

**Opening Statement**  
**Chairman Eliot L. Engel**

House Foreign Affairs Subcommittee on the Western Hemisphere

**Assessing the Merida Initiative: A Report from the Government Accountability Office (GAO)**

*Wednesday, July 21, 2010*

On Sunday, 18 people were murdered in cold blood at a party in Northern Mexico. This came just three days after a car bomb killed several people in Ciudad Juarez. And, it came a week after the 9<sup>th</sup> U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals ordered immigration judges to seriously consider granting asylum to Guatemalan women who fear they will be murdered in a country where more than 3,800 women have been killed since 2000.

Nobody can bring back the lives of the many people tragically killed through drug-related and other violence in Mexico and Central America. But, if we are to avoid future tragedies of this magnitude, we must redouble our efforts to support a holistic security strategy. Such a strategy must confront drug cartels head on while also investing in drug and violence prevention and treatment programs both in Latin America and here at home. One such effort that I have championed here in Congress is the Merida Initiative.

Today, the Government Accountability Office (GAO) is releasing a report that I commissioned, along with Ranking Member Mack, on the Merida Initiative and the Central American piece of Merida which is now known as the Central American Regional Security Initiative (CARSI).

Let me start with the good news from the report. In December, the GAO issued an interim report on the slow speed of Merida assistance to Mexico and Central America. Since then, the GAO reports that the Obama Administration has picked up the pace in getting essential equipment and training to our partners in these countries. I commend President Obama and Secretary Clinton for cutting through our government's red tape to get the Merida Initiative moving. In the coming months, we must continue to expedite our assistance to Mexico and Central America.

On a more disappointing note, today's report notes that nearly three years and \$1.6 billion after the announcement of the Merida Initiative, our counternarcotics assistance to Mexico and Central America lacks fundamental measurements of success. Specifically, GAO found that the State Department's performance measures "do not provide measurable targets, and do not measure outcomes." As the GAO report notes, "without targets to strive toward, State cannot determine if it is meeting expectations

under the Merida Initiative.” Our long history of counternarcotics spending in the Western Hemisphere demands that we better define our goals.

You all have heard me express my concerns in this Subcommittee about coordination of the Merida Initiative. The GAO’s report notes that tracking Merida funds is difficult as each of the three State Department bureaus managing these funds has a different method. It’s incredible to me that there is still no consolidated database for tracking these funds. If the State Department cannot track its own funding, then how can we in Congress exercise appropriate oversight? We can and must do better than this. I have long called for a coordinator at the State Department for our security programs in the Americas, and this is just another reason why we need it.

With regards to the Central American Regional Security Initiative (Carsi), I was stunned to learn that the Narcotics Affairs Section (NAS) at the U.S. Embassy in Mexico City serves as the account manager for funds destined for Central America. I cannot understand why this extra layer of bureaucracy is needed. And, finally, unlike Mexico, in Central America, there is no formal coordination mechanism in place between U.S. agencies and their host government counterparts working on Carsi implementation. This must be improved.

I now would like to thank the Government Accountability Office (GAO) for its excellent report. In addition to Mr. Ford who is testifying here today, I greatly appreciate the contributions from Juan Gobel, Marc Castellano, Marisela Perez, Erin Saunders Rath and Judith Williams.