

Opening Statement
Chairman Eliot L. Engel

House Foreign Affairs Subcommittee on the Western Hemisphere

**U.S. – Mexico Security Cooperation: Next Steps for the
Merida Initiative**

Thursday, May 27, 2010

It is a pleasure to hold today's joint hearing with my good friend, Chairman Cuellar, and the Homeland Security Subcommittee on Border, Maritime and Global Counterterrorism.

On Tuesday, President Obama announced that he will deploy 1,200 National Guard troops to our southern border and will request an additional \$500 million from Congress for border security. I have strongly supported President Obama on the Merida Initiative and firmly agree with the President that we must move ahead with comprehensive immigration reform. Today, I would like to receive more information from our administration witnesses on precisely what the role of the National Guard will be at the U.S.-Mexico border and how long the troops will remain there.

The deployment of National Guard troops **must not** replace or undermine crucial security and law enforcement efforts being carried out by the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives (ATF), Immigrations and Customs Enforcement (ICE) and Customs and Border Protection (CBP) in cooperation with our partners in Mexico. While I respect the President's decision to send National Guard troops to the southern border, let's first recognize what the National Guard is not: It is not a law enforcement or police force. The military is banned under the law from conducting domestic policing operations. That is not to say that if the National Guard cannot fill gaps in intelligence collection and communication in the short term, but this is really a temporary bandage, at best. I hope the Obama administration will work with Congress to quickly adopt a plan to further strengthen ATF, ICE and CBP – key agencies who work closely on a daily basis with their Mexican counterparts on intelligence sharing and efforts to curb the illegal flow of firearms and bulk cash south and illicit drugs north. Strengthening these agencies and their continuing working relationships with the Mexican Government is ultimately what will make our shared border safer and our critical relationship with Mexico closer and more grounded in trust and mutual cooperation. A National Guard presence at the U.S.-Mexico border must not be a long-term strategy.

Finally, any National Guard activity at our shared border must be coordinated with the Mexican Government and transparent in a way that bolsters our joint goals for the Merida Initiative. Moreover, any deployment of the National Guard must not be seen as a campaign against immigrants. The United States is a nation of immigrants and our

efforts must only underscore that this country is strengthened and renewed by the contributions of immigrants.

I believe that the United States has no more important friend in this hemisphere than Mexico. By welcoming President Calderon for a state visit last week, President Obama made it clear that U.S. – Mexico relations are a priority and will continue to remain at the top of his foreign policy agenda.

Security assistance to Mexico is essential, and as we focus on the next phase of the Merida Initiative, I would like to offer a few thoughts:

First, we must continue to expedite Merida Initiative assistance to Mexico. A report that I commissioned from the Government Accountability Office (GAO) in December found that only two percent of Merida funds had been spent through September 30, 2009. Fortunately, assistance is now moving more quickly with \$159 million in training and equipment provided to Mexico by May 11th. As President Calderon confronts his country's brutal drug cartels head on, we must continue to cut through our own government's red tape to get assistance flowing as fast as possible.

Second, I am pleased that the Senate supplemental appropriations bill includes \$175 million in funding for the next phase of the Merida Initiative, including key resources for judicial reform.

Mexico's 2008 constitutional reform requires that the country transition to a new judicial system at the state and federal levels by 2016. Our excellent USAID judicial reform work is focused on a few Mexican states, and I hope this additional funding will help expand these programs throughout the country.

As I have done before, I will work with my colleagues in the House to ensure that funds for Mexico are included in our supplemental appropriations bill.

Finally, as I have said many times before, security assistance alone is not enough. It is unacceptable that the United States not only consumes the majority of the drugs flowing from Mexico, but also arms the very cartels which contribute to the daily violence devastating Mexico.

And, while I am pleased that President Obama has developed a strategy to curb illegal firearms trafficking to Mexico, much remains to be done. I urge the Obama Administration to enforce the existing ban on imported military-style weapons being trafficked at an alarming rate from the United States across the border into Mexico. The import ban – which was authorized by provisions in the 1968 Gun Control Act – was enforced during the administrations of Presidents George H.W. Bush and Bill Clinton. President George W. Bush's Administration quietly abandoned enforcement of the import ban. As a result, the U.S. civilian firearms market is flooded with imported, inexpensive military-style weapons.

A return to enforcement of the existing import ban requires no legislative action and would be a win-win for the United States and Mexico. I firmly believe that starving Mexico's brutal drug cartels of military-style weapons will make all of us in the United States and Mexico much safer.

Thank you, Chairman Cuellar. It is a pleasure collaborating with you on today's hearing, and I look forward to hearing the testimony of our distinguished witnesses.