



Department of Justice

STATEMENT OF

**JOSEPH M. ARABIT
SPECIAL AGENT IN CHARGE
EL PASO DIVISION
DRUG ENFORCEMENT ADMINISTRATION
UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF JUSTICE**

AND

**WILLIAM McMAHON
DEPUTY ASSISTANT DIRECTOR
FIELD OPERATIONS
BUREAU OF ALCOHOL, TOBACCO, FIREARMS AND EXPLOSIVES
UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF JUSTICE**

BEFORE THE

**UNITED STATES SENATE
COMMITTEE ON FOREIGN RELATIONS**

HEARING ENTITLED

**“SOUTHERN BORDER VIOLENCE: HOMELAND SECURITY
THREATS, VULNERABILITIES, AND RESPONSIBILITIES”**

PRESENTED

MARCH 30, 2009

Chairman Kerry, Senator Lugar and Members of the Committee, we appreciate the opportunity to appear before you today to discuss the Department of Justice's (the Department) role in addressing the alarming rise of violence perpetrated by warring Mexican drug trafficking organizations in Mexico and the effects of that violence on the United States, particularly along our Southwest Border. We want to share with you the Department's strategy systematically to dismantle the Mexican drug cartels, which currently threaten the national security of our Mexican neighbors, pose an organized crime threat to the United States, and are responsible for the scourge of illicit drugs and accompanying violence in both countries.

Overview of Department of Justice's Mexico and Border Strategy

The explosion of violence along the Southwest border is being caused by a limited number of large, sophisticated and vicious criminal organizations, not by individual drug traffickers acting in isolation. Indeed, the Department's National Drug Intelligence Center has identified the Mexican drug trafficking organizations (DTOs) as the greatest organized crime threat facing the United States today. That insight drives our response. There is much to do and much to improve upon. But the Department's strategy – built on its proven track record in dismantling transnational organized criminal groups, such as the mafia in the 1980s and 1990s – confronts the Mexican cartels as criminal organizations, rather than simply responding to individual acts of criminal violence. Pursued vigorously, and in coordination with the efforts of other U.S. government agencies like the Departments of State and Homeland Security and with the

full cooperation of the Government of Mexico, this strategy can and will neutralize the organizations causing the violence.

The Department's strategy to identify, disrupt, and dismantle the Mexican drug cartels has five key elements. *First*, the strategy employs extensive and coordinated intelligence capabilities. The Department pools information generated by our law enforcement agencies and federal, state and local government partners, and then uses the product systematically to direct operations in the United States and assist the efforts of the Mexican authorities to attack the cartels and the corruption that facilitates their operations. *Second*, led by experienced prosecutors, the Department focuses its efforts on investigation, extradition, prosecution, and punishment of key cartel leaders. As the Department has demonstrated in attacking other major criminal enterprises, destroying the leadership and financial assets of the cartels will undermine the entire organizations. *Third*, the Department pursues investigations and prosecutions related to the smuggling of guns, cash, and contraband for drug-making facilities from the United States into Mexico. The violence and corruption in Mexico are fueled by these resources that come from our side of the border. *Fourth*, the Department uses traditional law enforcement approaches to address spillover effects of cartel violence in the United States. These effects include the widespread distribution of drugs on our streets and in our neighborhoods, battles between members of rival cartels on American soil, and violence directed against U.S. citizens and government interests. *Fifth*, the Department prosecutes criminals responsible for the smuggling, kidnapping and violence in federal court. The ultimate goals of these operations are to neutralize the cartels and bring the criminals to justice.

Attorney General Holder is committed to taking advantage of all available Department resources to target, disrupt, and dismantle the Mexican cartels. Last month, the Attorney General announced the arrest of more than 750 individuals on narcotics-related charges under Operation Xcellerator, a multi-agency, multi-national effort that began in May 2007 and targeted the Mexican drug trafficking organization known as the Sinaloa Cartel. This Cartel is responsible for bringing tons of cocaine into the United States through an extensive network of distribution cells in the United States and Canada. Through Operation Xcellerator, federal law enforcement agencies--along with law enforcement officials from the governments of Mexico and Canada and state and local authorities in the United States--delivered a significant blow to the Sinaloa Cartel. In addition to the arrests, authorities seized over \$59 million in U.S. Currency, more than 12,000 kilograms of cocaine, more than 1,200 pounds of methamphetamine, approximately 1.3 million Ecstasy pills, and other illegal drugs. Also significant was the seizure of 169 weapons, 3 aircraft, and 3 maritime vessels.

Similarly, the Department's Project Reckoning, announced in September 2008, was a 15-month operation that severely damaged the Gulf Cartel. It was one of the largest and most successful joint law enforcement efforts between the United States and Mexico. Project Reckoning resulted in over 600 arrests in the U.S. and Mexico, plus the seizure of nearly 20,000 kilos of cocaine, tens of thousands of pounds of marijuana, thousands of pounds of methamphetamine, hundreds of weapons and \$71 million in currency. Perhaps most importantly, Project Reckoning led to the indictment against a triumvirate of Gulf Cartel leaders.

Operation Xcellerator and Project Reckoning were tremendous successes in the U.S. government's battle against the Mexican cartels and illustrate the strengths of the Department's strategy. These operations applied the classic law enforcement tools that the Department has successfully wielded against other large and sophisticated criminal enterprises to target the largest threats from the cartels. Neither would have been possible without the development and effective sharing of tactical and strategic intelligence between and among federal agency partners and the Government of Mexico and its law enforcement and special military components. They reflected multi-agency, multi-national. They reflected multi-agency efforts. Although both were led by the Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA), the Department worked closely with the Department of Homeland Security and included the active participation of the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI), the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives (ATF), the U.S. Marshals Service (USMS), Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE), U.S. Customs and Border Protection (CBP), and the Internal Revenue Service (IRS). In all, more than 200 Federal, state, local, and foreign law enforcement agencies contributed to the success of Operation Xcellerator and Project Reckoning. And these multi-year investigations will result in federal prosecutions in numerous states by various U.S. Attorneys' Offices and the Criminal Division's Narcotics and Dangerous Drug Section.

We believe that we have the right strategy for stopping the violence spawned by the cartels. But despite recent successes, we also recognize that we have much more work to do to implement it effectively. The cartels remain too powerful and able to move too many drugs into the United States. Too many guns and too much cash are moving

south across the border into Mexico, where they fuel the cycle of violence. As a result, the Attorney General is working to allocate additional resources to address this threat.

The Dimensions of the Current Threat

The Mexican drug cartels pose a national security threat to Mexico and an organized crime threat to the United States. Drug-related violence, including kidnappings and increasingly gruesome murders, has skyrocketed in recent years in Mexico, particularly along the border with the United States. Drug-related murders in Mexico doubled from 2006 to 2007, and more than doubled again in 2008 to 6,200 murders. Almost 10 percent of the murders in 2008 involved law enforcement officers or military personnel. Mexican drug traffickers and their enforcers are also engaging in other violent crimes, including kidnappings and home invasion robberies -- primarily in Mexico but increasingly in U.S. communities as well. Although violence in Mexico has existed over the years, the bloodshed has escalated in recent months to unprecedented levels as the cartels use violence as a tool to undermine public support for the government's vigorous counter-drug efforts. Traffickers have made a concerted effort to send a public message through their bloody campaign of violence by leaving the bodies of their tortured victims out for public display to intimidate government officials and the public alike.

A significant portion of this increase in violence actually reflects progress by the governments of Mexico and the United States in disrupting the activities of the drug cartels. After President Felipe Calderon and Attorney General Eduardo Medina-Mora took office in 2006, and with support from the United States, the Government of Mexico

undertook a comprehensive program to break the power of the narco-traffickers, making record seizures of drugs, clandestine laboratories, and cash. Mexican law enforcement agencies have arrested many high level drug cartel members who are then being extradited to face prosecution in the United States in record numbers. This unprecedented pressure from the Government of Mexico has led to the increased violence directed at Mexican law enforcement and the Mexican government as a whole. As the Department and our federal agency partners have worked with Mexican authorities to disrupt and dismantle successive iterations of the most powerful cartels, their successors have escalated the fighting among themselves for control of the lucrative smuggling corridors along the Southwest border.

The violence in Mexico has direct and serious effects in the United States. According to the *2009 National Drug Threat Assessment (NDTA)* by the Department's National Drug Intelligence Center, Mexican drug trafficking organizations represent the "greatest organized crime threat to the United States," with cocaine being the leading drug threat. Mexican and Colombian drug trafficking organizations generate and launder between \$18 billion and \$39 billion in wholesale drug proceeds in the United States annually, a large portion of which is believed to be smuggled in bulk across the border back into Mexico; this cash further fuels the drug trade and its attendant violence. Similarly, firearms trafficking from the United States to Mexico contributes to escalating levels of violence on both sides of the border, as groups armed with military weapons and U.S.-based gangs serve as enforcement arms of the Mexican drug cartels. According to ATF's Tracing Center, 90 percent of the firearms about which ATF receives information are traceable to the United States.

Intelligence-Based Targeting Is the Foundation for a Successful Response

For more than a quarter-century, the principal law enforcement agencies in the United States have recognized that the best way to fight the most sophisticated and powerful criminal organizations is through intelligence-based, prosecutor-led task forces that leverage the strength, resources, and expertise of the complete spectrum of federal, state, local, and international investigative and prosecutorial agencies. It was this approach, for example, that fueled the ground-breaking Mafia prosecutions in the United States and Italy in the late 1980s and 1990s. The Department is applying these same intelligence-driven tactics that broke the back of the Mob to fighting the Mexican drug cartels.

The Department works through several programs to develop a full range of strategic, operational, and tactical intelligence against the Mexican cartels.

First, since 2003, the Department has worked with the drug enforcement community to develop the Attorney General's Consolidated Priority Organization Target (CPOT) list of international "Most Wanted" drug kingpins. Of the approximately 50 worldwide cartels currently on the list, 19 of them are Mexican enterprises. This list helps the Department and our federal agency partners focus critical resources on the greatest threats.

Second, the Department leads two multi-agency intelligence centers and an operational center that provide tactical and operational support in targeting the largest and most dangerous Mexican cartels and focusing law enforcement resources. The El Paso Intelligence Center (EPIC) is led by the DEA with participation of more than 20 agencies. It provides critical, case-specific tactical intelligence. For example, if a

highway patrol officer stops a vehicle in the middle of the night, EPIC may have information about the vehicle, driver or passengers that can be provided in real time. EPIC focuses specifically on the Southwest border but tracks broader tactical data. The ATF's "Gun Desk" at EPIC serves as a central repository for all intelligence related to firearms along the Southwest border. The FBI will shortly join the facility through a Southwest Intelligence Group (SWIG), which will be used to coordinate information and intelligence relating to the Southwest Border and to better disrupt and dismantle the ongoing violent criminal activity.

The Special Operations Division (SOD) is a DEA-led multi-agency operational center, but its functions go beyond the gathering and processing of intelligence. The SOD provides strategic support and coordination for long-term, multi-agency investigations. It passes leads that have been developed from intelligence sources to field investigators and coordinates the resulting investigations. It targets the command and control communications of major drug trafficking and narco-terrorism organizations. Special emphasis is placed on those major drug trafficking and narco-terrorism organizations that operate across jurisdictional boundaries on a regional, national, and international level. Operation Xcellerator was initiated as a SOD investigation. The transnational nature of narcotics trafficking results in numerous agencies from Federal, State and Local departments involved in the fight to stop the flow of narcotics into our communities. Working through the Organized Crime Drug Enforcement Task Force Fusion Center, SOD serves a critical role in the de-confliction of investigative efforts to prevent the occurrence of law enforcement from targeting one another.

The Organized Crime Drug Enforcement Task Force (OCDETF) Fusion Center, an intelligence center co-located with SOD, is a comprehensive data center containing drug and related financial data from DEA, ATF, FBI, IRS, the USMS, the U.S. Coast Guard, National Drug Intelligence Center (NDIC), EPIC, the Financial Crimes Enforcement Network (FinCEN), the Department of State's Bureau of Consular Affairs, and other key players in the international drug enforcement world. Like the SOD, it provides critical support for long-term and large-scale investigations. It conducts cross-agency and cross-jurisdictional integration and analysis of drug related data to create comprehensive pictures of targeted organizations. The Fusion Center passes actionable leads to field investigative units.

Focused Law Enforcement Initiatives

The Department's efforts are focused on three underlying aspects of the problem: drugs, guns, and cash; and are part of an integrated and coordinated operational response from Department law enforcement components in coordination with one another and federal agency counterparts.

1. Movement of Drugs

DEA has the largest U.S. drug enforcement presence in Mexico with 11 offices in that country. DEA Mexico primarily focuses its resources at the command and control infrastructure of the Mexican cartel leaders with the goal of removing the top layers of cartel leadership, who are essential to the operation of these criminal enterprises. To achieve this goal, DEA Mexico supports and/or facilitates operations by both the Mexican Federal Police and Military Special Forces to locate and capture cartel leaders

and their associates. Project Reckoning and Operation Xcellerator are recent examples of this successful partnership. DEA also sponsors the Sensitive Investigative Units (SIU), elite vetted units of Mexican law enforcement and military which undergo robust background investigations and polygraph examinations, resulting in trusted counterparts throughout Mexico.

DEA also targets the cartels through its “Drug Flow Attack Strategy” (DFAS), an innovative, multi-agency strategy, designed to significantly disrupt the flow of drugs, money and chemicals between the source zones and the United States by attacking vulnerabilities in the supply chains, transportation systems, and financial infrastructure of major drug trafficking organizations. DFAS calls for aggressive, well-planned and coordinated enforcement operations in cooperation with host-nation counterparts in global source and transit zones around the world.

Department law enforcement components cooperate with the Department of Homeland Security and other federal agencies on EPIC’s “Gatekeeper Initiative.” A “Gatekeeper” is a person or group whose role is “to facilitate the taxation and protection of contraband loads (including illegal aliens) and to enforce the will of the cartel through bribery, intimidation, extortion, beatings, and murder.” These Gatekeepers control territory along the border and are key to cartel smuggling operations in both directions. The Gatekeeper Initiative, combines the statutory expertise and authorities of its multi-agency members – DEA, FBI, the U.S. Marshals, IRS, ICE, ATF, and CBP to: (1) establish multi-district investigations of the Gatekeepers and their organizations operating along the Southwest Border, including the identification and investigation of corrupt law enforcement officials on both sides of the border; (2) identify additional activities of the

Gatekeepers in other regions and pass investigative leads to those jurisdictions; (3) disrupt drug trafficking patterns along the Southwest Border by attacking the smuggling of major cartels; and (4) target the illegal purchase and distribution of firearms by Gatekeepers.

Within the United States, DEA has worked with the Department of Homeland Security to implement its “License Plate Reader Initiative” in the Southwest border region to gather intelligence, particularly on movements of weapons and cash into Mexico. The system uses optical character recognition technology to read license plates on vehicles in the United States traveling southbound towards the border. The system also takes photographs of drivers and records statistical information such as the date, time, and traffic lane of the record. This information is then compared with DEA and CBP databases to help identify and interdict vehicles that are carrying large quantities of cash, weapons, and other illegal contraband toward Mexico.

2. Trafficking of Guns

Given its statutory mission and authority, ATF is principally responsible for stopping the flow of weapons from the United States south to the cartels. Merely seizing firearms through interdiction will not, by itself, stop firearms trafficking to Mexico. ATF, in collaboration with other law enforcement entities, seeks to identify, investigate, and eliminate the sources of illegally trafficked firearms and the networks for transporting them.

Since 2006, Project Gunrunner has been ATF’s comprehensive strategy to combat firearms-related violence by the cartels along the Southwest border. It includes special agents dedicated to investigating firearms trafficking on a full-time basis and industry

operations investigators (IOIs) responsible for conducting regulatory inspections of Federal Firearms Licensees (FFLs) along the Southwest Border. Since 2007, ATF has inspected approximately 95 percent of the FFLs in the region.

Congress has recently allocated an additional \$15 million in support of Project Gunrunner. These funds will allow ATF to open five new field offices staffed with Special Agents and IOIs. With these additional resources, ATF can identify and prioritize for inspection those FFLs with a history of noncompliance that represents a risk to public safety, as well as focus on primary retailers and pawnbrokers who sell the weapons of choice for drug cartels. In addition, the funds will be used to send additional Special Agents to consulates in Mexico.

The tracing of firearms seized in Mexico and the United States is an essential component of the strategy to curtail firearms trafficking along the Southwest border. When a firearm is traced, specific identifying information – including the make, model, and serial number – is entered in the ATF Firearms Tracing System (e-Trace), which is the only federal firearms tracing system. Using this information, ATF can establish the identity of the first retail purchaser of the firearm and then investigate how the gun came to be used in a crime or how it came to be located in Mexico. Furthermore, analyses of aggregate trace data can reveal trafficking trends and networks, showing where the guns are being purchased, who is purchasing them, and how they flow across the border. Without tracing data, federal officials would be forced to rely solely on interdiction efforts to gain investigative leads, an often ineffective use of federal resources. As part of the Mérida Initiative, discussed below, ATF received \$4.5 million to initiate a Spanish version of ATF's e-trace to Mexico. ATF is working with Mexican officials to increase

their current usage of the gun tracing system, with deployment to nine U.S. consulates in Mexico set for December of this year.

3. Bulk Currency Shipments and Money Laundering

The spike in violence in Mexico among the cartels stems from fights over market share and profits as the Mexican and U.S. governments have, by working together, succeeded in applying greater pressure against them. In addition to removing the leadership ranks of the cartels, the Department is waging a war to take their assets too. Again, as with any other criminal enterprise, the Department places a high priority on attacking and dismantling the financial infrastructure of the Mexican drug trafficking organizations.

For example, the Department has established a “Bulk Currency Money Laundering Initiative,” which investigates bulk currency movement along transportation routes in the Southwest. Although we do not know the exact amount of bulk cash flowing back across the U.S. border to the Mexican DTOs, the National Drug Intelligence Center estimates that Mexican DTOs generate approximately \$17-\$38 billion annually in gross wholesale proceeds from their distribution of illicit drugs in the United States. State and local agencies, which encounter the vast majority of currency seizures on the highways, often lack the resources necessary to conduct follow-up investigations that will lead to the identification and prosecution of the major drug organizations that own the smuggled cash. Again we have worked in partnership with the Department of Homeland Security, the component agencies of which have primary responsibility for securing the U.S. border. This Strategic Initiative is designed to enhance all the federal, state, and local agencies’ efforts through coordination and cooperative investigation. Federal

agencies currently participating in this initiative include ATF, DEA, FBI, ICE, IRS, the USMS, and the U.S. Attorney's Offices.

Between 2007 and 2008, \$2.9 billion were forfeited under the Department of Justice Asset forfeiture program. Under the National Asset Forfeiture Strategic Plan, asset forfeiture is integrated into every appropriate investigation and prosecution, recognizing that asset forfeiture is a powerful law enforcement tool that strips criminals of their illicit wealth.

Finally, under the Mérida Initiative, discussed below, the Department is sharing its expertise with Mexican investigators and prosecutors to strengthen Mexico's own asset forfeiture laws and authority.

Federal Prosecution Along The Border

The United States Attorneys have over 540 prosecutors in the five Southwest Border districts, handling national and district-level priorities involving narcotics trafficking, gun-smuggling, violent crimes, and immigration offenses. Each of the Southwest Border United States Attorneys' offices works closely with federal, state, and local investigative agencies on the initiatives described above. The United States Attorneys' offices are on the front lines of the national effort to prosecute both large-scale criminal enterprise cases involving significant trafficking organizations as well as other criminal offenses arising at the border with Mexico. The United States Attorneys also coordinate with Mexican prosecutors to share evidence in appropriate cases to ensure that justice is achieved either in U.S. or Mexican courts.

During the past three years, U.S. Attorney's Offices and the Department's Criminal Division have seen a significant increase in the number of international

fugitives returned to face justice in the United States through international extradition. Colombia and Mexico have extradited fugitives to the United States during this time in unprecedented numbers. Some of those extradited were significant cartel leaders, including major figures of the Tijuana and Gulf Cartels. For example, Osiel Cardenas Guillen, leader of the Gulf Cartel, was extradited in January 2007. Last December, Mexico extradited Juan Diego Espinosa Ramirez, “El Tigre,” a Colombian associate of the Sinaloa Cartel wanted by the DEA. Last month Mexico extradited Miguel Caro-Quintero to the United States to face federal narcotics trafficking and racketeering charges brought by the Department; Caro-Quintero is the former head of the now-defunct Sonora Cartel and was responsible for trafficking thousands of metric tons of cocaine and marijuana to the U.S. in the 1980s and 1990s. (Caro-Quintero is also the younger brother of Rafael Caro-Quintero who was the mastermind behind the kidnapping, torture, and murder of DEA Special Agent Enrique “Kiki” Camarena in 1985.) Just last week, the Mexican government announced the arrest of Vincente Zambada, a top Sinaloa cartel leader, who has been indicted on federal narcotics charges in the U.S.

To build on these successes, and to handle the growing number of cases involving international extraditions and foreign evidence more effectively, the Department is in the process of establishing an OCDETF International Unit within the Criminal Divisions Office of International Affairs (OIA), which will focus on mutual legal assistance to other countries. The Unit will expand the current level of cooperation with our foreign counterparts in the arrest, extradition, and successful prosecution of cartel leaders and their subordinates.

Responding to the Threat with Additional Resources

Although the elements of the Department's proven prosecutor-led, intelligence-based strategy are in place, we have much work to do to implement it effectively to combat the Mexican cartels. The Department has taken the following steps to buttress our law enforcement resources along the Southwest border.

- **Increased DEA presence on the border.** DEA is forming four additional Mobile Enforcement Teams (METs) to specifically target Mexican methamphetamine trafficking operations and associated violence, and anticipates placing 16 new positions in its Southwest border field divisions. 29 percent (1,171) of the DEA's domestic agent positions are now allocated to the DEA's Southwest border field divisions.
- **Re-allocation of 100 ATF personnel to Southwest border within the next 45 days.** ATF is redeploying 100 employees, including 72 agents, under Project Gunrunner, primarily to Houston and South Texas based on ATF intelligence on drug trafficking patterns. The FY 2009 budget and Recovery Act include additional new funding for Project Gunrunner as well. In particular, \$10 million in American Recovery and Reinvestment Act funding is being used to hire 37 ATF employees to open, staff, equip, and operate new Project Gunrunner criminal enforcement teams (in McAllen, TX; El Centro, CA; and Las Cruces, NM), and to assign two special agents to each of the U.S. consulates in Juarez and Tijuana to provide direct support to Mexican officials on firearms-trafficking-related issues. ATF will also open new Gunrunner field offices in Phoenix, AZ and Houston, TX

under the FY2009 Budget and will add 30 additional ATF personnel in those areas.

- **OCDETF is adding to its Strike Force capacity along the Southwest border:**

OCDETF is expanding the staffing of its joint interagency Strike Forces along the Southwest Border (in San Diego and Houston); within the last year, OCDETF has also established two new Strike Forces, one in Phoenix and one in El Paso. In addition, OCDETF is adding one full-time financial analyst contractor for each of the Strike Forces and placing an intelligence analyst team from the National Drug Intelligence Center with each Strike Force, following a model currently in place with the Houston Strike Force. The Department intends to roll out additional teams across the Southwest Border.

- **Increased FBI focus.** The FBI is enhancing its efforts to disrupt drug activity and to dismantle gangs that may have connections to the violent Mexican drug cartels by participating on Organized Crime and Drug Enforcement Task Forces. In addition, to address the surge in kidnappings, the FBI is working closely with Mexican police officials on a Bilateral Kidnapping Task Force. This task force investigates cases along the border towns of Laredo, Texas, and Nuevo Laredo, Mexico. Aside from operational task forces, each of our border offices has Border Liaison Officers who travel to Mexico on a weekly basis to liaison and coordinate with law enforcement partners. These tools provide local law enforcement on both sides of the border with a rapid response force to immediately pursue, locate and apprehend violent crime fugitives who commit their crimes and flee across the international border to elude capture.

- **Increased funding to combat criminal narcotics activity stemming from the Southern border.** The American Recovery and Reinvestment Act includes \$30 million, to be administered by the Department's Office of Justice Programs, to assist with state and local law enforcement to combat narcotics activity along the Southern border and in High Intensity Drug Trafficking Areas, including the \$10 million that is required by statute to be allocated to Project Gunrunner.
- **Public relations campaign.** ATF is doing a public education campaign in Houston and San Antonio, TX this summer on illegal straw purchasing. This will include press conferences, radio, TV, billboards, and seminars with people who have federal licenses to sell firearms.

The Mérida Initiative

Let me conclude with a brief mention of the Mérida Initiative. The Department strongly supports the Mérida Initiative, which provides an unprecedented opportunity for a highly coordinated, effective bilateral response to criminal activity on our Southwest border. The Department has been and continues to be actively involved in the Mérida Initiative planning and implementation both on an interagency and bilateral basis. One of the first Mérida Initiative programs in Mexico is a ministerial level Strategy Session on Arms Trafficking, funded by the government of Mexico and the U.S. State Department, and developed and designed by the Department in conjunction with DHS and the U.S. Embassy in Mexico City, to be held in Mexico on April 1 and 2. Attorney General Holder and Secretary Napolitano are scheduled to attend, joining their Mexican counterparts for the second day of the conference.

The Department's Criminal Division and law enforcement agencies already are working with our Mexican counterparts to enhance and strengthen Mexico's operational capacities to effectively combat narco-trafficking, firearms trafficking and other organized criminal enterprises, including trafficking in persons. The Mérida Initiative provides increased support for our joint efforts with Mexico in these and other areas of mutual concern. These efforts have focused on the development of intelligence-based targeting and prosecutor-led multi-agency task forces, collection of evidence, and extradition. The Department has been and continues to be an active participant and partner in the Mérida Initiative interagency planning and implementation both in Washington DC and as an integral member of the country team at Embassy Mexico City.

Conclusion

Thank you for your interest in the Department's efforts to combat the alarming rise of violence in Mexico along the Southwest border, as well as our views about the most effective ways to address the current threat. In order to attack the full spectrum of the drug cartels' operations – drug trafficking, kidnapping, bribery, extortion, money laundering and smuggling of profits, and trafficking and use of dangerous weapons – we must employ the full spectrum of our law enforcement agencies' resources, expertise, and statutory authorities. By continuing to work together, building on what we have done well so far and developing new ideas to refresh our strategies, we can rise to the current challenge. Again, thank you for your recognition of this important issue and the opportunity to testify here today. We will be happy to answer any questions you may have.