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Dominican Republic: Background And U.S. Relations



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Synopsis

The Dominican Republic, a country of roughly 9.7 million people that shares the Caribbean island of Hispaniola with Haiti, is a key U.S. trade partner and political ally in the region. The United States is the Dominican Republic's main trading partner, with two-way trade totaling more than \$10.6 billion in 2008 before falling to \$8.6 billion in 2009. In addition to trade, U.S. interest in the Dominican Republic has focused on anti-drug cooperation and governance/human rights issues, as well as the country's role in helping resolve regional conflicts. After a July 12, 2010, official meeting, President Barack Obama praised Dominican President Leonel Fernández's regional leadership, particularly the role he and his government have played in the aftermath of the January 2010 earthquake in Haiti and in helping to resolve the political crisis in Honduras. President Fernández of the center-left Dominican Liberation Party (PLD) took office for his third term in August 2008. Fernández previously served as President from 1996-2000 and 2004-2008. In 2009, President Fernández achieved one of his primary political goals: securing congressional approval of a new constitution. The new constitution, which took effect in January 2010, allows presidents to complete one term and then serve again after sitting out of office for four years, making President Fernández eligible to run again in 2016. Few have criticized Fernández for changing the constitution to allow himself to run for another term, but some have spoken out against calls from the PLD for further changes that would enable him to run in 2012. Despite some lingering economic and security challenges that have yet to be resolved and concerns about corruption in his Administration, President Fernández has remained popular. His party dominated legislative elections held on May 16, 2010. In recent years, U.S. interest in the Dominican Republic has focused on trade, security, and human rights issues. Trade and investment flows have expanded since the Dominican Republic- Central America-United States free trade agreement (CAFTA-DR) entered into force for the Dominican Republic on March 1, 2007. U.S. trade capacity building assistance has also reportedly helped boost Dominican competitiveness in some sectors. The United States is the largest bilateral donor to the Dominican Republic, with U.S. assistance totaling an estimated \$49 million in FY2010. U.S. aid — both bilateral and regional aid provided through the Mérida Initiative and the Caribbean Basin Security Initiative (CBSI) — is helping the Fernández government combat drug trafficking and crime. Human rights issues, including the treatment of Haitians in the Dominican Republic and trafficking in persons, have also been of interest to Congress and the Obama Administration.

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