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“Combating Transnational Gangs Through Information Sharing”

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Chairman King, Ranking Member Rice, distinguished Members of the Subcommittee; thank you for the opportunity to appear before you today to discuss the work of the Department of State's Bureau of International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs (INL) to combat transnational gangs, including through information sharing. Transnational gangs are key drivers of instability throughout the Western Hemisphere, posing significant threats to security and prosperity here in the United States and to our partners abroad, particularly in Central America. Transnational gangs extort individuals and small businesses and perpetuate high levels of violence and crime, causing large numbers of Central Americans, particularly in the Northern Triangle countries of El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras, to migrate to the United States.

Gangs, predominantly Mara Salvatrucha (MS-13) and the 18th Street Gang, which originated in Los Angeles in the 1980s, continue to forcibly recruit vulnerable Central American immigrants and expand their influence in the United States. With a presence in more than 40 U.S. states, communities across the country are forced to grapple with increased levels of homicide, extortion, local drug dealing, prostitution, and other violent crimes carried out by gangs. MS-13 is particularly prevalent in El Salvador, contributing to its notoriety as one of the most violent countries in the world in 2015 and 2016. While El Salvador's homicide rate for 2017 decreased by 25 percent from 2016 levels, gang activity still contributes to sustained levels of extortion, violence, and insecurity. U.S. law enforcement reports more frequent communication between MS-13 members in El Salvador and the United States, further reinforcing the growing transnational nature of MS-13. Both MS-13 and Barrio 18 have a significant presence in Honduras, though not on the same scale as in El Salvador. In Guatemala, gang activity consists mainly of street gangs focused on extortion. However, transnational gang members, especially Barrio 18, are increasingly extending operations in Guatemala as El Salvador and Honduras intensify efforts to combat gangs in their respective countries.

As the reach of transnational gangs span borders and communities, successfully dismantling them require comprehensive and well-coordinated solutions at the local, state, federal and international levels. INL leads the Department of State's efforts to combat transnational crime overseas by strengthening the capacity of foreign partners to combat and prevent crime at the source before it reaches U.S. borders. Our programs complement those of, and are closely coordinated with, the efforts of our U.S. interagency colleagues, including the U.S. Department of Justice (DoJ) and the U.S. Department of Homeland Security (DHS).

In Central America, INL leads the Department's implementation of regional efforts to combat transnational crime under the Central America Regional Security Initiative (CARSI) and in support of the U.S. Strategy for Central America, a multi-year interagency initiative to secure U.S. borders and protect U.S. citizens by addressing the security, governance, and economic drivers of migration and illicit trafficking, and to promote private sector investment in Central America. Established in 2008, CARSI brings years of lessons learned and best practices to the current fight against transnational gangs, including the knowledge that combatting MS-13 and other transnational gangs requires a multi-faceted approach that couples law enforcement efforts to deny transnational gangs the ability to operate with building stronger, more accountable institutions that bring criminals to justice. To this end, INL support under CARSI focuses on strengthening the capacity of foreign governments' law enforcement and criminal justice systems through a three-part approach: regional coordination and information sharing through vetted and specialized units, bottom-up community anti-gang efforts, and top-down institutional reform and capacity building. Through this approach, we prevent gang activity and recruitment in Central American communities, ensure institutions are capable of bringing gang members to justice, and strengthen the ability of partner nation law enforcement to disrupt and dismantle transnational gangs.

Our Northern Triangle partners are also working to enhance their efforts to disrupt and dismantle transnational crime. In August 2016, the Northern Triangle governments signed the "Regional Plan Against Transnational Organized Crime". The agreement includes measures for information sharing on organized crime investigations and increased joint patrolling of border zones by police and military personnel to curb arms and drug smuggling, as well as the movement of gang members. As part of this plan, high level officials, including the Attorney Generals, meet to increase collaboration and coordination between the countries.

Regional Coordination and Information Sharing

Working closely with our interagency colleagues, including DoJ and DHS, INL combats transnational gangs through building the capacity of vetted units and specialized task forces to investigate cases and to serve as reliable, trusted partners of U.S. law enforcement. Due to the transnational nature of MS-13 and Barrio 18, our efforts increasingly focus on enhancing cross border intelligence sharing and operations. We currently support 56 partner nation vetted units, task forces, and specialized tactical units throughout Central America. These units, typically comprised of elite members of partner nation law enforcement institutions, are capable of investigating complex and high-threat gang cases and other key security

issues. In Honduras, El Salvador, and Guatemala, INL provides training, equipment, technology, and logistical support to FBI-vetted and advised Transnational Anti-Gang Units (TAGs), which lead international efforts to target criminal gangs. Through the TAGs, U.S. and Central American law enforcement partners work together to investigate, disrupt, and dismantle transnational gangs, including through the collection and dissemination of intelligence to support investigations. The results of these units have been remarkable and, importantly, have led to arrests in both the United States and Central America, and to lives saved. In 2015 the TAG unit in El Salvador started monitoring Salvadorans with active links to gang members throughout the east coast of the United States, which contributed to the identification of the entire leadership structure for local MS-13 and 18th Street gangs and the arrest of 98 MS-13 gang members in Charlotte, Boston, and Newark, saving four lives in the United States and 28 in El Salvador.

To enhance TAG units' ability to attack criminal gang activity in the region, INL supported the development of the Regional Criminal Gang Intelligence Platform (SICAT), which was operationalized in October 2017. INL continues to support SICAT, which enables real-time information-sharing for TAG units to track gang-related activities, migration, human smuggling, and the trafficking of drugs, weapons, and illicit goods across the Northern Triangle. The platform facilitates secure and immediate exchange of information, directly supporting the Northern Triangle Presidents agreement in the 2016 "Regional Plan Against Transnational Organized Crime" to exchange information on transnational gang activity. SICAT is a critical component for increased cross-border coordination and operations.

In the Northern Triangle and Panama, INL supports U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE)-vetted Transnational Criminal Investigative Units (TCIUs) through the provision of equipment and technology, training, and logistical support. TCIUs disrupt and dismantle transnational criminal organizations (TCOs) and investigate a litany of crimes, including human trafficking, smuggling, and money laundering, which often have a nexus with transnational gangs. Our support for TCIUs includes DHS Operation CITADEL, a multi-year interagency effort to bolster partner nation capabilities to identify, disrupt, and dismantle TCOs by targeting the networks used to move migrants, illicit funds, and contraband throughout Central America. In 2017, CITADEL's intelligence and information sharing, mentoring, and capacity building through cross-border TCIU operations resulted in 231 arrests, including nine MS-13 members in Honduras. CITADEL also led authorities to identify or disrupt a

number of human trafficking and financial networks of gangs and TCOs in the region.

Extortion is the main source of revenue for Salvadoran gangs. Widespread extortion perpetuated by gangs is often cited as a primary security concern by citizens of the Northern Triangle and one of the drivers of migration from the region. As a result, INL established several specialized task forces beginning in 2012 comprised of police and prosecutors to address extortion and dismantle transnational gangs' extensive financial networks. Through technical assistance and mentoring by INL and DOJ Office of Overseas Prosecutorial Development Assistance and Training (OPDAT) advisors, investigations by these task forces have produced impressive results. In 2017, asset forfeiture and financial crimes task forces executed numerous large-scale operations with hundreds of arrests and multi-million dollar asset seizures of gang members and associates, eliminating access to their financial resources. For example, the Salvadoran Business Crimes Task Force (BCTF) successfully dismantled four MS-13 and 18th Street extortion networks, maintaining a 96 percent conviction rate. In 2016, these units contributed to Operation Jaque, El Salvador's first effort to dismantle MS-13 financial structures. The Salvadoran Attorney General's Office expanded the BCTF concept to anti-extortion units located in each of El Salvador's 19 departments. In September 2017, the units executed a second MS-13 financial takedown, Operation Tecana, which involved cross-border coordination with Guatemala and DHS, resulting in 137 arrests, including six police officers, for collaborating with MS-13 and other criminal organizations and the seizure of properties and businesses used to launder money from illicit acts.

In September 2017, INL and interagency efforts to more effectively coordinate the network of Northern Triangle task forces and vetted units contributed to the success of Operation Regional Shield. INL-supported prosecutors and police in Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador, working with OPDAT and the FBI, conducted a coordinated regional operation against gang members in their respective countries. The operation led to the arrest of 3,800 gang members in the United States and Central America. Law enforcement officials seized six firearms and charged 284 gang members in Guatemala; seized 14 businesses and 11 luxury vehicles and arrested 12 MS-13 money launderers in Honduras; and filed 3,477 criminal charges, resulting in more than 1,400 arrests and the dismantling of eight MS-13 and Barrio 18 cliques in El Salvador.

In May 2017, INL facilitated the creation of the Border Integration and Coordination Center (GCIF), a Salvadoran multi-agency task force supporting DHS and U.S. state and local law enforcement to identify, arrest, or deny entry to

gang members. GCIF officials, originally deployed to McAllen, Texas, conduct research and report information to DHS and relevant law enforcement for further action. The information provided through GCIF was not available to U.S. authorities prior to the implementation of the program. Since its inception, GCIF information has led to the arrest of eight gang members and one human smuggler in the United States, as well as the arrest of a gang member in Italy who was on Salvadoran authorities' top-wanted criminal list. GCIF has identified 240 MS-13 members not previously known to U.S. law enforcement, 46 not previously known to Salvadoran authorities, and 37 Salvadoran human smugglers and facilitators. GCIF queries also identified 88 Salvadoran nationals with active arrest warrants in El Salvador; information U.S. officials utilized when reviewing immigration applications made by these individuals. In December 2017, the last Salvadoran officials deployed to McAllen returned to El Salvador, joining a permanent staff of 10 police officers, five migration officials, and two corrections officers – alongside representatives from the U.S. Department of Homeland Security – at a dedicated Salvadoran headquarters where they will continue to review these records.

Due to the initial successes and strengthened coordination between United States and Salvadoran authorities, INL is working to expand GCIF to include Guatemalan and Honduran officials. In July 2017, the INL-funded United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime human trafficking project facilitated the first Interparliamentary Forum among legislators, Attorneys General, and Security Ministers of the Northern Triangle countries. The country delegates concluded the meeting with signed commitments, including support for GCIF, the first tangible regional commitment to the GCIF by the Northern Triangle governments. At the same time, we are working to expand GCIF beyond its current location and are promoting it as a resource for U.S. states and local jurisdictions with significant MS-13 presence. In October 2017, INL and DHS reached out to the Suffolk County, Long Island Police Department (SCPD), which submitted to GCIF a list of 454 individuals suspected of gang affiliation. GCIF identified and provided potential residential locations of known gang members and individuals wanted in El Salvador.

Through INL's International Law Enforcement Academies (ILEAs), we provide specialized training to criminal justice sector officials and facilitate collaboration between partner nations' and U.S. federal, state, and local law enforcement to address common problems. From 2015 through 2017, 211 law enforcement officials from 12 countries, including more than 100 from the Northern Triangle, attended anti-gang training courses at ILEAs San Salvador and Roswell. The courses were taught either by the FBI or Salvadoran National Police to provide participants with tools to investigate gang related crimes.

Information-Sharing with Mexico

Through our strong security partnership with Mexico, INL's efforts under the Merida Initiative includes enhancing information sharing with Mexico to disrupt transnational crime and TCOs. In 2015, the United States agreed to help Mexico develop a nationwide, interagency biometrics system capable of interfacing with U.S. biometrics systems. INL, in coordination with DHS, commenced a pilot project in 2017 to enable Mexico's National Migration Institute to routinely collect and exchange biometric information on migrants with the United States. As of 2017, all biometric information collected in migration centers and ports of entry along Mexico's Southern border with Guatemala and Belize is shared with United States law enforcement. This capability enhances our countries' joint efforts to identify, track, and dismantle TCOs and other violent criminal groups; to identify Known or Suspected Terrorists before they reach U.S. borders; to track migration patterns; to anticipate, plan for, and respond to migration surges; to analyze human trafficking networks; and to support cross-border investigations of gang members and other criminals. INL partners with ICE and Customs and Border Protection (CBP) to train and mentor Mexican migration officials. We will explore expanding this biometric exchange with Mexico to prisons, airports, and other Mexican security agencies.

The depth of our cooperation with Mexico to strengthen border security, control migration, and dismantle transnational criminal networks is unprecedented. Since 2014, Mexico has significantly increased its presence along its Southern border with Guatemala and Belize. In 2016, Mexico's Migration Agency detained 188,595 migrants headed to the United States. Ninety percent of those migrants were Central Americans, and 17,889 were unaccompanied children. Mexico's cooperation to control migration strengthens our own border security and saves the United States billions of dollars in potential deportation costs.

Mexico continues to increase engagement with the United States and Central American partners to combat shared threats from organized crime, and we welcome this very positive step in regional collaboration.

Bottom-Up Anti-Gang Efforts

In addition to our bilateral and regional coordination efforts to enhance information sharing, INL also implements proven successful community-level anti-gang interventions in Central America, given a significant amount of gang activity in the region is localized. These interventions strengthen the capacity of police,

make communities more resilient to gang infiltration, and establish trust and relationships between communities and the police. Through Model Police Precincts (MPP) and Place-Based Strategy (PBS) sites, we strengthen local law enforcement's ability to prevent and respond to gang violence by identifying key high-crime areas and communities at risk, and partnering with implementers to develop strategically-balanced and integrated criminal justice sector projects. As a result of these strong partnerships, MPP and PBS sites have seen reductions in homicide rates ranging from 40 to 73 percent since 2015. We also tackle gang recruitment, a pervasive issue for youth in the Northern Triangle countries, through the Gang Resistance Education and Training (GREAT) and Police Athletic League (PAL) programs. These police-led programs provide anti-gang and life skills training, sports, and other activities to at-risk children. As a result, children develop tools to resist recruitment tactics and citizen trust in law enforcement is strengthened. To date, more than 300,000 students have graduated from INL-sponsored GREAT programs in Central America, and 1,624 police officers achieved certification to teach the GREAT curriculum.

Top-Down Institutional Efforts

Arresting gang members is only effective if justice institutions are capable of prosecuting, convicting, and incarcerating these criminals. Through training, technical assistance, and mentoring, INL and our interagency partners enhance the capacity of the Northern Triangle justice institutions and ensure the security of prosecutors and judges working on high-profile cases. These efforts are essential as corruption and impunity remain significant challenges in the region. We work closely with the Attorney Generals of the Northern Triangle countries to introduce legal reforms, mitigate gang violence, and combat corruption. Many key successes, including Operation Regional Shield executed in September 2017, are coordinated by Northern Triangle Attorney Generals, with U.S. support. Furthermore, by helping Salvadoran and Guatemalan prisons improve security and infrastructure, we work to ensure that gang leaders are unable to direct criminal activities while incarcerated.

Conclusion

Dismantling transnational gangs and ending the violence and crime they carry out requires sustained and well-coordinated efforts between law enforcement while also strengthening the institutions that administer justice and investing in local communities to increase trust and confidence in the police and provide citizens with the tools necessary to resist gang influence. These are smart and necessary investments, whether it is combating transnational gangs here at home or

abroad. Security in Central America is vital to the security of the United States. INL's work to strengthen foreign partner capacity in the region provides critical linkages between U.S. and foreign law enforcement to make possible greater information sharing. Like other forms of transnational crime, however, dismantling gangs does not lend itself to simple, short-term solutions. This is a long term endeavor, but the comprehensive approach we have put in place to tackle the considerable challenges before us is demonstrating measurable results. INL will continue to support programming that enhances information-sharing and regional coordination to improve citizen security in Central America and combat the influence of transnational gangs and criminal organizations in the United States.