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“Security Cooperation in Mexico: Examining the Next Steps in the U.S. – Mexico Security Relationship”

Chairman Udall, Ranking Member McCain, and members of the subcommittee, thank you for the invitation to appear before you today. I am grateful for the opportunity to discuss the U.S. Agency for International Development’s (USAID) contributions to the Merida Initiative and to receive your advice and counsel.

It is an honor to testify with my colleagues from the State Department, Assistant Secretaries Roberta Jacobson and William Brownfield. Collaboration among our bureaus has never been stronger.

In Latin America and the Caribbean, USAID is increasingly focused on helping the region’s governments to reduce crime and violence. This is a matter of national security for the United States, as my colleagues have just noted, as well as an economic and political imperative for the affected countries. Crime and violence are a severe drain on private and public investment in the Americas and, according to studies by USAID and the Inter-American Development Bank, the leading constraint to economic growth in some countries. Criminal activity is also arguably the greatest threat to democracy in some countries in the region, corrupting governments, restricting citizen engagement and undermining freedom of the press.

In Mexico, USAID’s collaboration with the Government on citizen security has three principal goals: to improve the effectiveness of the judiciary; bolster the capacity of communities to reduce crime; and protect and defend human rights. To achieve these goals, we operate in a genuine partnership. Every one of our programs is designed, developed and implemented jointly with our Mexican counterparts. And our activities are coordinated with the State Department and other U.S. agencies to make for a comprehensive approach to crime reduction. And even in a time of tight budgets, we have nevertheless been able to increase and maintain our funding for Merida security programs.

Five years ago, Mexico began a legal transition from the written inquisitorial criminal justice system to the more open and transparent oral accusatorial system. USAID’s support of that transition in twelve states ranges from helping to develop new laws, policies and regulations and train judges, prosecutors, lawyers and public defenders in the new criminal justice system.

We are also helping the Mexican Government to create and strengthen institutions essential to the reform, such as internal training units, victims' assistance centers, alternative dispute resolution offices and pretrial services units. To prepare the next generation of Mexican lawyers and judges to effectively perform their functions under the new criminal justice system, we are assisting Mexican bar associations and law schools to develop their curriculum.

Later this year, we plan to double the number of states where we are providing training and technical assistance. Our programs complement Mexico's significant contribution to the reform process, including building new courtrooms, providing infrastructure and staffing and expanding training and capacity development.

The transition to the new system is already proving effective. A review of the process in five states has found a marked decrease in pretrial detentions, longer sentences assigned for serious crimes, reduced case backlogs and stronger alternative dispute mechanisms and victims assistance units.

Strengthening Mexico's justice sector institutions is vital to ensure that crimes are properly investigated, the accused are treated fairly, and the guilty appropriately sentenced. Ideally, however, we can help avert that youth ever have to enter the legal process in the first place. Like its neighbors, Mexico has embraced preventative actions to reduce crime and violence, such as economic investments in communities and social programs designed for youth most susceptible to joining gangs. In February, President Enrique Peña Nieto launched a national crime prevention strategy, with funding commitments totaling \$9 billion.

To support the Mexican government's crime prevention efforts, we are testing innovative approaches in three of the cities most affected by narco-related violence and other criminal activity: Ciudad Juarez, Monterrey and Tijuana. In three communities in each city, we are partnering with local organizations and drawing on international expertise to develop new models for safe urban spaces, providing life and job skills for at-risk-youth, increasing educational opportunities, improving the capacity of all levels of government to keep citizens safe and empowering communities to address the root causes of crime and violence. We will jointly evaluate the effectiveness of these activities with the Mexican Government as it considers their broader application across the country.

One of the keys to success of our Merida activities has been the extent to which the private sector has assisted in implementing our programs. For example, we have partnered with companies like Cisco, Intel and Prudential to train youth from tough neighborhoods for jobs in the growing fields of technology and construction.

To truly ensure the sustainability of our efforts, we are increasingly supporting local organizations at the forefront of the effort to reduce crime and violence in Mexican communities.

Such organizations as the Chihuahuan Business Foundation and Citizens Committed to Peace are bolstering their communities by, providing educational and professional counseling services, setting up after school programs and offering support services to youth and families affected by narco-related violence and other criminal activity.

Many of the approaches that we and our Mexican counterparts draw upon are from the United States, which have achieved dramatic reductions in crime in the past two decades. Through an agreement signed last year with Los Angeles, USAID has been sharing that city's proven gang reduction and youth development tools with officials in Mexico, as well as in Central America. Last week, a deputy mayor of Los Angeles met with federal government officials in Mexico City and with local authorities and civil society leaders in Monterrey to share some of the keys to Los Angeles's success in reducing criminal gang activity, including community policing models and tools to assess the extent to which individual youth are at-risk of joining a gang.

Among the segments of society most affected by crime and drug trafficking are human rights defenders and journalists. Through the Merida Initiative, USAID is helping the Mexican Government to protect journalists, citizen bloggers and others who expose crime and corruption. We are benefiting from lessons learned from nearly a decade of investments to enhance similar protection mechanisms in Colombia. Last year, we trained more than 150 Mexican journalists and human rights professionals on practices, tools and technologies to protect themselves and their work, and we plan to reach hundreds more in the coming years.

To increase law enforcement's awareness of international human rights standards and practices, we are helping to train federal and state police and the staff of the Mexican Government's new victims assistance unit. This year, over 250 officers earned master's certificates in human rights with USAID's support.

Citizen activism is key to raising awareness and mobilizing action on the defense of human rights. So we are collaborating with Mexican organizations on campaigns to support the implementation of the Government's human rights reforms, including a groundbreaking Constitutional Reform that strengthens Mexico's human rights commission and elevates the country's international human rights commitments to the same level as their national laws.

Mr. Chairman, we are encouraged by many of the steps that Mexico has taken to reduce crime and violence. But we also recognize that defeating the powerful cartels and reducing other factors that contribute to crime will take time. We are prepared to continue to stand shoulder to shoulder in support of the Mexican government and civil society in this endeavor. Their success will make the United States safer.

Thank you. I look forward to your questions.