

United States Senate
COMMITTEE ON THE JUDICIARY
WASHINGTON, DC 20510-6275

December 17, 2025

The Honorable Chuck Grassley
Chairman
Senate Judiciary Committee
135 Hart Senate Office Building
Washington, DC 20510

Dear Chairman Grassley:

Since September, the Trump Administration has summarily executed at least 95 people in 25 known strikes on alleged drug smugglers in vessels at sea.¹ This is not a time to mince words. These strikes are extrajudicial killings and shocking violations of fundamental principles of due process and the right to life under U.S. and international law.² The Administration's claims that the people it is killing are guilty of crimes, affiliated with a criminal or terrorist organization, or "combatants" in a nonexistent armed conflict, do not render these extrajudicial killings any less unlawful.³ This Committee must address the serious concerns that these strikes may violate U.S. criminal laws,⁴ and that Department of Justice attorneys who gave President Trump and

¹ Nathan Willis, *U.S. Strikes 3 More Boats in Eastern Pacific, Killing 8*, N.Y. Times, Dec. 4, 2025, (online at <https://www.nytimes.com/2025/12/15/us/politics/drug-boat-strikes-pacific.html>); Charlie Savage and Julian E. Barnes, *Second Strike Scrutiny Obscures Larger Question About Trump's Boat Attacks*, N.Y. TIMES, Dec. 4, 2025, (online at <https://www.nytimes.com/2025/12/04/us/politics/trump-boat-attacks-killings.html>).

² See Press Release, United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, US war on "narco-terrorists" violates the right to life, warn UN experts after deadly vessel strike (Sep. 16, 2025) (available at <https://www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2025/09/us-war-narco-terrorists-violates-right-life-warn-un-experts-after-deadly>); Jeh C. Johnson, *Not All Targeted Killings Are the Same. Hegseth's Boat Strikes Are Illegal*, N.Y. TIMES, Dec. 7, 2025, (online at <https://www.nytimes.com/2025/12/07/opinion/hegseth-boat-strikes-killings.html>); Tess Bridgeman, Michael Schmitt, and Ryan Goodman, *Expert Q&A on the U.S. Boat Strikes*, JUST SECURITY, Dec. 3, 2025, (online at <https://www.justsecurity.org/126156/expert-qa-on-the-u-s-boat-strikes/>).

³ Michael Schmitt, Ryan Goodman and Tess Bridgeman, *Operation Southern Spear: Why the Crews, Drugs, and Boats are Not Targetable*, JUST SECURITY, Dec. 7, 2025, (online at <https://www.justsecurity.org/126553/operation-southern-spear-international-law/>).

⁴ 18 U.S.C. § 1111(a) ("Murder is the unlawful killing of a human being with malice aforethought."); 18 U.S.C. § 956(a)(1) (outlawing a conspiracy to kill persons within the "special maritime and territorial jurisdiction of the United States . . . if any of the conspirators commits an act within the jurisdiction of the United States to effect any object of the conspiracy"). See also Press Release, United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, UN experts alarmed by United States escalating pressure on Venezuela (Dec. 4, 2025) (available at <https://www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2025/12/un-experts-alarmed-united-states-escalating-pressure-venezuela>) ("Those involved in ordering and carrying out these extrajudicial killings must be investigated and prosecuted for homicide.").

Secretary Hegseth legal cover to summarily execute suspected criminals have violated their ethical obligations.⁵

We respectfully request that you immediately convene a Senate Judiciary Committee hearing to ensure that those who authorized these extrajudicial killings are held to account. There is not, nor can there be, any justification for state-sanctioned extrajudicial killings. Summary executions have no place in a constitutional democracy operating under the rule of law, no matter how heinous the accusations a government makes against someone.⁶ Nor can governments fabricate an armed conflict or falsely label people “combatants” to kill them.⁷

This is why U.S. officials and Members of Congress from both parties have long condemned extrajudicial killings, including of alleged drug traffickers, when committed by other nations. For instance, Secretary of State and then-Senator Marco Rubio introduced a bipartisan resolution in the Senate in 2020 condemning the state-sanctioned extrajudicial killings of alleged criminals as part of the Duterte government’s “war on drugs” in the Philippines.⁸ Just last year, then-Senator Rubio introduced a resolution condemning the Maduro regime in Venezuela for the use of extrajudicial killings.⁹ Former President Duterte is now facing crimes against humanity charges for his spree of extrajudicial killings of alleged drug traffickers.¹⁰ For decades, under both Republican and Democratic Presidents, the State Department’s annual Country Reports on Human Rights have condemned extrajudicial killings by foreign governments as significant abuses of internationally recognized human rights.¹¹

Drug trafficking is a terrible crime. And it must be addressed with robust, effective, and lawful measures, including interdicting vessels transporting such drugs, prosecuting violators to the full extent of the law, and supporting the needs of impacted families and communities.¹² Instead of intensifying such efforts, President Trump has weakened them. Just recently, President Trump pardoned Juan Orlando Hernandez, the former President of Honduras who was convicted of helping to smuggle 400 tons of cocaine into the United States as part of what U.S. authorities

⁵ Letter from former ethics counsels for Presidents Bush, Clinton, and Obama, to Suzanne Drouet, Counsel, Department of Justice, Office of Professional Responsibility (Dec. 9, 2025) (available at https://dea5edf3-e27d-4adc-a42a-b9c082bc3167.usrfiles.com/ugd/dea5ed_827cca77efcd4175b14d2563e3c96f73.pdf).

⁶ Kenneth Roth, *All of the deadly US strikes on alleged drug boats are murders*, THE GUARDIAN, Dec. 10, 2025, (online at <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2025/dec/10/us-boat-strikes-murder>).

⁷ Benjamin Farley, *Why Trump’s Justifications for Drone Killings Fall Short*, FOREIGN POLICY, Nov. 18, 2025, (online at <https://foreignpolicy.com/2025/11/18/caribbean-venezuela-drones-attacks-trump-narco-trafficking-maduro/>).

⁸ S. Res. 142, 116th Cong. (2020).

⁹ S. Res. 741, 118th Cong. (2024).

¹⁰ Prosecutor v. Duterte, Case No. ICC-01/21-01/25, Case Information Sheet (November 2025), <https://www.icc-cpi.int/sites/default/files/2025-11/DuterteEng.pdf>.

¹¹ See, e.g., U.S. Dep’t of State, 2024 Country Reports on Human Rights (2025), (online at <https://www.state.gov/reports/2024-country-reports-on-human-rights-practices>).

¹² The Coast Guard has long interdicted such vessels, confiscated any drugs or other contraband, and prosecuted individuals who have violated U.S. law. The use of lethal force as a first resort against those on board suspected vessels is both unlawful and utterly unnecessary. See Mark Nevitt, *Using Labels, Not Law, to Justify Lethal Force: Inside the Venezuelan Boat Strike*, JUST SECURITY, Sep. 5, 2025, (online at <https://www.justsecurity.org/119985/labels-ustify-lethal-force-venezuelan-boat-strike/>).

have characterized as “one of the largest and most violent-drug trafficking conspiracies in the world.”¹³ This follows the President’s pardon of another drug kingpin, Silk Road founder Ross Ulbricht, who created the largest online black market for illegal drugs in our nation’s history.¹⁴

At the same time, this Administration has diverted thousands of Drug Enforcement Administration and other federal law-enforcement agents from their critical drug enforcement missions to carry out the President’s radical anti-immigrant agenda.¹⁵ This Administration has also shuttered the critical Organized Crime and Drug Enforcement Task Force,¹⁶ unilaterally terminated hundreds of grants that provide critical funding to state and local law enforcement,¹⁷ and is slashing the High Intensity Drug Trafficking Areas program by more than a third, from about \$298 million to \$196 million.¹⁸ Not surprisingly, federal drug prosecutions under this Administration have dropped to the lowest level in decades.¹⁹

The American people want real solutions to crime and the drug epidemic—not extrajudicial killings committed in their name. In accordance with the Committee’s oversight responsibilities, we urge you to schedule an immediate hearing on this outrage.

¹³ William Rashbaum, Maggie Haberman, Kenneth Vogel, and Jonah Bromwich, *Former President Is Freed From Prison After Trump Pardon*, N.Y. TIMES, Dec. 2, 2025, (online at <https://www.nytimes.com/2025/12/02/us/politics/hernandez-honduras-trump.html>).

¹⁴ See Press Release, U.S. Atty’s Off., S.D.N.Y, Ross Ulbricht, A/K/A “Dread Pirate Roberts,” Sentenced In Manhattan Federal Court To Life In Prison (May 29, 2015) (online at <https://www.justice.gov/usao-sdny/pr/ross-ulbricht-aka-dread-pirate-roberts-sentenced-manhattan-federal-court-life-prison>); Executive Grant of Clemency to Ross William Ulbricht, President Donald Trump (Jan. 21, 2025) (available at <https://www.justice.gov/pardon/media/1386096/dl?inline>).

¹⁵ Hamed Aleaziz, Nicholas Nehamas, Michael Keller and Alexandra Berzon, *Drug Arrests and Gun Seizures Fell as Homeland Security Pursues Immigration*, N.Y. TIMES, Nov. 25, 2025, (online at <https://www.nytimes.com/2025/11/25/us/politics/drug-arrests-gun-seizures-homeland-security-immigration.html>).

¹⁶ Jason Leopold, *Anti-Drug Unit Officially Shut Down by DOJ*, BLOOMBERG, Nov. 7, 2025, (online at <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/newsletters/2025-11-07/reagan-era-crime-unit-officially-shut-down-by-doj>).

¹⁷ Council on Criminal Justice, *DOJ Funding Update: A Deeper Look at the Cuts*, May 2025, (online at <https://counciloncj.org/doj-funding-update-a-deeper-look-at-the-cuts/>).

¹⁸ Ryan Tarinelli, *Law enforcement groups oppose proposed anti-drug program cuts*, ROLL CALL, July 3, 2025, (available at <https://rollcall.com/2025/07/03/law-enforcement-groups-oppose-proposed-anti-drug-program-cuts/>); See Press Release, National HIDTA Directors Association, Trump administration cut to federal drug enforcement grant program could impact Montana, (online at <https://hidadirectors.org/trump-administration-cut-to-federal-drug-enforcement-grant-program-could-impact-montana/>).

¹⁹ Brad Heath, *Exclusive: Federal drug prosecutions fall to lowest level in decades as Trump shifts focus to deportations*, REUTERS, Sep. 29, 2025, (online at <https://www.reuters.com/legal/government/federal-drug-prosecutions-fall-lowest-level-decades-trump-shifts-focus-2025-09-29/>).

Sincerely,



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Ranking Member



Sheldon Whitehouse
United States Senator



Amy Klobuchar
United States Senator



Christopher A. Coons
United States Senator



Richard Blumenthal
United States Senator



Mazie K. Hirono
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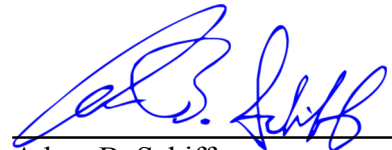
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