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House of Representatives
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Opening Statement
Ranking Member Darrell Issa

Full Committee Hearing
“The Rise of the Mexican Drug Cartels and U.S. National Security”

July 9, 2009

Thank you, Mr. Chairman, for holding this important hearing.

At the outset, I want to commend your work on this critical issue facing our national security. Our staffs have worked together on this matter and I look forward to our continued cooperation.

Today’s hearing addresses serious concerns associated with cartel violence in Mexico. Since President Calderon began cracking down on these illegal networks, thousands have died in Mexico’s streets. Most have been members of cartel organizations battling with the government, and with each other. Some, however, have been innocent Mexicans and foreign tourists.

The impact upon Mexico’s economy has been significant. As a result of the skyrocketing murder rate, Mexico’s tourist industry has nearly ground to a halt. Popular vacation destinations once booming with business have more vacancies than ever. U.S. businesses have also been affected. In addition to airlines that can’t fill seats, U.S. border towns that rely on pass-through commerce have suffered as well.

Reports have also cited justifiable concern that the rise in cartel violence could spread into our border towns. I am concerned by these reports. As a representative of a border region, I can say that violence has always been a problem in American border towns. For years, cartels have established influence among American gangs, and have developed vast networks of distribution rings. This influence is not limited to the border region, however. Though not as concentrated, their reach spans every corner of the United States.

The question is whether the recent surge in violence has brought a proportional increase of violence to American towns. Though Administration officials have assured staff that it has not, I would like a fuller explanation and verification from our witnesses here today.

This question of spillover violence brings a larger issue to the forefront. The issue is whether the U.S. can do a better job of curbing drug, firearm, money, and human trafficking across our border. Past administrations have taken the fight to the cartels, such as Plan Colombia. Since then, stronger fences have been built and thousands of agents have been added to our borders. What is this Administration's plan? Can the Obama Administration do it better and more effectively than past administrations? I look forward to an explanation of how the Administration's *National Southwest Border Counternarcotics Strategy* is better and/or different from past efforts.

Thus far, a silver bullet solution has eluded us. Some suggest that we must first look inward. In other words, America's appetite for drugs, and the availability of arms protected by our Second Amendment are to blame. They propose that if the federal government invests in widespread drug treatment programs and bans guns, the problem will simply go away. This proposal is naïve at best.

Others suggest that in addition to our northbound inspection efforts, full-time southbound inspections should be implemented to address the smuggling of weapons into Mexico. While southbound inspections would likely result in more seizures, such a program would immediately detract from our own national security efforts. A full-time outbound inspection program is the equivalent of securing Mexico's border for them. It would create a perverse incentive for Mexico not to use its own resources at border crossings and on their side of the fence – relying Americans to police traffic in both directions.

If the Administration believes that providing full-time outbound inspections is in America's best interests, then it should provide this Congress with a detailed plan and answer critical questions. If we secure Mexico's border, is it more costly to use American labor considering the average border agent's salary is between \$40k and \$50k? Currently, there are nearly 40,000 agents assigned to our border. How many agents would it take to add a full-time outbound force? According to DHS figures, the Border Patrol is already 5,000 agents shy for *northbound* inspections. Would the addition of outbound forces come at the expense of northbound inspections? What other policies or programs could be substituted for such an effort? These are significant domestic and foreign policy questions requiring national debate, especially in these tough economic times.

Already, \$700 million has been appropriated to "support partnerships" through the Merida Initiative. This is in addition to the hundreds of millions appropriated every year through various appropriations vehicles. Is it working? Are there more effective ways in which we could help the Mexican people? As the Administration tackles the problems at our border, I hope they will examine these programs to determine whether the taxpayer is getting sufficient return on his money. Mr. Chairman, I look forward to providing any assistance this Committee can in that effort. With trillions in new deficit heaped on taxpayers' backs, we need to be certain this money is well spent.

Throughout this effort, it is incumbent upon this Committee to ensure that agencies are sufficiently coordinated. In the wake of 9/11, Congress established the Department of Homeland Security to consolidate national security bureaus, eliminate cross-agency red tape, and enhance our ability to protect the American people. This massive government reorganization came at great cost to

the taxpayer. It appears, however, that some of the old bureaucracy remains, especially between ICE and DEA. Only recently did ICE agree to share intelligence and coordinate its efforts with other agencies. I look forward to a full explanation of why interagency turf wars have taken precedence over the safety of American citizens.

Mr. Chairman, this hearing could not be more timely. It provides an excellent opportunity to look back over the past 7-8 years since 9/11 and assess whether progress has been made. Additionally, it provides this Administration a platform to tell the American people how its new strategy is different or better than past administrations.

I would like to commend the work of our border agents and all of those involved in protecting our national security. This includes our witnesses here today, who play a large part in coordinating those efforts. It is not an easy task. I thank you for your service, and look forward to your testimony.