

TESTIMONY OF
ROBERTA S. JACOBSON
DEPUTY ASSISTANT SECRETARY OF STATE,
BUREAU OF WESTERN HEMISPHERE AFFAIRS
DEPARTMENT OF STATE
BEFORE
THE SUBCOMMITTEE ON THE WESTERN HEMISPHERE
COMMITTEE ON FOREIGN AFFAIRS
UNITED STATES HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES
March 18, 2009

Mr. Chairman, Ranking Member Mack, and Distinguished Members of the Subcommittee:

Thank you for the opportunity to appear before this Committee and to discuss Mexico and the Merida Initiative.

Mexico, as well as our other neighbors in Central America and the Caribbean, is passing through a critical period. Mexican cartels are using harsh and appalling violence to attack security forces and each other as these criminal organizations seek to expand their operations and to dominate or eliminate rivals. The cartels are targeting police, military, and other security service personnel, and using graphic displays of public violence to intimidate communities. This tripartite struggle, in which cartels fight each other while attacking state authorities, represents a significant threat to Mexico and to our national interests.

This hearing and my remarks today focus appropriately on Mexico. Nonetheless, let me stress that the problem at hand – drug trafficking, transnational criminal organizations, and violence -- is a regional one which directly and immediately threatens our other neighbors in Central America and the Caribbean. Our response therefore -- embodied in the Merida Initiative -- is also very much a regional one.

The Merida Initiative is premised on a continuing close partnership with the Government of Mexico, as well as the governments of Central America, Haiti, and the Dominican Republic. The Merida Initiative recognizes the transnational nature of the challenge we face and provides us with a framework to collaborate with our neighbors to confront the criminal

organizations whose activities, violence and intimidation threaten the welfare, prosperity, and security of our citizens.

I would like to discuss the current situation in Mexico, the strategic importance of the Merida Initiative, its potential to transform our relationship with Mexico and how we envision security cooperation. At the same time, I want to underline the urgency of our assistance through the Merida Initiative – an urgency heightened by the current financial and economic crisis. With public sector budgets at risk, remittances declining, and job losses mounting in Mexico, and throughout the region, organized crime and the cartels may present an attractive alternative for those who see no other future.

The Merida Initiative reflects our response to both an imminent danger and an opportunity to work with Mexico to address the threat emanating from organized crime and drug trafficking organizations. Our cooperation with Mexican administrations has increased remarkably during the past decade. But since assuming the presidency in December 2006, the Administration of President Calderon has expanded that cooperation and offered to work with us in an unprecedented collaborative and coordinated fashion.

Our affirmative response -- as embodied in the Merida Initiative -- was an expression of our confidence in President Calderon's leadership, and the courage of the Mexican people. The nature of our shared challenge is daunting. Mexican authorities estimate that in 2008 over 6200 persons were killed in drug-related violence, including 522 civilian law enforcement and military personnel. This year alone, the death toll has mounted to over 1,200. We are increasingly aware that this violence affects U.S. communities along our southern border. According to federal law enforcement agencies, elements of the Mexican-based criminal organizations are present in 230 American cities.

President Calderon and his government have demonstrated over the last two years their intention to surmount the serious challenges posed by these transnational criminal organizations. The Calderon administration has taken major steps to confront the narcotraffickers and to enhance the state's capability to address crime and corruption. These steps have included deploying the military and federal police in large numbers in operations against organized crime; professionalizing Mexico's police forces and

prosecutors; extraditing top drug bosses wanted by U.S. authorities; instituting long-term reforms to improve the efficiency and effectiveness of Mexican judicial institutions, and removing Mexican officials linked to crime syndicates and corruption. President Calderon has also launched critical social, development, and health initiatives to reclaim Mexico's public spaces, and confront the increasing demand for drugs within Mexico.

As you know, our bilateral agenda with Mexico is enormous. These ties encompass everything from trade to energy to environmental issues; from making our borders operate more efficiently to collaborating on health issues. But working together to meet the unprecedented threat represented by the criminal organizations is at the top of our bilateral agenda, and the Merida Initiative is critical to our collaboration and success.

The Merida Initiative has two interconnected and mutually reinforcing aspects. On the one hand, Merida has a robust assistance component, in which the Department of State, working in close collaboration with the Departments of Homeland Security and Justice, USAID and other agencies, seeks to provide Mexico with equipment, training, and technical assistance to enhance Mexico's ability to interdict and stop illicit drugs, arms and human trafficking; to improve public security and law enforcement; and to strengthen institution building and the rule of law.

On the other hand, Merida is more than a program of bilateral or regional assistance. The Initiative is premised on a partnership between Mexico and the United States, and a recognition that the multifaceted problems associated with these criminal organizations represent a shared responsibility whose solution requires a coordinated response. The Merida Initiative entails increased levels of assistance while providing a framework for enhanced cooperation. This partnership means that U.S. and Mexican authorities work together to design strategy as well as develop and implement projects and activities.

The principles of shared responsibility and partnership central to the Merida Initiative also require action on our part. The weapons employed by the criminal organizations against law enforcement agencies and innocent civilians in Mexico primarily originate in the United States and smuggled illegally across the border. The Department of Homeland Security (Immigration and Customs Enforcement, Customs and Border Protection, and the U.S. Coast Guard) and the Department of Justice (Bureau of

Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives, Drug Enforcement Administration, Federal Bureau of Investigation, Organized Crime Drug Enforcement Task Forces, the U.S. Marshals Service and the United States Attorneys) are working in the U.S. and with Mexican officials to curtail this deadly trade. These components of the Department of Homeland Security and the Department of Justice are also continuing to work with the Department of the Treasury (Internal Revenue Service) and with Mexican financial and law enforcement authorities to disrupt the bulk transfer of cash from drug sales that flow from the U.S. and finance the operations of the Mexican drug cartels. Of equal importance is the demand component of this deadly equation. It is the U.S. demand for illicit drugs which drives the narcotics trade. We must continue to invest in efforts to reduce our domestic demand even as we assist Mexico with its own burgeoning demand problem, something that we are undertaking as one activity under our Merida programs. Progress on these three fronts is critical to the success of the Merida Initiative, to protect our citizens, and, to defeat these criminal organizations.

Again, let me refer to the important regional dimension of our efforts. The U.S. Government remains committed to supporting the nations of Central America in countering the influence of traffickers, gangs and organized criminal groups in their territories as well. The Merida Initiative provides us a regional vehicle to accomplish these objectives and to link our efforts in Mexico with those elsewhere in Central America and the Caribbean. All the governments who partner with us under Merida recognize that these are transnational problems requiring transnational solutions. The Central Americans, for example, hold regular meetings among their political and security officials, including under the auspices of SICA, the Central American Integration System. Mexico, the countries of Central America and Colombia also meet regularly in recognition of the transnational nature of the threat. The Merida Initiative furthers this regional dialogue and engagement. Ultimately, the results of our efforts will enable the governments in Central America, Haiti and the Dominican Republic to reassert control over their territory, provide the stability needed for the creation of new economic opportunities, and reinforce the critical role of democratic institutions and adherence to the rule of law.

I want to conclude by emphasizing that continued funding is essential to the success of the Merida Initiative. Thanks to strong bipartisan support in this committee and in the entire Congress, we launched the Initiative with

\$465 million in funding appropriated in the FY 2008 Supplemental Appropriations Act. Congress appropriated an additional \$300 million in the FY 2009 Foreign Operations Appropriations Act and look forward to working with Congress to fulfill the \$1.4 billion commitment to Mexico. Mexico, as well as our other partners, have clearly demonstrated their willingness to take strong and decisive action, dedicating lives and committing increased resources while revamping law enforcement and justice sector institutions for this task.

The Merida Initiative was born out of crisis. This crisis also provides us with a strategic opportunity to reshape our security cooperation relationship and expand dialogue with our partners on critical security and law enforcement issues. The Merida Initiative provides us with a platform to enhance this partnership and work more effectively with our nearest neighbors in the hemisphere to counter a menace that threatens us all.

Thank you and I would be happy to answer any questions you may have.