

Statement of
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**House Foreign Affairs Subcommittee on Western Hemisphere,
Civilian Security, and Trade**

“Assessing U.S. Security Assistance to Mexico”

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Mr. Chairman, Ranking Member Rooney, distinguished Members of the Subcommittee; thank you for the opportunity to appear before you today to discuss U.S. bilateral security cooperation with Mexico. I must also thank the U.S. Congress, and this committee in particular, for its consistent, bipartisan, strong support of the U.S. – Mexico relationship in general, and the Merida Initiative in particular.

While our bilateral agenda with Mexico covers a wide array of issues including trade and commercial relationships, illegal immigration, educational exchanges, and efforts to create a more competitive partnership in a globalized world; security cooperation has always been the central element of the agenda.

The United States and Mexico are essential partners in confronting transnational criminal organizations (TCOs) operating on both sides of the U.S.-Mexico border. These TCOs and their subsidiaries have engaged in unprecedented levels of violent and criminal activities and pose a fundamental challenge to Mexico and its people. They are also a major threat to the United States. Dismantling these groups is, therefore, of vital importance to the national security of both our countries. We must take a comprehensive approach to dismantle these TCOs, including the targeting of their business model; from production and trafficking of illicit drugs to their illicit finances and revenue. This is critical for the safety of all our citizens.

The necessity of our cooperation has been made even clearer over the past few months with the horrific murders of nine American citizens on November 4, 2019, in Bavispe, Sonora and the failed operation to arrest Ovidio Guzman, and the accompanying violence, in Culiacan in October 2019. These events are in addition

to the many lives of Mexican security forces and citizens that continue to be lost in the fight against TCOs. The Trump Administration is committed to working with Mexico to combat these organizations. In just the last month, Attorney General Barr, Director of the Office of National Drug Control Policy Carroll, U.S. Customs and Border Protection Deputy Commissioner Perez, and Acting Assistant Secretary of State for Western Hemisphere Affairs Kozak have all separately visited Mexico to discuss our joint efforts and ways we can increase our collaboration to more effectively confront this threat.

Merida Initiative

Transnational criminal organizations traffic Mexican heroin, methamphetamine, fentanyl (mostly from China), and Colombian cocaine to the United States. To address these and related threats, the United States and Mexico partner through the Merida Initiative to support Mexico's efforts to improve security, reduce drug production and trafficking, enhance criminal prosecutions and rule of law, build public confidence in the justice sector, improve border security and reduce irregular migration flow, and promote greater respect for human rights.

U.S. – Mexico security cooperation has been expanding and evolving since the Merida Initiative was launched in 2008, based on the recognition and commitment that our countries share responsibility for combating transnational criminal networks and protecting our citizens from the crime, corruption, and violence they generate. The Merida Initiative is founded on mutual respect, and it reflects our understanding of the tremendous benefits derived from this collaboration. We have forged strong partnerships to improve civilian security in affected areas to fight drug trafficking, organized crime, corruption, illicit arms trafficking, money laundering, and demand for drugs on both sides of the border.

U.S. assistance has provided crucial support to the Mexican government in its efforts to build the capacity of its rule of law institutions and advance justice sector reforms, while enhancing the bilateral relationship and the extent of cooperation between the U.S. and Mexican governments through provisions of equipment, technical assistance, and training. While the Merida Initiative does not fund law enforcement operations, it does build capacity. This capacity building helps Mexico produce skilled analysts, investigators, prosecutors, police and all the other public servants necessary to implement and strengthen the rule of law in Mexico. The Merida Initiative also enables greater cooperation between U.S. and Mexican law enforcement agencies, prosecutors, and judges as they share best practices and expand bilateral cooperation in tracking criminals, drugs, arms, and money. A variety of U.S. federal agencies – including the Department of State, the United

States Agency for International Development (USAID), the Department of Homeland Security, and the Department of Justice – are working with the Mexican government to implement Merida projects.

Cooperative efforts are based on the premise that to combat transnational criminal organizations we need to attack their business model and networks. Therefore, current priorities include reducing drug production, inhibiting cross-border movement of drugs, cash, and weapons, and denying illicit revenue. Continued support for Mexico’s judicial reform invests in the criminal justice system and human rights, and contributes to stronger communities that can resist TCO and subsidiary presence and recruitment.

U.S. programming builds Mexico’s capacity to coordinate with U.S. Customs and Border Protection and Homeland Security Investigations along our shared border and to identify, target, and interdict drugs and other illicit goods hidden within the otherwise licit cross-border trade and travel flows. Our assistance also helps Mexico combat illegal immigration, secure land, air, and sea ports of entry, and exchange biometric information.

Bolstering Mexico’s criminal justice system is an essential component of combating transnational criminal organizations. Merida Initiative programs train investigators, prosecutors, and judges to advance effective prosecutions. From forensics analysts to prison officials, Merida programs support Mexican federal and state agencies in bringing institutions and personnel up to international professional standards, which increases transparency while reducing opportunities for corruption.

Training and technology investments supporting Mexico’s transition from an inquisitorial to an accusatorial, oral trial justice system have paid dividends. A 2016 study by the World Justice Project reported a 46 percentage point increase in judges’ appearance in court, a 57 percentage point increase in hearings recorded, a 25 percent decrease in time to resolve homicide cases, and a notable decrease in reported coerced confessions and use of torture in detention.

We also understand the importance of measuring the impact of our Merida assistance. The Department and USAID continue to advance monitoring and evaluation efforts to inform future projects and ensure a U.S. return on investment.

Way Forward

President Lopez Obrador has made the reduction of violence the key goal of his security policy and has pledged to fight corruption in Mexico. A prominent feature of the Lopez Obrador security strategy has been the creation of a National Guard focused on building closer connections with communities and reducing violence. To advance efforts to combat our shared security challenges, the United States and Mexico are undertaking a number of activities, including the development of the Mexico City-based *High-Level Security Working Group (HLSWG)*. The HLSWG is chaired by U.S. Ambassador Landau and Mexican Secretary of Foreign Relations Ebrard and Secretary of Security and Citizen Protection Durazo. Under the umbrella of the HLSWG, we have jointly developed several bilateral working groups to tackle issues of the highest importance. These working groups focus on drug policy, migration, illicit finance, cyber security, armed forces, emergency response, justice sector, and arms trafficking. Through these groups, we are identifying priorities and specific actions we can take together to make progress in each area. For example, we are looking at ways we can increase joint efforts to combat synthetic drugs and illicit drug production; increased drug interdiction and TCO prosecutions; and stem illicit finances. We are also working to reduce the amount of illicit firearms, weapons parts, and ammunition crossing the U.S.-Mexico border. The United States Government also continues to address this issue through traditional, law enforcement-to-law enforcement collaboration and other bilateral coordination bodies such as the 21st Century Border process. The United States is also exploring how to improve our own domestic activities through the interagency U.S. Council on Transnational Organized Crime, which is part of implementing Executive Order (EO) 13773, *Enforcing Federal Law with Respect to Transnational Criminal Organizations and Preventing International Trafficking*.

The continued threat posed by transnational criminal organizations to both Mexico and the United States requires our continued support. Bilateral cooperation must continue, and the Merida Initiative provides a comprehensive, flexible framework through which our partnership can move forward to the benefit of both Americans and Mexicans. I will be happy to answer any questions you may have.