

***Opening Remarks of Chairman Henry Cuellar (D-TX), as prepared
Subcommittee on Emergency Communications, Preparedness, and Response
“Examining Preparedness and Coordination Efforts of
First Responders Along the Southwest Border”
March 31, 2009, 10:00 a.m. – 311 Cannon House Office Building***

Today’s hearing, entitled “Examining Preparedness and Coordination Efforts of First Responders along the Southwest Border,” is designed to assess the unique challenges that Federal, State, local, and Tribal first responders face in border communities in light of the escalation of drug-cartel related violence along the U.S.-Mexico border.

Specifically, this hearing is an opportunity to discuss the emergency preparedness and response needs specific to southwest border States, including cross-border communications and information sharing capabilities, and multi-jurisdictional partnerships.

Additionally, this hearing is an opportunity to examine the coordination and planning among international, Federal, State, local, and tribal governments to prevent drug-cartel related crimes from spreading to the United States.

By now, we have all heard the media reports that describe the heinous and brutal violence of the drug cartels in Mexico who have been competing for the control of trafficking routes in the United States.

So in the past couple of years, we have learned of the assassinations of high-level government and law enforcement officials, horrific murders including beheadings, violent kidnappings, use of a growing and varied arsenal of high-powered weapons and the indiscriminate killing of civilians.

What is most disturbing is that in 2008, more than 5,600 people in Mexico were killed in drug trafficking violence, a 110% increase over 2007. Of that number, 550 of the killed were law enforcement officers.

Although we have been buffered by the battles of the Mexican drug cartel, there is ever-growing concern of a spillover into the United States.

As a member whose district includes the border city of Laredo, Texas, I can tell you just last year the city of Nuevo Laredo, Mexico – which lies just across my district – was gripped in terror at the hands of the cartels.

But my local sheriff worked with the State law enforcement, the Texas National Guard, and Federal agencies as part first Border Enforcement Security Taskforce (BEST) established by DHS in Laredo, TX.

The Laredo BEST focused on the disruption of cross-border criminal activity related to narcotics smuggling; money laundering; human and weapons smuggling; transnational gangs; and cross-border violence. As a result of this collaboration and coordination, the Laredo BEST helped to stem the encroaching violence and protect our community.

Unfortunately, the Mexican drug-cartel moved their aggression toward other border communities that could provide them with access routes to the United States.

First responders from border communities tell me that the demand for drugs from this country, coupled with the illegal weapons going into Mexico, fuels the strength of the drug-cartels in Mexico.

But I remain convinced that our collective commitment to combat the efforts of the cartels can prevail.

That is why we must support our first responders who are the Nation's first line of defense.

Thus, coordinating policies and procedures at all levels of government to address border security and emergency preparedness as complementary concepts may expedite emergency response while improving homeland security on both sides of the border.

That is why I have issued my support for the Merida Initiative and the President's "Major Southwest Border Security Initiative" announced last week.

Our first responders need and deserve the additional personnel, increased intelligence capacity, better coordination and the strategic redeployment of 360 additional officers and agents at the border and in Mexico City.

But I must state emphatically that the only way we can address against the greed and violence of the drug cartels is by working together as a team.

I am disturbed by reports of turf battles among Federal agencies that now seek to threaten the successes of first responders at the State, local, and tribal communities.

As the great Henry Ford stated, "Coming together is a beginning. Keeping together is progress. Working together is success."

As Chairman of this Subcommittee, I will use my authority to conduct aggressive oversight to that we can stamp out these unnecessary turf battles.

Simply put, we cannot fight the turf battles of the Mexican drug cartels if we are distracted by the turf battles of the Federal agencies.

Our first responders put their lives on the line everyday. So to them I say, "One team, one fight!"

With that, I look forward to hearing from Dr. Richard C. Barth, the Acting Assistant Secretary for the Office of Policy at DHS. Dr. Barth will tell us how DHS is coordinating with other Federal agencies, State, local, and Tribal communities to increase the security of the homeland.

Ms. Janice Ayala, Deputy Assistant Director at the Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE), will discuss the success of the BEST program and other efforts at ICE to work collective with its multi-jurisdictional partners.

Major General Peter Aylward, who serves as the Director of the Joint Staff at the National Guard Bureau will discuss the support of the Guard at the southwestern border to carry out the border security initiatives.

Our final witnesses are our first responders Sheriff Sigifredo Gonzalez, Jr. of Zapata County, Texas and Sheriff Larry A. Dever, Cochise County, AZ who will give the Committee the perspective of the first responder community along the southwestern border.