

Statement of
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Civilian Security, and Trade**

“Assessing U.S. Security Assistance to Mexico”

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Chairman Sires, Ranking Member Rooney, distinguished members of the Subcommittee: thank you for the opportunity to appear before you today to discuss U.S.-Mexico security cooperation. Today’s hearing comes at a time of crisis for both Mexico and the United States; U.S. drug overdoses and deaths remain alarmingly high, while Mexico suffers record violence. The U.S.-Mexico security partnership remains essential in the face of shared threats posed by transnational criminal organizations.

Over the last 12 years, the Bureau of International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs (INL) and the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) have provided foreign assistance to Mexico under the Merida Initiative to build interdiction, law enforcement, and prosecutorial capacity in the Mexican government to reduce the trafficking of drugs to the United States, and to hold members of transnational criminal organizations accountable for their crimes. U.S. assistance has contributed to genuine improvements in Mexican capacity, and INL continues to adapt programs to address U.S. national security priorities, Mexico’s own priorities, and the shifting threat environment. Dismantling transnational criminal organizations requires sustained political will, resources, and urgency to develop solutions that adequately address today’s problems while laying a foundation for long-term development, economic opportunity, and a culture of lawfulness. We continue to press for the essential ingredients that any effective security cooperation needs to deliver for the American people, for Mexico, and for our shared interest in a stable and prosperous Western Hemisphere. This calls for deepening our partnership and measuring progress against clear objectives. We have seen clear and positive steps regarding law enforcement cooperation in response to Attorney General Barr’s recent visits to Mexico. Building on that

momentum, with Mexico's explicit commitment and clear recognition of shared strategic priorities, we have an opportunity to more effectively tackle our shared threat. American and Mexican lives depend on our efforts; we cannot afford to lose focus.

The Drug Crisis

Today's drug problem is serious, but tomorrow's has the potential to be even worse. Drugs originating from and transiting through Mexico have a profound and deadly effect on the United States. Despite the good news that U.S. drug overdoses are finally on the decline for the first time in 20 years, dropping four percent between 2017 and 2018, more than 67,000 Americans died in 2018 from a drug overdose. Many of those overdoses are caused by cocaine and heroin, but we are also seeing a resurgence of methamphetamine use, as well as rising use of synthetic opioids like fentanyl. Nearly 70 percent of fatal drug overdoses in the United States in 2017 involved opioids, and of those, more than half involved synthetic opioids.¹ Synthetic drugs like fentanyl pose a particularly deadly threat; they are extremely potent and they are easy and profitable to make, traffic, and sell in U.S. communities. Criminals can produce these drugs anywhere, at a lower cost than ever before, and ship them through the mail to anyone with an internet connection and a mailing address. Worse still, criminal chemists are developing new substances at a rate faster than domestic and international drug control frameworks can respond. Drug traffickers often mix these synthetics with heroin, cocaine, and other drugs before trafficking them across the U.S. border, which increases the drugs' profitability even as it renders them more deadly. Mexico is the source country for most heroin and methamphetamine consumed in the United States, and remains a major transit zone for cocaine from South America destined for the United States.² We are also seeing concerning signs of fentanyl production in Mexico and reports of fake prescription pills containing fentanyl.

This drug crisis is not limited to the United States; countries around the world note the rising use of synthetics and opioids, including in Mexico. Mexico's efforts to be more strategic about how it combats substance use disorders are welcome, particularly as anecdotal evidence suggest some Mexican states are seeing increases in the use of methamphetamine and cases of fentanyl use have been detected in Mexico City, Tijuana, and elsewhere in the country. In November, Mexico inaugurated a national chapter of the International Society of Substance Use Professionals (ISSUP), which is a global organization that INL helped create

¹ [U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention](#)

² [2018 National Drug Threat Assessment](#). U.S. Department of Justice, Drug Enforcement Administration.

over the past five years aimed at integrating prevention, treatment, and recovery professionals with researchers to promote best practices in the field. This chapter, in addition to promoting evidence-based prevention and treatment services to deter and treat drug use disorders, will also integrate with the criminal justice system to support alternatives to incarceration for nonviolent offenders. We look forward to Mexico advancing efforts to reduce poppy cultivation and illicit drug production, and to working together to interdict drugs to prevent use in Mexico and the United States.

Mexico Governance

Behind the drug crisis, Mexico faces an epidemic of violence, with a record high homicide rate of 29 per 100,000 inhabitants in 2019. In January, the Mexican government announced that its estimate of disappeared persons since 2006 now surpasses 60,000, more than 50 percent higher than its previous estimate.

Transnational criminal organizations are major contributors to Mexican crime and violence – with estimates suggesting that anywhere between 20 and 67 percent of all homicides in Mexico are attributed to organized crime.³ In recent months, two incidents laid bare Mexico’s crisis. In October 2019, Mexican forces released Ovidio Guzman, the son of Sinaloa Cartel leader “El Chapo” Guzman, after government security forces were surprised by a large, heavily armed, violent cartel response in a highly publicized city-wide shootout in Culiacan, Sinaloa. And in November 2019, nine U.S. citizens, all women and children, were killed by cartel members in Chihuahua; this investigation is still ongoing.

In addition to the violence epidemic, impunity is high, public trust in police is low, and organized crime erodes government institutions through violence and corruption. According to one Mexican organization, four out of five homicide cases go unsolved, and 90 percent of all crimes go unpunished.⁴ Public confidence in Mexican law enforcement and the justice sector remains dismally low. In 2018, 20 former state governors were under investigation or in jail. In December 2019, former Secretary of Public Security Genaro Garcia Luna was arrested in Texas on charges of having taken multi-million-dollar bribes from the Sinaloa Cartel. Government institutions remain weak and often underfunded, while personnel lack career standards and training. Meanwhile, the Mexican government continues to consolidate its transition to the accusatorial justice system with notable signs of progress. Nevertheless, there are significant growing pains, and the full transition

³ [Organized Crime and Violence in Mexico, April 2019](#). Justice in Mexico, Department of Political Science & International Relations, University of San Diego.

⁴ [Impunidad en homicidio doloso en Mexico: Reporte 2019](#). Impunidad Cero.

process is one that development experts suggest takes an average of 40 years to complete.

The Merida Initiative, 2008-Present

In the face of these challenges, the Merida Initiative has better positioned U.S.-Mexico security cooperation over the last 12 years to confront the evolving drug threat, tackle corruption and insecurity, and build trust between U.S. and Mexican law enforcement. In support of President Trump's February 2017 Executive Order on Enforcing Federal Law with Respect to Transnational Criminal Organizations and Preventing International Trafficking, and the December 2017 National Security Strategy, the Department and USAID focus our cooperation on building the capacity of the Mexican criminal justice system to attack each component of transnational criminal organizations' business model – from drug production to trafficking to illicit proceeds – and hold them accountable to Mexican law. INL has learned and adapted its programs to meet the evolving environment; tackle priority issues for changing U.S. and Mexican administrations; and prioritize sustainability, Mexican ownership, and measurable impact. Just a few examples of where INL programs and enduring Mexican commitment converged to produce meaningful results include:

Counternarcotics

To enhance Mexico's capacity to detect and interdict illicit drug trafficking, INL donated more than 400 canines to Mexican federal and state agencies, and sponsored training for canine and handler teams to detect weapons, cash, and drugs. This included fentanyl-specific detection training through cooperation with the Royal Canadian Mounted Police in 2018. We are seeing expanded drug seizures by those canine teams as a result of INL investment; the 448 canines donated since 2011 have resulted in the seizure of more than 23 tons of narcotics, including more than 26 kilograms of fentanyl, 56,000 guns, and \$12 million in smuggled cash. Together, canines and inspection equipment donated to Mexico by INL since 2008 have led to the seizure of more than 300,000 kilograms of deadly drugs destined for U.S. communities. INL has since expanded the canine program to committed state police and corrections partners and is working with Mexico to develop a strategic, data-driven plan for the deployment of canines to targeted locations to increase seizures and save more lives. INL also increased the Mexican Navy's (SEMAR) ability to interdict drugs. Launching operations from a base that was refurbished with INL support, SEMAR detected and seized two meth labs in the state of Durango in July 2019, including 541 liters of liquid meth (10.8 million doses), 30 kg of crystal meth (600,000 doses), 1,425 liters of liquid precursor chemicals, and 375 kg of solid precursor chemicals. In August 2018, INL-trained

and -equipped SEMAR forces conducted the largest seizure of meth on record, destroying more than 130 metric tons of processed meth (2.6 billion doses) and more than 29,000 liters and 10,000 kg of precursor chemicals from multiple clandestine labs and underground storage facilities in Sinaloa and Durango.

Border Security

At the border, INL-funded joint trainings with U.S. Customs and Border Protection and Mexico's interagency facilitated stronger ties between law enforcement agencies patrolling either side of our shared border and led to an increase in the number of joint operations to disrupt transnational crime. These trainings yielded the identification and destruction of an illicit border tunnel in October 2019 just 700 yards west of the DeConcini Port of entry in Nogales, Arizona. At Mexico's southern border, INL investments expanded Mexico's visibility on migrants crossing into Mexico, many of whom are en route to the United States. Today, as a result of years of cooperation, Mexico's immigration agency is equipped to collect biometric data from migrants at all 54 Mexican migration stations nationwide and to share that information in real-time with U.S. law enforcement to identify persons of concern before they reach the U.S. border. This capability also enhances our countries' joint efforts to identify, track, investigate, and dismantle transnational criminal organizations and anticipate and respond to migration surges. The U.S. government advocates for a more comprehensive approach to securing our shared border through the increased use of technology and non-intrusive inspection equipment, and through increased joint operations.

Rule of Law

For the Mexican law enforcement and justice sectors, INL learned that no amount of equipment or training can reduce impunity absent sustainable, institutional improvements. INL programs ensure sustained improvements through helping Mexican institutions achieve and maintain international standards in areas such as police, forensics, and corrections. Accreditation to international standards is just one tool to build capacity, but in Mexico it has been a jumping off point to engender and sustain professional standards and promote best practices in response to security challenges. Institutionalizing those higher standards has the added benefit of surmounting the perennial challenges of personnel turnover and administration changes at the federal and state levels. This model has been most successful at the state level, spurring Mexican investment of resources to expand and sustain more effective criminal justice systems.

Building on U.S. assistance, 98 of Mexico's 300 prison facilities in 18 states have achieved American Correctional Association (ACA) accreditation. Prison

accreditation has led to a reduction in escapes, riots, and assaults, and statistics indicate criminal activity both inside and surrounding prisons dropped in correlation with the number of accredited facilities in those areas. Meanwhile, Mexico has taken ownership of the model, adopting ACA accreditation as national policy in 2017. In 2018, ACA formally opened a Mexican chapter, in 2019 published a Mexico-specific code of standards, and is now positioned to share their knowledge and experience with others in the hemisphere.

Following Mexico's adoption of a new accusatorial criminal justice system in 2008, INL assistance helped the Mexican government to implement and consolidate the many changes needed to realize a completely new judicial system. While there is still much to be done, we believe Mexico would not have advanced at the level or pace it has in the justice sector had no investment been made over the past decade in this area.

Future of U.S.-Mexico Security Cooperation

INL is under no illusion that we have achieved yet what we set out to accomplish through the Merida Initiative. Security assistance programs have not yet contributed to a substantive reduction in the availability of drugs in the United States or adequately contributed to reducing the levels of violence in Mexico. The challenges ahead still loom large. However, these examples demonstrate how U.S. investments, when coupled with Mexican political will, can yield improvements that can add up over time. We will seek opportunities to make the greatest changes for our investment, while mitigating risk and ensuring sustainability. The situation demands we continue to work closely with Mexico to develop more successful and enduring solutions to the threats that undermine both countries' security and prosperity.

Necessity of Shared Goals and a Strategic Approach

Critical to our efforts is an articulation of U.S. and Mexican shared goals, alongside a mutual understanding of our shared threats. In the first year of his presidency, President Lopez Obrador publicly committed to reduce violence through the establishment of a new National Guard, eliminate corruption, stop arms trafficking in Mexico, and target illicit proceeds from criminal activities. INL appreciates the President's emphasis on these critical issues, wholeheartedly agrees they are important, and hopes to see a specific and strategic set of objectives to advance progress along those broader promises. INL is well-positioned to build Mexican capacity to tackle all these issues.

In any country, political will must be backed by action and resources, and those will only make a measurable difference if they are deployed in a strategic manner, with identified targets and a deep understanding of the challenge. In August of last year, President Trump called on Mexico to do more to stop the flow of deadly drugs entering our country, specifically by intensifying efforts to increase poppy eradication, illicit drug interdiction, prosecutions, and asset seizures, and to develop a comprehensive drug control strategy.⁵ Attorney General Barr's visits have emphasized the United States' commitment to protecting U.S. and Mexican citizens through bilateral law enforcement cooperation and coordination across our justice systems. These visits yielded specific improvements, including a renewed commitment to U.S.-Mexico law enforcement cooperation and the extradition of a number of Mexicans wanted for trial in the United States.

U.S. assistance in this effort is most effective when matched to a Mexican strategy to reduce drug production and trafficking and deprive transnational criminal organizations of their assets and firepower. Mexican targets for poppy eradication, drug interdiction, transnational crime-related prosecutions, and asset seizures, with identified lines of effort that contribute to those targets, would allow us to tailor our assistance to maximize and sustain results.

The United States and Mexico hold high-level security working groups that have met regularly since October 2019 to discuss ongoing and new areas for cooperation. The working groups have identified opportunities critical to our efforts against synthetic drugs, including strengthening Mexican container control at seaports where precursors enter and ramping up inspections at mail facilities for drugs, weapons, and weapons parts.

Improving Data Collection to Measure Impact

We are constantly looking to improve our programs to ensure lasting impact and demonstrate good stewardship of U.S. taxpayer dollars. Before embarking on new projects at the federal, state, and local levels in Mexico, we assess and secure confirmation of our partners' political will, investment, and end goals to ensure the effort will meet both countries' needs and expectations. In recent years, we have expanded our programming at the state level, and we continue to codify Mexican commitment where possible to ensure continuity across administrations and personnel changes. As in any country where we provide foreign assistance, our success ultimately depends on the enduring will of our committed partners. Where

⁵ [Memorandum on the Presidential Determination on Major Drug Transit or Major Illicit Drug Producing Countries for Fiscal Year 2020](#), August 8, 2019.

we lack data, we design and fund projects that will collect and analyze the necessary baseline information to inform future assistance. For example, the World Justice Project measures rule of law at the state level in Mexico, enabling us to measure improvements in citizen security and the justice sector at a more granular level on an annual basis. We continue to partner with the Mexican government to improve the data collected across the Mexican interagency on drug interdictions and case prosecutions.

INL Bureau Project Design Improvements

Across the globe, INL is redoubling efforts to better understand our results, to know whether and to what extent we are improving security in a country receiving our assistance. There is good evidence that investing in careful project design will increase our success. When we are clear about what we seek to accomplish, we can improve our results, ensure taxpayer dollars advance INL's mission to combat transnational crime, and better explain to the American people how our work advances our national interests.

Conclusion

The deadly effect of the drug trade on American and Mexican lives demands our best efforts. Our security partnership has adapted to the changing context and priorities of successive U.S. and Mexican administrations. Where our programs are matched with committed partners in the Mexican government, we see results, and we continue to work to ensure future programs meet high standards. We welcome Mexico's responsiveness in the bilateral working groups and during high-level visits. We also believe a clear Mexican commitment to a strategic approach that tackles drug trafficking and transnational criminal organizations would enable us to target our assistance more effectively. The enduring and significant change we seek – to save lives and improve security for both our countries – requires nothing less.