

Congressional Testimony by Ricardo Ainslie, Ph.D. (University of Texas at Austin)

Homeland Security Committee

Congressman Michael McCaul, Ranking Member

Subcommittee on Oversight, Investigations and Management

**U.S. Homeland Security Role in the Mexico War against Drug Cartels**

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Washington, D.C.

Thank you Mr. Chairman for holding hearings on a question that is of the greatest national importance. The fates of the United States and Mexico are deeply entwined for a variety of economic and historical reasons, and we know that Mexico is presently facing a grave national crisis that we can no longer ignore.

My research has focused on two aspects of Mexico's war against the drug cartels. 1) At a policy level, I have interviewed the people who are formulating and implementing Mexico's national strategy, including several members of President Calderón's security cabinet; and, 2) I have focused on Ciudad Juarez, the city that has suffered nearly 25% of the 34,000 cartel-related deaths over the last three years and where the Mexican government has at times deployed nearly 25% of its forces. Juarez is the epicenter of this war and its fate will tell us a great deal of what the outcome of this war will be which is why I have chosen to spend a great deal of time there.

I would like to highlight several points that I believe are key to understanding what is taking place across from our southern border.

1. Plan Merida, as a response to the crisis that Mexico is facing, is anemic at best. As you know, it calls for approximately 1.4 billion dollars in aid over the course of three years. That is less than we are presently spending in Afghanistan on any given week. If we want Mexico to succeed, we will need to do more and it is in our national interest that we do so.

2. We are not doing enough to control the flow of weapons into Mexico. Presently our reporting laws are actually stricter with respect to handgun purchases than they are for purchases of automatic weapons. It is in our national interest to find mechanisms for the responsible oversight of the sale of automatic weapons.

3. We need to raise awareness about what is taking place in Mexico and how it directly affects our national security. For example, according to the DEA there is documented evidence of cartel networks in some 230 American cities. This is an elaborate and sophisticated system of transportation, warehousing and distribution within the United States. Yet, only two on the FBI's 10 Most Wanted list (Eduardo Ravelo and Joe Luis Saenz) are individuals associated with Mexican drug cartels.

4. Finally, the violence and its raw, often sadistic brutality, form an ever-present backdrop to daily life in Mexico. Cartels are adept at exploiting various media such as Youtube and the internet to call explicit attention to their capacity for violence. I think many of us here have failed to grasp the profound impact of this narco-terrorism on the lives of Mexican citizens throughout the country.

The Mexican government has attempted to meet the complex challenges of the country's current crisis in a variety of ways. When president Calderón declared war against the cartels in December of 2006 the Mexican government lacked the resources to

carry it out. Municipal and state police forces in the most affected regions of the country were already under the effective control of the cartels. The Mexican president deployed some 45,000 army troops because there were no law enforcement resources on which Mexico could rely. Over the last three years, Mexico has nearly doubled expenditures for security, and its Federal Police has grown from a force of 6000 officers to 35,000 officers. There is an effort to create a professionalized Federal Police that will become the model for the state police forces. The Federal Police are increasingly replacing the Mexican army, such as happened in Ciudad Juarez in the spring of 2010. In addition, there appears to be unprecedented cooperation between U.S. and Mexican law enforcement. In recent years Mexico has also permitted the extradition of unprecedented numbers of cartel operatives to the U.S.

However, much work remains to be done, as evidenced by the continuing violence in Mexico. An Achilles heel of the current Mexican strategy is the fact that the Mexican judicial system is presently dysfunctional despite a decade of efforts at modernization. In 2009, for example, the year in which 2,607 people were executed in Ciudad Juarez, there was only one Federal prosecution and only 37 state prosecutions that resulted in prison sentences. Current estimates for the state of Chihuahua, which was supposed to be a model for judicial reform, are that only 3%-5% of crimes eventuate in actual convictions and prison terms. Improvements in law enforcement that are not accompanied by real judicial reform will mean that most cartel members will continue to act with impunity, a fact which, in turn, has profound effects on the morale of the citizenry.

Last spring Mexico launched a program called “Todos Somos Juarez,” a strategy modeled after aspects of Plan Colombia in which, for the first time, significant federal resources are being directed toward programs that aim to repair the social fabric in Juarez. For example, Juarez has one of the highest rates for drug addiction in the country, the highest incidence of school dropouts, and rampant unemployment (especially since the recent economic recession). In one of the poorest sections of Juarez, where approximately 40-percent of the city’s 1.3 million residents live and where cartel violence has been especially high, there was only a single high school until recently. The “Todos Somos Juarez” program represents an implicit understanding that an exclusively law enforcement-driven strategy has not been sufficient. It will take some time to know if this program is effective, or where it is effective and where it is not, although currently Juarez is averaging six executions a day, down from a year ago when they were averaging 10 and 11.

Our “Plan Mexico,” if you will, will require continued support and an expanded relationship with Mexican law enforcement. To succeed it will also require real judicial reform in Mexico. Finally, it is clear that a successful response to the Mexican crisis will require a significant commitment to helping Mexico restore and strengthen the social fabric, especially in those areas of the country that have been most severely affected by the drug violence. At the same time, the recent assassination of ICE agent Jaime Zapata and the wounding of Victor Avila in San Luis Potosi, last year’s killing of three people with ties to the U.S. Consulate in Ciudad Juarez, and the attempted grenade bombing of the U.S. Consulate in Monterrey in 2008 all attest to the likelihood that greater American efforts to assist Mexico may well come at a cost.