

TESTIMONY OF  
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DEPARTMENT OF STATE  
BEFORE  
THE SUBCOMMITTEE ON STATE, FOREIGN OPERATIONS, AND  
RELATED PROGRAMS  
COMMITTEE ON APPROPRIATIONS  
UNITED STATES HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES  
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Madam Chairwoman, Ranking Member Granger and Distinguished Members of the Subcommittee:

Thank you for the opportunity to appear before this Committee and to discuss the Merida Initiative. Mexico, and the countries of Central America and the Caribbean, are passing through a critical period. The fight among organized crime groups and drug cartels to control lucrative trafficking operations has unleashed appalling violence in Mexico, Guatemala, and Honduras. The effort by our Merida partner governments to attack and dismantle these criminal organizations has provoked a harsh response. The cartels are targeting police, military, and other security service personnel, and using graphic displays of public violence to intimidate communities. This three corner battle, in which cartels fight each other while attacking state authorities, represents a significant threat to our nearest neighbors and to our national interests.

The Merida Initiative -- and the continuing close partnership it promotes with the governments of Mexico, Central America, Haiti, and the Dominican Republic -- recognizes the transnational nature of the challenge we face and provides us with a framework to collaborate with our neighbors to confront the criminal organizations whose activities, violence and intimidation threaten the welfare, prosperity, and security of our citizens.

I would like to briefly discuss the strategic importance of the Merida Initiative, what it means for the future of security cooperation in the Americas, and its potential to transform our relationships with our Merida partners. As I do so, I want to highlight that the urgency of our assistance

through the Merida Initiative is heightened by the current financial and economic crisis. With public sector budgets at risk, remittances declining, and job loss throughout the region, the attraction that organized crime and cartels present is obvious.

## MEXICO

With respect to Mexico, the Merida Initiative reflects our response to both an imminent danger and an opportunity to work with Mexico to address the threat emanating from organized crime and drug trafficking organizations. While we have been working increasingly cooperatively with the Government of Mexico during the past decade, the Administration of President Calderon has expanded that cooperation and offered to work with us in an unprecedented collaborative and coordinated fashion.

Our affirmative answer to this offer was an expression of our confidence in President Calderon's leadership, and the courage of the Mexican people. The nature of our shared challenge is daunting. Mexican authorities estimate that in 2008 over 6200 persons were killed in drug-related violence, including 522 civilian law enforcement and military personnel. We are increasingly aware that this violence affects U.S. communities along our southern border. According to federal law enforcement agencies, elements of the Mexican-based criminal organizations are present in 230 American cities.

President Calderon and his government have demonstrated over the last two years their intention to surmount the serious challenges posed by these transnational criminal organizations. The Calderon administration has taken major steps to confront the narcotraffickers and to enhance the capacity of the state to address crime and corruption. These steps have included deploying the military in large numbers in operations against organized crime; professionalizing Mexico's police forces and prosecutors; extraditing top drug bosses wanted by U.S. authorities; instituting long-term reforms to improve the efficiency and effectiveness of Mexican judicial institutions, and removing Mexican officials linked to crime syndicates and corruption. President Calderon has also launched critical social, development, and health initiatives to reclaim Mexico's public spaces, and confront the increasing demand for drugs within Mexico.

Our bilateral ties with Mexico are already broad and deep; they encompass everything from trade and energy to making our borders operate more efficiently. But working together to meet this unprecedented threat is at the top of our bilateral agenda, and the Merida Initiative is critical to our collaboration and success.

As you know, the Merida Initiative has two interconnected and mutually reinforcing aspects. On the one hand, Merida has a robust assistance component, in which the Department of State, working in close collaboration with the Departments of Homeland Security, Justice, and others, seeks to provide Mexico, Central America, and Haiti and the Dominican Republic with equipment, training, and technical assistance to enhance the capacity of the state to interdict and stop illicit drugs, arms and human trafficking; to improve public security and law enforcement; and to strengthen institution building and the rule of law.

But more than just a program of bilateral or regional assistance, the Merida Initiative is premised on a partnership between our countries, and a recognition that the multifaceted problems associated with these criminal organizations represent a shared responsibility whose solution requires a coordinated response. The Merida Initiative entails increased levels of assistance while providing a framework for enhanced cooperation. This partnership means that U.S. and Mexican authorities work together to design strategy as well as develop and implement projects and activities.

The cooperation and the partnership central to the Merida Initiative and the principle of shared responsibility also require action on our part. The weapons employed by the criminal organizations against law enforcement agencies and innocent civilians in Mexico are primarily purchased in the United States and smuggled illegally across the border to Mexico. The Department of Homeland Security (Immigration and Customs Enforcement and Customs and Border Protection) and the Department of Justice (Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms) are working in the U.S. and with Mexican officials to curtail this deadly trade. The Department of the Treasury and the Department of Homeland Security (Immigration and Customs Enforcement and Customs and Border Protection) continue to work with Mexican financial and law enforcement authorities to disrupt the bulk transfer of cash from drug sales that flow from the U.S. and finance the operations of the Mexican drug cartels. And, of course, it is the demand for illicit drugs in the U.S. which underpins the narcotics trade. We must

continue to invest in efforts to reduce our domestic demand even as we assist Mexico with its own burgeoning demand problem. Progress on these three fronts is critical to the success of the Merida Initiative, to protect our citizens, and, to defeat these criminal organizations.

## CENTRAL AMERICA

The security situation in Central America continues to be a serious concern, with all nations witnessing significant and sustained increases in crime and violence. While some of the rise in Central American crime can be attributed to locally-based criminal enterprises, an important part of the increase in violence is the result of Colombian and Mexican trafficking entities and their supporting infrastructure moving into Central America.

While we are convinced that the leaders of the Central American nations are dedicated to eliminating the violence and crime that plague their nations, they are challenged by sophisticated traffickers, gangs and organized criminals who utilize widespread bribery, intimidation and corruption to undermine the efforts of national law enforcement and judicial authorities.

To support the governments of Central America, we have made significant progress in working to implement the Supplemental FY 2008 Merida Initiative funding for Central America, as well as positioning the U.S. Government to make further advances in the region with anticipated out year funding. As we address regional issues in Central America, we have adopted regional solutions and approaches. The Central American nations have also engaged in sustained, high-level regional security cooperation discussions to collectively address serious, destabilizing regional law enforcement threats under the auspices of the Central American Integration System (SICA). The Central American component of the Merida Initiative grew out of an unprecedented dialogue with SICA and the Central Americans own strategy against crime and violence. Our range of programming will encourage regional training and best practices, and enhanced law enforcement cooperation and information sharing to permit cross border investigations, interdiction efforts, and prosecution efforts against transnational organized crime groups, gangs and traffickers.

The U.S. Government remains committed to supporting the nations of Central America in countering, disrupting and ending the influence of

traffickers, gangs and organized criminal groups throughout the region. The Merida Initiative provides us a regional vehicle to accomplish these objectives and to link these efforts with our efforts in Mexico. The Governments of Central America and Mexico recognize that these are transnational problems requiring transnational solutions and they hold regular meetings among their political and security officials, including under the auspices of SICA. The Merida Initiative furthers this regional dialogue and engagement. Ultimately, the results of our efforts will enable the Central American governments and Haiti and the Dominican Republic to reassert control over their territory, provide the stability needed for the creation of new economic opportunities for the peoples of the region, and reinforce the critical role of democratic institutions and adherence to the rule of law.

## THE CARIBBEAN

The FY08 Supplemental, as approved, included \$2.5 million each for Haiti and the Dominican Republic. This was recognition by the Congress of the threat that drug trafficking through the Caribbean poses to the two countries of Hispaniola.

We have begun a process of engagement with the other countries of the Caribbean which we hope will lead to a security dialogue and security cooperation program. This possibility was explored during a visit by Admiral Jim Stavridis, the Combatant Commander of United States Southern Command (SOUTHCOM), and I to the Caribbean; and our commitment was ratified in a statement issued by the State Department in September 2008 following a meeting with Caribbean Foreign Ministers. We plan to hold initial technical discussions with Caribbean security representatives in May after the Summit of the Americas.

## CONCLUSION

Assistant Secretary Johnson will address more directly the issues related to the implementation of our projects under the Merida Initiative. I want to conclude by emphasizing that continued funding is essential to the success of the Merida Initiative. Thanks to strong bipartisan support in this committee and in the entire Congress, we launched the Initiative with \$465 million in funding appropriated in the FY 2008 Supplemental Appropriations Act. We have to be able to stay the course and maintain

significant levels of funding if we are to be successful. Continued funding of the Merida Initiative will provide us with sustained resources to achieve our goals in support of the governments of Mexico, Central America, Haiti, and the Dominican Republic. Our partners have clearly demonstrated their willingness to take strong and decisive action, committing lives and treasure while revamping law enforcement and justice sector institutions for this task.

The Merida Initiative was born out of crisis. This crisis also provides us with a strategic opportunity to reshape our security cooperation relationship and expand dialogue with our partners on critical security and law enforcement issues. The Merida Initiative provides us with a platform to enhance this partnership and work more effectively with our nearest neighbors in the hemisphere to counter a menace that threatens us all.

Thank you and I would be happy to answer any questions you may have.