

**Statement of Sue Saarnio
Deputy Assistant Secretary
for Canada, Mexico, and Regional Economic Policy
Bureau of Western Hemisphere Affairs
U.S. Department of State**

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“Violence on the Border: Keeping U.S. Personnel Safe”

Chairman Chaffetz, Ranking Member Cummings, and distinguished Members of the Committee, thank you for the opportunity to testify before you today. As the Deputy Assistant Secretary of State responsible for our Mexico portfolio I want to assure you that the safety and security of our colleagues in Mexico is our top priority. I started my career in Mexico and have worked on Mexico multiple times in my career, and I am proud to share with you the work the Department of State performs to assist American citizens in Mexico’s border region. I will highlight the measures we are taking to enhance security in Mexico, through strong bilateral cooperation, all while ensuring the safety of U.S. personnel -- particularly of those serving in U.S. consulates along the U.S.-Mexico border.

The State Department closely examines all threats to our diplomats, locally employed colleagues and U.S. facilities. The Department assesses daily the risks U.S. personnel face as they do their jobs in a constantly shifting landscape. We seek a balance between the critically important work our people do – including the consular services provided to American citizens in Mexico – and the inherent risks of working in a challenging security environment. At every step, we work to ensure the safety and security of all American citizens, including our diplomatic colleagues in Mexico. We remain vigilant and analyze carefully new potential threats.

The Department -- in collaboration with key U.S. government agencies such as Justice, Homeland Security, Defense and others -- works with the Mexican government through the Merida Initiative to combat transnational criminal organizations and to protect our citizens from the crime, corruption, and violence that these organizations generate. With strong Congressional support, for which we are grateful, the State Department has delivered more than \$1.4 billion in training, equipment, and technical assistance to Mexico since the Merida Initiative

began in 2008. We have made significant progress at the federal level, as seen in Mexico's response to the 2014 surge in Central American migration. We continue to work with Mexico to improve the capacity and professionalism of state and local institutions.

The United States and Mexico share a mutual investment in security and prosperity. The bilateral economic relationship between our two countries is huge: two-way trade topped \$500 billion in 2014, with 80 percent of that crossing the U.S.-Mexico land border. Our integrated economic relationship supports thousands of jobs in both countries. Hundreds of thousands of people legally cross our border each day. Mexico remains the top foreign destination for travelers from the United States. In fact, we estimate that on any given day there are 1.5 million American citizens in Mexico.

The management of our border infrastructure is critical to facilitate the commercial flows that unite Mexico and the United States and that contribute directly to our shared North American prosperity. The inter-connectedness of Laredo, Texas and Nuevo Laredo, Mexico highlights the importance of the border region, and underscores the need for a strong, active U.S. diplomatic presence on the ground. Forty percent of all U.S.-Mexico trade passes through Nuevo Laredo and Laredo, with approximately 12,000 commercial trucks and 1,800 railcars crossing between the two cities daily. In 2014, more than 2 million cargo trucks moved northbound from Mexico through Laredo.

U.S. Consulate General Nuevo Laredo supports the U.S. economy through visa services for tourists, students, and workers. The Consulate adjudicated the second largest number of temporary worker visas in Mexico in 2014 – more than 69,000 visas. This year the Consulate has adjudicated 23,000 temporary worker visas and more than 67,000 total visas.

U.S. Consulate General Nuevo Laredo provides critical services to the estimated 80,000 U.S. citizens living in the northern regions of Tamaulipas and Coahuila. These services include passport issuances and renewals, issuing Consular Reports of Birth Abroad, providing information on voter registration, and offering notary services for documents to be used in the United States. The Consulate also provides emergency services American citizens who are arrested, kidnapped, or face temporary destitution.

U.S. Consulate General Matamoros similarly provides essential support to U.S. citizens, facilitates commerce, and supports our broader national interests in

Mexico. It provides critical services to the estimated 58,000 U.S. citizens living in the Consular district. An estimated 20,000 U.S. citizen children attend school in the district, which covers most of the Mexican state of Tamaulipas.

Because of our robust and ongoing dialogue with Mexico on security issues, Mexican federal authorities have taken action to improve security conditions and reduce violence in the state of Tamaulipas. In response to our requests, the Mexican government has deployed additional federal security forces to respond to the situation in the state and, in particular, in the vicinity of our Consulate General in Matamoros. The Department and the White House have raised our concerns about the increased levels of violence in the state of Tamaulipas with Mexican government officials. Our Embassy and consulates maintain strong day-to-day ties with Mexican federal, state, and local officials and meet frequently with them to discuss these concerns and to ensure all appropriate measures are being taken to protect our personnel and U.S. citizens and businesses.

We have systems in place that allow us to communicate rapidly and effectively with U.S. citizens when the security situation requires it. Our Travel Warning, Country Specific Information, and Security Messages provide U.S. citizens with our assessment of the risks they may face when traveling to certain regions in Mexico. In 2014 and 2015 to date we have sent out six country-wide Travel Warning updates and 14 security-related messages, covering everything from carjackings to street fighting to hurricane warnings. By law, any security warning issued to U.S. officials is also provided to private U.S. citizens.

We share the Committee's concern about the levels of violence in certain areas in Mexico and assess the overall environment on a daily basis. We believe U.S. interests are best protected by maintaining a strong presence on the ground in Mexico and continuing our close law enforcement and security relationship with authorities. We review and monitor the situation daily and have been taking all appropriate steps to ensure the safety of all American citizens, including U.S. government personnel, working in Mexico. I want to assure you that this is and will continue to be a top priority for me, my leadership, and the Department.

Thank you again for the opportunity to testify, and I will be happy to answer any questions you may have.

Sue Saarnio

Sue Saarnio is the Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for Canada, Mexico and Regional Economic Policy. She previously served as Director of Canadian Affairs and started her diplomatic career at the U.S. Embassy in Mexico City. She is a career Foreign Service Officer with 30 years of experience working on international trade and economic issues in the U.S. State Department.



Ms. Saarnio served as the Minister Counselor for Economic Affairs at the U.S. Embassy in Ottawa responsible for the bilateral economic, trade, energy and environment relationship from 2010 to 2013. She served in the State Department's Economic, Energy and Business Affairs Bureau from 2008 to 2010 as Deputy Special Representative for Commercial and Business Affairs and Director for Multilateral Trade Affairs.

She served as the U.S. Special Advisor for Conflict Diamonds representing the U.S. government in the multilateral Kimberley Process from 2005-2008 leading implementation of the U.S. Clean Diamond Trade Act. She has served at Embassies in Panama, Nicaragua and Tunisia and at the U.S. Consulate General in Jerusalem.

Prior to her government service, Ms. Saarnio worked as journalist in Montana and Minnesota. She is a graduate of Macalester College in St. Paul, Minnesota, and attended the American University in Cairo, Egypt.