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Rubio Says Narco-Terrorist Boats Coming From Caribbean Will Continue to Be Struck

U.S. Secretary of State Marco Rubio confirmed that military forces will keep destroying narco-terrorist boats in the Caribbean, calling the campaign historic as F-35 jets and troops are deployed across the region and legal challenges mount abroad.

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Ernice Gilbert **October 06, 2025**

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U.S. Marines.

U.S. Secretary of State Marco Rubio has reaffirmed that the United States will continue targeting and destroying narco-terrorist boats operating in the Caribbean, declaring that the mission represents a permanent shift from traditional interdiction to direct military elimination of maritime threats.

Rubio, addressing the ongoing campaign, said the strikes are part of a broader counter-narcotics escalation ordered by President Donald Trump and supported by an extensive military buildup across the region. The operations have already included multiple lethal strikes on vessels tied to Venezuelan-based criminal organizations such as Tren de Aragua, which was officially designated a foreign terrorist organization earlier this year.

“For the first time in our history, the U.S. military is operating in our region, in our hemisphere, against these traffickers of poison who are ultimately winding up in our streets, contributing to crime in our streets, not to mention the death of Americans,” Rubio said, calling the effort historic.

The Secretary of State pointed to clear indicators used to identify the suspect vessels — boats equipped with oversized engines, no fishing gear, and visible drug markings. “I would ask people for some common sense, okay? What is a boat doing 15 miles into international waters with four 450 engines on the back of it? No fishing rods, clear markings of drugs on those boats. We know who these boats are,” he said.

Rubio explained that the decision to shift from capture to destruction was driven by intelligence showing the boats’ role in a sophisticated logistics chain funneling narcotics from South America through the Caribbean and into the United States. “They are headed towards the United States through a logistics chain they’ve created in the Caribbean and that needs to stop,” he stated.

Since early September, U.S. forces have conducted several strikes under the new authorization, including one that killed eleven people aboard a vessel departing Venezuela. Additional crews have been eliminated in subsequent operations, according to official reports confirmed by Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth.

Hegseth, who oversees the Defense Department’s role in the mission, said the vessels struck were verified through intelligence as being directly involved in trafficking. The Pentagon has informed Congress that the ongoing campaign falls under an “armed conflict” determination with designated terrorist organizations, defining smugglers as unlawful combatants.

Rubio said the administration’s previous approach — which centered on interdiction and arrests — had failed to deter traffickers. “We’ve known who these boats are for a very long time. In the past, there’s been efforts to interdict them. Now the effort is to stop them,” he said, adding that the Trump administration is committed to using decisive force to disrupt drug operations at their source.

The campaign has drawn sharp criticism abroad. Venezuelan President Nicolás Maduro has condemned the strikes as acts of aggression, warning that his government may respond defensively if attacks continue. He has denied U.S. allegations linking the Venezuelan military and government officials to cartels such as the Cartel de los Soles, despite ongoing American indictments accusing him of narco-terrorism.

Regional leaders in Colombia and Brazil have expressed concern about the U.S. policy, citing the absence of due process and warning that the use of lethal force without capture represents a dangerous departure from standard international counter-narcotics practice.

Human rights advocates and legal analysts have also questioned the legality of the strikes, citing reports that at least one vessel had begun turning back before being destroyed. Administration officials, however, maintain that the operations are fully justified under international law and rooted in the terrorist designations issued earlier this year.

“The threat is imminent, the intelligence is solid, and the action is necessary,” one U.S. official said in defense of the campaign.

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As part of that buildup, hundreds of U.S. troops have been stationed on St. Croix, where they are housed at the PHRT Village, also known locally as the “Man Camp,” on the island’s south shore. The deployment is part of a broader regional counter-narcotics operation involving roughly 4,500 soldiers across Puerto Rico, Trinidad and Tobago, and the U.S. Virgin Islands.

Governor Albert Bryan Jr. has expressed support for the presence of troops, citing both the security and economic benefits to the island. “If we could stop this flow of drugs to our shores, why wouldn’t we be for that?” Bryan said earlier, noting that traffickers increasingly use Caribbean routes as border enforcement tightens elsewhere. “If you want to put two or three hundred soldiers here in St. Croix as part of that initiative, they gotta eat, drink and make merriment in our community. We are happy to have them,” he added.