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# Central America and the Merida Initiative

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[The following are excerpts from a statement before the House Committee on Foreign Affairs Subcommittee on the Western Hemisphere, Washington, DC, May 8, 2008.]

Thank you for the opportunity to appear before this Subcommittee today to discuss the Central America portion of the Merida Initiative and the opportunity it represents for regional security cooperation among not only the countries of Central America but also with the United States and Mexico.

Drug trafficking, gang violence, crime, and human smuggling, all linked to Central America, now directly afflict many areas of the United States, while arms and cash flows move south across our border and through Mexico to sustain these criminal organizations. The United States has a compelling strategic interest in moving quickly to reinforce our partnership with Central America to check illicit activity in the region. Drug trafficking and criminal organizations in Central America have grown in size and strength over the last decade, suborning and intimidating police and judges, which weakens the states' abilities to maintain public security. The results have been a region-wide surge in crime and violence and the emergence of gangs as major social actors. Central American leaders and public opinion, especially in El Salvador, Honduras, and Guatemala, have characterized this situation as a national emergency requiring an urgent response. Furthermore, the effects of these Central American problems are readily apparent in the United States.

Since 2005, more than 1,800 alleged members of Mara Salvatrucha, or MS-13, have been arrested in cities across the United States. Estimates of the number of gang members in Central America vary considerably, but the United Nations [UN] estimates the number around 70,000. A UN Office on Drugs and Crime report published in May 2007 cites country gang membership at approximately 10,500 in El Salvador, 36,000 in Honduras, and 14,000 in Guatemala. The gang problem is most serious in these "northern three" countries of Central America; but we have indications that gangs are increasingly active in Belize, Costa Rica, and Panama.

Central America has among the highest homicide rates in the world, and the rates are increasing. In 2005, the estimated murder rate was 56 per 100,000 people in El Salvador, up from 43 in 2004 and 37 in 2003. Between 2003 and 2006, the murder rate in Guatemala jumped from 32 per 100,000 to 47. Due to lack of standardized data, good numbers are not available for Honduras; but it is estimated that the murder rates are comparable to those in El Salvador and Guatemala. For comparison, the U.S. murder rate is 5.6 per 100,000.

The UN Office on Drugs and Crime study reports that more than 70 percent of homicides in the northern three countries are committed with firearms. The same report suggests that there are an estimated 800,000 unregistered firearms in civilian hands in Central America, in addition to the half million legally registered firearms. This means that between half and two-thirds of all the firearms in Central America are illegal—a number that is roughly five times more than the number of weapons held by law enforcement in the region.

The Central American isthmus is a primary transit point for people and drugs destined for the United States. With increased Mexican air and maritime interdiction, traffickers will increasingly look to Central America for over-land movement of contraband and people into Mexico and the United States. Increasing violent crime threatens the internal stability of states, debilitates national economies, undermines public

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confidence in democracy, and exacerbates illegal migration to the United States. Resource constraints, ineffective criminal justice systems, and uncoordinated national efforts hamper an effective Central American response. However, we believe a growing sense of common political will and urgency among the Central American countries affords the United States a unique opportunity to launch a process to develop common and effective approaches to shared security concerns in the region.

The countries of Central America collectively—and individually—have demonstrated historic democratic progress since the end of their internal conflicts. As they have integrated economically, they have also transformed their militaries and improved respect for human rights. Central America's collective willingness to work with the United States and Mexico on these issues also represents an important opportunity—it provides an unprecedented opening to address security in coordination with neighbors whose countries form a bridge running from the Andes to the border of the United States.

The Merida Initiative grew out of the President's March 2007 trip to Latin America, particularly his visits to Guatemala and Mexico where security concerns dominated his conversations with former President Berger and President Calderon. In July, I led a U.S. inter-agency delegation to the inaugural meeting of the U.S.-Central American Integration System, or SICA, Dialogue on Security held in Guatemala. At these meetings, the Central American leaders identified what they believe to be the major threats to the region: gangs, drug trafficking, and illicit trafficking of arms.

Beyond strictly national or even bilateral approaches, Central American countries agree they must collectively strengthen regional security through the Central American Integration System. In conjunction with Mexico, they produced a comprehensive regional security strategy that was published in August of last year.

In the months that followed, the State Department led an inter-agency process to develop the U.S. portion of the Central America Merida Initiative request. Working with our colleagues from throughout the U.S. Government, including the Bureau of International Narcotics and Law Enforcement, the Departments of Justice and Homeland Security, the U.S. Agency for International Development, the Office of National Drug Control Policy, and others, we built a comprehensive public security proposal that responds directly to the needs identified by the Central American leaders.

At the same time, we were in close contact with our Embassies throughout the region, who worked with host-country officials to conduct security requirement assessments and provided on-the-ground expertise. In January of this year, we sent a delegation of 40 USG representatives to El Salvador to hold validation team meetings with SICA member countries and further refine our Merida Initiative request. This was the same process successfully used with Mexico. Additionally, we conducted briefings and consultations with the Central American Embassies in Washington. Finally, since the announcement of the FY2008 emergency supplemental request, we have benefited greatly from our conversations with Congressional staff and members as we worked to develop our FY2009 budget request.

The Central America portion of the Merida Initiative is a comprehensive public security package that seeks to tackle citizen insecurity in Central America by more effectively addressing criminal gangs, improving information sharing between countries, modernizing and professionalizing the police forces, expanding maritime interdiction capabilities, and reforming the judicial sector in order to restore and strengthen citizens' confidence in those institutions. For these purposes, we have requested \$50 million in initial supplemental funding and an additional \$100 million through the FY2009 budget request.

Our Merida Initiative request has been designed to complement efforts that Central American governments are undertaking on their own to combat the threats that organized criminal elements and gangs pose to their societies. By providing a short-term targeted boost to public security funding in the

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region, our goal is to enable host governments to leverage their own budgets and resources more effectively and move towards sustainable responses to the security crisis in the region.

However, it must be recognized that these countries, with economies similar in size to those of medium-sized American cities, are hard pressed to take on resource intensive surveillance and interdiction missions facing adversaries who have large amounts of cash at their disposal. While traffickers may fly drugs on corporate jets and build fleets of submarines and semi-submersible vessels, Central American countries are barely able to keep operational their basic law enforcement and counter-narcotics vehicles, boats, or Vietnam-era aircraft.

Nevertheless, we are encouraged by the efforts of the nations of Central America and Mexico to work together to confront security threats in the region. Mexico has signed on as an observer to SICA and participated in the development of their security strategy. Additionally, the regional Attorney Generals regularly meet in various fora. Just last week, on the margins of the OAS [Organization of American States]-hosted Justice Ministerial [REMJA], the Attorney Generals and Ministers of Justice from the United States, the nations of Central America, Mexico, and Colombia came together to discuss the security of the region. Operational cooperation is ongoing as well. For example, Mexican and Guatemalan law enforcement work together to combat trafficking of people and contraband flowing across their shared border. El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, and Mexico have provided the FBI with thousands of samples of fingerprints of known criminals to be entered into a new, shared fingerprint database. El Salvador has more than doubled the number of police officers dedicated to the Transnational Anti-Gang, TAG, Unit in partnership with the FBI.

The Merida Initiative request is divided into three “pillars” of activities: Counter-narcotics, Counter-terrorism, and Border Security; Public Security and Law Enforcement; and Institution Building and Rule of Law. Specifically, pillar one focuses on information sharing and interconnectivity, improved border security and maritime interdiction efforts, and a targeted regional effort to combat arms trafficking. Through pillar two, we seek to help further professionalize Central American law enforcement and to address the proliferation of gangs through implementation of the U.S. Strategy to Combat Criminal Gangs. Our approach includes diplomatic initiatives, improved law enforcement and processes for repatriation, capacity enhancement for all justice sector actors, and a strong prevention program. We also support preventative and community policing with technical assistance, training, and much-needed non-lethal equipment that will enable law enforcement to communicate, get out into communities, and perform better investigations.

We recognize that all sectors of the region’s justice system need strengthening to make this strategy sustainable. As such, we have requested funding to improve the efficiency and management of the law enforcement and judicial sectors to improve their responsiveness to citizens. To strengthen the rule of law in the region, we would increase training for prosecutors, defenders, and court managers; expand technical assistance on prison management; and improve juvenile justice systems.

It is important to note that rule of law, training, and efforts to improve capacity are integral parts of the entire package, not just the third pillar, “Institution Building and Rule of Law.” For example, pillar one includes funding requests for training on aviation, port, and document security as well as support for OAS demand[ed] reduction efforts. In pillar two, over \$15 million has been requested over the two years to support capacity enhancement and community prevention activities as part of the U.S. Strategy to Combat Gangs. While the pillars serve as an organizational tool for us, we cannot view the pillars individually. To attain a comprehensive picture of what we have set out to achieve through the Merida Initiative, the request must be analyzed as a single, comprehensive package as, in many cases, program funding transects the pillars of activities.

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Central America and Mexico are facing public security threats of tremendous proportions. The leaders of the region have shown that they are committed to working together to put an end to the growing violence and crime, but their resources are limited. As President Bush has said, violence and drug trafficking are a shared problem; and we have a shared responsibility to confront criminal organizations. The Merida Initiative represents this shared responsibility to combat the threats that affect not only the citizens of Central America and Mexico but also U.S. citizens as gang activity and drug-related violence proliferate in the United States.

As I mentioned before, we have far-reaching geographic, economic, and demographic links to Mexico and Central America and a compelling national security interest in helping the governments of the region succeed in the battle against crime and insecurity. By funding the Merida Initiative, Congress can take a vital step towards saving innocent lives here in the United States. The gangs that plague Central America are transnational in their operations. For example, last June a federal grand jury in Greenbelt, MD indicted two MS-13 leaders for ordering the murders of two people in the United States from their prison cells in El Salvador. DOJ [Department of Justice] estimates that there are between 8,000 and 10,000 active MS-13 members in the United States and between 30,000 and 50,000 18th Street members worldwide. MS-13 has a presence in at least 38 states and the District of Columbia, while 18th Street is active in 28 states. Drug cartels operate throughout Central America and Mexico and on both sides of the U.S.-Mexico border, with U.S. citizens implicated in violent gun battles in Mexico and Americans the victims of such violence. By working with these nations to dismantle such groups and strengthen institutions, we multiply the effectiveness of our own domestic security efforts.

Today's threats require a coordinated international response to pressing security concerns. Only through partnership and shared responsibility will Central America and United States be able to defeat the transnational threats that confront us. The Merida Initiative represents the cornerstone of that response.