

News from Congressman Eliot Engel

*Representing the Bronx, Westchester, and Rockland Counties
Offices in the Bronx, Mount Vernon and West Nyack
2161 Rayburn HOB, Washington, DC 20515*

Contact: Eric Jacobstein or Jason Steinbaum, 202-226-9980
For Release: Friday, June 19, 2009

GAO REPORT HIGHLIGHTING PROBLEMS IN U.S. EFFORTS TO COMBAT ILLEGAL GUN TRAFFICKING TO MEXICO

RELEASED BY CHAIRMAN ENGEL

*Chairman of the House Western Hemisphere Subcommittee Holds Hearing on New
GAO Report*

Washington, D.C. – At a hearing today, Congressman Eliot Engel – the Chairman of the House Foreign Affairs Subcommittee on the Western Hemisphere – is releasing a report he commissioned from the Government Accountability Office (GAO) on U.S. efforts to combat illegal gun trafficking to Mexico. The report – which is the first GAO report ever issued on this topic – cites the serious challenges that the United States faces in our efforts to curb illegal gun trafficking to Mexico, and notes that until recently, no U.S. strategy to combat firearms trafficking existed.

According to Rep. Engel, “It is mind-boggling that for a year and a half, we have had no inter-agency strategy to address this major problem, but instead have relied on uncoordinated efforts by a variety of agencies. A strategy to combat arms trafficking to Mexico should have been in place and running on October 22, 2007 – the day that Presidents Bush and Calderon announced the Merida Initiative. I’m glad President Obama has finally begun to address this.”

Data in the GAO’s report shows that 93% of firearms recovered in Mexico and traced in FY 2008 originate in the United States. In FY 2006 and 2007, the number was 95%.

Following today’s hearing, testimony from the GAO can be read and the proceedings can be viewed at <http://foreignaffairs.house.gov/subcommittees.asp?committee=8>

The following is Chairman Engel’s opening statement at today’s hearing:

“Today’s hearing will focus on the just released Government Accountability Office (GAO) report on U.S. efforts to combat arms trafficking to Mexico. I commissioned this report last year with the former Ranking Member of this Subcommittee Dan Burton and several other Subcommittee Members.

“The availability of firearms illegally flowing from the United States into Mexico has armed and emboldened a dangerous criminal element in Mexico, and it has made the

brutal work of the drug cartels even more deadly. Data in the GAO's report shows that 93% of firearms recovered in Mexico and traced in FY 2008 originate in the United States. In FY 2006 and 2007, the number was 95%. This is even higher than the 90% figure that is most frequently cited in the press, and it is simply unacceptable.

"This is not the first time this Subcommittee has focused on what the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives (ATF) has referred to as the "iron river of guns" illegally flowing from the United States into Mexico. When the Merida Initiative was announced in October 2007, the United States and Mexico put out a joint statement in which the U.S. pledged to "intensify our efforts" to combat the trafficking of weapons to Mexico. As Chairman of this Subcommittee, I have been waiting for too long for us to live up to this commitment, and I will not let up the pressure until we do.

"It has been a year and a half since the Merida Initiative was announced. Shockingly, the GAO's report states that until just a couple of weeks ago, a U.S. strategy to combat firearms trafficking to Mexico was nowhere to be found. On June 5th, the Office of National Drug Control Policy (ONDCP) released its 2009 National Southwest Border Counternarcotics Strategy which, for the first time, includes a chapter on combating illicit firearms trafficking to Mexico. But, implementation still has not begun. It is mind-boggling that for a year and a half, we have had no inter-agency strategy to address this major problem, but instead have relied on uncoordinated efforts by a variety of agencies. A strategy to combat arms trafficking to Mexico should have been in place and running on October 22, 2007 – the day that Presidents Bush and Calderon announced the Merida Initiative. I'm glad President Obama has finally begun to address this.

"The June 5th announcement was certainly a step in the right direction, and we now anxiously await further direction on this inter-agency strategy and the roles and responsibilities of various U.S. agencies. As the GAO reports, ATF and Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) – the two main agencies implementing efforts to combat firearms trafficking to Mexico – do not effectively coordinate their efforts. I fully endorse the GAO's recommendation that the Attorney General and the Secretary of Homeland Security finalize a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) between ATF and ICE. I was also pleased to author a provision in the House-passed Foreign Relations Authorization Act which will create an Inter-Agency Task Force on the Prevention of Illicit Small Arms Trafficking in the Western Hemisphere to ensure that our efforts to curb firearms trafficking are better coordinated, not just with regard to Mexico but with all countries in Latin America and the Caribbean.

"I was not surprised to learn in the GAO report that certain provisions of federal firearms laws – including the Tiahrt amendment – present challenges to U.S. efforts to curb firearms trafficking to Mexico. Current restrictions on collecting and reporting information on firearms purchases not only make the jobs of our fine police officers more difficult than they already are, but also inhibit our ability to effectively curb firearms trafficking to Mexico.

“GAO reports that of the 87% of firearms recovered in Mexico originating from the United States between 2004 and 2008, 19% were manufactured in third countries and imported into the United States before being trafficked into Mexico. This is why we **must** once again enforce the ban on imported assault weapons that was previously enforced during the administrations of President George H.W. Bush and Bill Clinton. In recent years, the George W. Bush Administration quietly abandoned enforcement of the import ban. As a result, the U.S. civilian firearms market is flooded with imported, inexpensive military-style assault weapons. These assault weapons – which often come from Eastern Europe – are being trafficked from the U.S. across the border into Mexico. To get around the ban, importers have been able to skirt restrictions by bringing in assault weapons parts and reassembling them with a small number of U.S.-made parts. Enforcing the existing import ban requires no legislative action and would be a win-win for the US and Mexico. On February 12th, I sent a letter to President Obama – signed by a bipartisan group of 52 of my colleagues – urging him to once again enforce the ban on imported assault weapons. The data in today’s report only reinforces the need to return to enforcement of this ban.

“Finally, I would like to once again call upon the Senate to ratify the Inter-American Convention against Illicit Manufacturing of and Trafficking in Firearms, also known as CIFTA. The treaty was signed during the Clinton Administration and must be ratified, so the United States can tell our friends in the hemisphere that we are serious in addressing the problem of illegal weapons trafficking.

“Before I close, I would like to personally thank the GAO team who put together this extraordinary report over the past year. Jess Ford, Juan Gobel, Addison Ricks and Lisa Helmer – thank you all for your excellent work.

“With that, I would now like to call on Ranking Member Mack for his opening statement.”