

**Opening Statement  
Chairman Eliot L. Engel**

House Foreign Affairs Subcommittee on the Western Hemisphere

**Guns, Drugs and Violence: The Merida Initiative  
and the Challenge in Mexico**

*Wednesday, March 18, 2009*

A quorum being present, the Subcommittee on the Western Hemisphere will come to order.

I want to start today's hearing with a brief anecdote from my recent trip to Mexico. Over President's Day recess, I led a bipartisan Congressional Delegation to Mexico with 6 of my colleagues. One of my main goals for this trip was to focus on ways that the US and Mexico can enhance cooperation in combating the scourge of illegal firearms trafficked from the US into Mexico. My very first meeting in Mexico City was with Attorney General Eduardo Medina Mora. After the meeting, the Attorney General led my delegation into an adjacent room where he had pulled together just a small sampling of the many guns that were captured in that week alone. Of course, the majority of these military-style assault weapons could be traced back to the United States, and many could be even further traced back to countries in Eastern Europe.

The availability of assault weapons has armed and emboldened a dangerous criminal element in Mexico, and it has made the job of drug cartels easier. A shocking 90% of firearms recovered in drug-related violence in Mexico come from the United States. I have been outspoken on this issue over the last two years, and I will continue to do everything I can to increase US efforts to curb gun trafficking into Mexico.

On February 12<sup>th</sup>, I sent a letter to President Obama – signed by a bipartisan group of 52 of my colleagues – urging him to once again enforce the ban on imported assault weapons, which was previously enforced during the administrations of Presidents George H.W. Bush and Bill Clinton. In recent years, the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives (ATF) has quietly abandoned enforcement of the import ban. As a result, the US civilian firearms market is flooded with imported, inexpensive military-style assault weapons. These assault weapons – which often come from Eastern Europe – are being trafficked from the US across the border into Mexico. To get around the ban, importers have been able to skirt restrictions by bringing in assault weapons parts and reassembling them with a small number of US-made parts. Enforcing the existing import ban requires no legislative action and would be a win-win for the US and Mexico.

To show our commitment to curbing firearms trafficking from the US to Mexico, I also urge the Senate Foreign Relations Committee to take up the Inter-American Convention against the Illicit Manufacturing of and Trafficking in Firearms,

Ammunition, Explosives, and Other Related Materials (CIFTA) as soon as possible. To expedite the process, I urge the Administration to begin consultations with the Committee on the Treaty immediately.

I'd like to take a step back from the firearms issue for a second, and focus more broadly on the precarious security situation in Mexico, and along the US-Mexico border. Drug-related killings in Mexico reached around 6,000 last year, and the US press clearly is taking note of the alarming situation. I have met with President Calderon three times over the past six months. I am impressed by his courage in taking on Mexico's drug cartels, and his commitment to strong US-Mexico relations. I have been one of the strongest supporters of the Merida Initiative in Congress, and will continue to be in the coming years.

**But**, let me emphasize today, as I have in the past, that we cannot focus exclusively on Mexico as we look to combat drug trafficking. We must take a more comprehensive, hemisphere-wide approach to the problem. The inclusion of Central America in the Merida Initiative was a good first step, as was Congress's expansion of Merida to Haiti and the Dominican Republic. But, funding must be increased for the countries in Central America and must be further expanded in the Caribbean.

At the same time, much more needs to be done to reduce the US demand for drugs. Not only do our weapons arm Mexico's drug cartels, but our consumption habits fuel the drug trade. Just as the Merida Initiative was announced and a US-Mexico joint statement was put out saying that the US would "intensify our efforts" in addressing the demand question, President Bush released his FY 2009 budget that cut spending for US drug prevention and treatment programs by \$73 million. This was completely unacceptable. I was encouraged by President Obama's selection of Seattle Police Chief Gil Kerlikowske as our new drug czar. In his remarks upon accepting the nomination, Kerlikowske said that "the success of our efforts to reduce the flow of drugs is largely dependent on our ability to reduce demand for them." I could not agree more.

I am now pleased to introduce our two distinguished witnesses from the State Department. David Johnson is Assistant Secretary of State for International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs and Roberta Jacobson is Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for Western Hemisphere Affairs. We look forward to hearing your testimony. I will save introductions of our second panel for later.

With that, I now would like to call on Ranking Member Mack for his opening statement.