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Before the

House Committee on Homeland Security
Subcommittee on Border, Maritime and, Global Counterterrorism

“The Merida Initiative: Examining U.S. Efforts to
Combat Transnational Criminal Organizations”

On

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Madam Chairwoman, Congressman Souder, and other distinguished Members of the Committee, thank you for the opportunity to appear before you to discuss the Merida Initiative and how it will help combat transnational criminal organizations that threaten security in Central America, Mexico and the United States. I am pleased to appear before you with Acting Assistant Secretary Paul Rosenzweig of the Department of Homeland Security's Office of International Affairs since confronting these challenges requires complementary efforts on both sides of the border and the cooperative efforts of all agencies whose mission focuses on America's security.

With increased globalization, we have seen further proliferation of illegal migration, narcotics and weapons trafficking, violent gangs, laundered money and counterfeit goods – all phenomena whose effects spill across national boundaries. Over the past decade, drug trafficking, transnational gangs, and other criminal organizations have grown in size and strength. They aggressively seek to undermine and intimidate government institutions in Mexico and Central America, compromise municipal and state law enforcement, and weaken governments' ability to provide public security and advance the rule of law.

The growth of criminal organizations is a major threat. They corrupt the police, judiciary, and prison systems, and fuel a growing popular demand for governments to respond to the threat posed by them. The effects of this growing problem are also readily apparent in the United States in the form of gang violence, crime, and trafficking in illegal drugs and persons – all of which threaten our own national security and impose mounting economic costs.

The United States Government recognizes that working by ourselves, we cannot successfully confront the significant threat transnational criminal organizations pose to ourselves and the countries in our hemisphere. Because of that fact, in the case of youth gangs, the State Department, in partnership with the Departments of Justice, Homeland Security and others, is implementing in Central America, a government-wide strategy that includes prevention programs, law enforcement capacity building, joint law enforcement operations, and other bilateral and regional anti-gang programs.

AFFECTS US ALL

As we see in Mexican border cities such as Tijuana, each horrific act of violence seems to be surmounted by the next. I spent time earlier in my career as a Vice Consul at the U.S. Consulate General in Ciudad Juarez, across the border from El Paso, Texas, and have a strong appreciation of the close relationship between the United States and Mexico, especially in our border communities. The level of violence has reached such drastic proportions in some areas of Mexico, including along the border, that combined Mexican military and police units have been deployed to restore order.

In the Tijuana area, border violence has increased significantly in the past six months. U.S. Customs and Border Protection (CBP) agents have suffered rock throwing incidents, forcing them to respond with crowd control tactics. We are painfully aware of the terrible day in January when Border Patrol agent Luis Aguilar was killed in the line of duty by a vehicle believed to be carrying drugs in the Imperial Sand Dunes Park. Mexican authorities, with the assistance of the Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) attaché office, quickly responded in that case, arresting a suspect who has been charged in Agent Aguilar's death.

There has, indeed, been a wave of attacks and assassinations all along the border, including an incident in which a Tijuana policeman was killed in his home along with his wife and 9-year-old daughter, as well as a shootout involving some 100 soldiers and drug traffickers

near a kindergarten. In Ciudad Juarez, there have been more than 300 drug-related murders so far this year, surpassing the total for all of last year. The chief of police resigned after his deputy was assassinated, and several members of the police force on a drug trafficker "hit list" were murdered. Now, the acting police chief is a military officer and joint military-police units patrol the city streets.

Another major concern on both sides of the border is the threat of methamphetamines abuse and trafficking. Because of increased law enforcement efforts and the Combat Methamphetamine Epidemic Act of 2005, most US-based "super" meth labs, that is, labs capable of producing more than 10 pounds per cycle, have moved from the United States to Mexico. Partly as a result, methamphetamine abuse has increased in border areas, especially in Tijuana. The Government of Mexico has taken decisive steps to address this menace by outlawing imports of the precursor chemicals used to make methamphetamine, even for legitimate use.

The leaders of Mexico and Central America are already working to beat back violence and crime for their own citizens and for ours, and they have turned to us to join them – as partners.

MEXICO

In Mexico, President Calderón has acted decisively. He has reorganized the federal police, put new and additional resources in the hands of his security services, deployed military units to support police operations, focused on rooting out corrupt officials, arrested major crime figures, sought fundamental legal reforms in the criminal justice system, and extradited a record number of drug kingpins and other criminals to the United States. The determination and commitment shown by the Calderón Administration is historic; and the early results impressive.

However, President Calderón has recognized that leadership and political will are not enough; he needs greater institutional and material resources for both near-term success and long-term institutional change. In an unprecedented step, he has asked the United States to launch a new partnership with Mexico and to help him strengthen Mexican law enforcement, public safety, and border security to defeat the drug money-fueled criminal organizations. The Merida Initiative is not a "traditional" foreign assistance request. It is, as our joint declaration called it, "a new paradigm" for security cooperation.

CENTRAL AMERICA

At the same time, the nations of Central America have committed to collective action to address common security concerns. Through the Central American Integration System (SICA), these governments have expressed their political resolve to join forces to strengthen regional security; however they lack sufficient tools and capacity to execute such will. Despite these challenges, national authorities remain committed to the fight, collaborating with each other as well as with the United States. As with Mexico, they have increased the resources and other elements devoted to transnational security and enforcement efforts.

BEGINNINGS OF THE MÉRIDA INITIATIVE

It is in our own national interest to support these efforts. Over the past several months, one of the President's highest priorities has been the Mérida Initiative, a regional security

cooperation initiative which, if funded, will greatly enhance our anti-narcotics and law enforcement efforts with Mexico and the seven Central America countries. The Mérida Initiative grew out of conversations in 2007 that President Bush had with Mexican President Calderón in Mérida, just after speaking with then-President Berger of Guatemala. He heard the same concerns from both that crime is the number one challenge and that they wanted to work more closely with each other and with the United States.

After much consultation with Mexico and Central America, last October President Bush asked Congress for an initial sum of \$500 million for Mexico and \$50 million for Central America in FY 2008 supplemental funding to support the Mérida Initiative. In the 2009 budget, the Administration has requested an additional \$450 million for Mexico and \$100 million for Central America for this initiative.

This funding request is part of over \$1.4 billion that the Administration plans to request for this multi-year initiative. It will provide equipment, such as transport helicopters, surveillance aircraft, and information technology, and it will assist in our mutual efforts to break the backs of criminal organizations. The initiative will also support capacity building as well as police and judicial reform efforts already underway in Mexico and Central America.

MÉRIDA INITIATIVE PROGRAM ELEMENTS

Overall, the Mérida Initiative, if approved, will focus on three areas: Counternarcotics, Counterterrorism, and Border Security; Public Security and Law Enforcement; and Institution Building and the Rule of Law.

The Merida Initiative will provide support to Mexico and Central American countries based on specific requests, and after having had our experts meet to determine needs. If approved by Congress, the Mérida Initiative will provide Mexico:

- Helicopters and surveillance aircraft;
- Non-intrusive inspection equipment, ion scanners, canine units for Mexican customs;
- Technologies to support collecting information for criminal law enforcement;
- Technical advice and training to strengthen the institutions of justice – vetting for the new police force, new offices of citizen complaints and professional responsibility, and witness protection programs;
- Programs to support Mexico's efforts on demand reduction, anti-corruption efforts and human rights; and
- Programs to support Mexico's efforts to enhance their border management process.

Our initial proposal for the Central America part of the Mérida Initiative includes over \$25 million (out of the total \$50 million proposed) to help our partners fight criminal gangs. The Presidents of Central America have recognized the need to address common threats regionally; our goal will be to achieve a fully-coordinated response to these transnational threats. For Central America, if approved, the Mérida Initiative will provide funding to:

- Strengthen the region's ability to defend its borders against traffickers and to interdict criminals;
- Improve investigation and prosecution of dangerous gang members;

- Fight arms trafficking through tracing mechanisms and training for law enforcement; and
- Provide training in prison management, courts, prosecutors, and communities to help strengthen justice systems.

In Central America, the package seeks to address citizen insecurity by giving these governments the tools they need to more effectively address criminal gangs, modernize and professionalize police forces and reform the judicial sector to restore and strengthen citizen confidence.

To address the proliferation of gangs and gang violence, through the Merida Initiative, we will implement all five elements of the U.S. Strategy to Combat Criminal Gangs from Central America and Mexico: Diplomacy, Repatriation, Law Enforcement, Capacity Enhancement, and Prevention. Under this comprehensive strategy, the United States Government is working with Central American governments to combat transnational and other gangs through both prevention and enforcement.

The gang prevention program will increase security by providing thousands of at-risk youth in targeted urban “hot spots” with positive education, training, and job opportunities, thereby reducing the risk of gang recruitment, crime, and violence in the region.

PENDING LEGISLATION

I want to express my thanks to the Congress for showing support for these efforts by including Merida funding in both FY 2008 Supplemental bills that have been passed by the House and Senate. We look forward to continuing to work with Congress so the most effective package is included in the final bill. Both the Governments of Mexico and the United States believe that there is value added by providing many of these programs and assets, especially air assets, since this will allow us to enhance law enforcement as well as military cooperation.

As for the Caribbean, we share Congressional concern that drug trafficking represents a serious threat to the region. In the last two years the island of Hispaniola has become the principal transit point in the Caribbean for drugs headed to the U.S. and Europe due primarily to a dramatic rise in drug smuggling by small aircraft from Venezuela. We will continue to look for ways to improve security cooperation in this region – and to facilitate cooperation among the countries of the Caribbean.

We will be working with several U.S. Government agencies to implement the Merida Initiative, once the supplemental appropriation is completed. We intend to work closely with DHS and DOJ to enhance the security of our nation’s border through port, airport and border security programs; through law enforcement training, crime prevention and police modernization; through financial intelligence gathering to counter money laundering; and through improving case tracking and law enforcement database management.

Thank you for your time and I would be happy to address any questions you may have.