

News from **Congressman Eliot Engel**

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ENGEL URGES OBAMA ADMINISTRATION TO IMPROVE STRATEGY TO FIGHT ILLEGAL GUN TRAFFICKING TO MEXICO

*Chairman of the House Western Hemisphere Subcommittee Follows up on Recommendations of
Government Accountability Office (GAO)*

Washington, D.C. – Today, Congressman Eliot Engel – the Chairman of the House Foreign Affairs Subcommittee on the Western Hemisphere – sent a letter to President Obama urging him to implement the recommendations of a Government Accountability Office (GAO) report on illegal gun trafficking to Mexico. The report – which was commissioned by Rep. Engel last year – cites the serious challenges that the United States faces in our efforts to curb illegal firearms trafficking to Mexico, and notes that until recently, no U.S. strategy to combat firearms trafficking existed. The letter was also signed by Representatives Mike Castle (R-DE) and Carolyn McCarthy (D-NY).

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.”

In the letter, Rep. Engel and his colleagues also urged President Obama to return to the ban on imports of assault weapons that was enforced during the administrations of Presidents George H.W. Bush and Bill Clinton, but was quietly abandoned during the administration of George W. Bush. According to the GAO, of the 87% of traced firearms recovered from Mexico originating in the United States between 2004 and 2008, 19% were manufactured in third countries and imported into the United States before being trafficked into Mexico. According to Rep. Engel, “Many of these weapons never should have entered the United States in the first place. It is long past time to return to enforcement of the existing import ban on assault weapons.”

The full text of the letter to President Obama is below:

Dear Mr. President:

We write to follow up on a recently released report by the Government Accountability Office (GAO) on U.S. efforts to combat illegal arms trafficking to Mexico that comes to a number of disturbing conclusions. The report – commissioned by Congressman Engel and a bipartisan group of Members of the Western Hemisphere Subcommittee – found that although it has been over a year and a half since the Mérida Initiative was announced, until just a couple of weeks ago, a U.S. strategy to combat firearms trafficking to Mexico was nonexistent.

We commend you and the Office of National Drug Control Policy (ONDCP) for including a chapter on combating illicit firearms trafficking to Mexico in the 2009 National Southwest Border Counternarcotics Strategy that was released on June 5th. We also applaud your deployment of additional Bureau of Alcohol,

Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives (ATF) personnel to the Southwest border in March. We now anxiously await the firearms trafficking strategy's implementation. It is troubling 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. We believe that 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 Calderón announced the Mérida Initiative.

GAO reports that 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. One startling example that GAO highlights is an operation where an ICE agent unknowingly covertly kept watch on an undercover ATF agent who was investigating a suspected trafficker.

The report includes a number of key recommendations for executive action that we urge your Administration to implement as soon as possible. These actions include:

- Conclusion of a Memorandum of Understanding between ATF and ICE on combating arms trafficking to Mexico and enhanced data sharing between the two agencies;
- Implementation of the arms trafficking chapter of the 2009 Southwest Border Counternarcotics Strategy that (1) identifies needs and clearly defines objectives for addressing those needs; (2) identifies roles and responsibilities for meeting objectives that leverage the existing expertise of each relevant agency; (3) ensures agencies are provided guidance on setting funding priorities and providing resources to address those needs; (4) establishes mechanisms to facilitate coordination across agencies, and (5) employs monitoring mechanisms to determine and report on progress toward objectives and identifies needed improvements;
- Preparation of a report to Congress by the Attorney General on approaches to address the challenges law enforcement officials raised in the report regarding the constraints on the collection of data that inhibit the ability of law enforcement to conduct timely investigations;
- Regular updates by the ATF Director of ATF's reporting on aggregate firearms trafficking data and trends;
- Expedition of the dissemination of eTrace in Spanish across Mexico to the relevant Government of Mexico officials and proper training on the use of eTrace.

The GAO report also provides startling new data on firearms trafficking to Mexico. 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.

Furthermore, the report notes that of the 87% of traced firearms recovered from Mexico originating in 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 demonstrates once more why we must return to enforcement of the ban on imported assault weapons that was previously enforced during the administrations of Presidents 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, we sent you a letter – signed by a bipartisan group of 50 of our

colleagues – urging your administration 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.

Again, the GAO’s report sheds light on a number of areas where the United States can enhance our efforts to curb firearms trafficking to Mexico. We urge you to implement the recommendations offered by the GAO and return to enforcement of the ban on imported assault weapons. We look forward to working with you as your Administration intensifies its efforts to halt the illegal flow of weapons to Mexico.

Sincerely,

Eliot L. Engel (D-NY)
Chairman, House Subcommittee on the Western Hemisphere

Michael N. Castle (R-DE)
Member of Congress

Carolyn McCarthy (D-NY)
Member of Congress