

United States Senator Chuck Grassley

Iowa

<http://grassley.senate.gov>



**OPENING STATEMENT OF SENATOR CHARLES E. GRASSLEY
SENATE CAUCUS ON INTERNATIONAL NARCOTICS CONTROL
“US-Central America Security Cooperation”
WEDNESDAY, MAY 25, 2011**

Madam Chairwoman, thank you for holding today’s hearing. The drug-related violence in Central America is an important topic that threatens our national security. As the Co-Chairman of the Senate Caucus on International Narcotics Control and as the Ranking Member of the Judiciary Committee, I continue to be concerned about the rising violence caused by criminal organizations in both Mexico and Central America. I want to better understand the situation so that we can help these countries strengthen their efforts. I look forward to learning more about the situation from both the Government officials and outside experts on our two panels today.

During prior hearings held by both the Drug Caucus and the Judiciary Committee, I have heard from experts that drug cartels and other criminal organizations, commonly referred to as Drug Trafficking Organizations or DTOs, make billions by moving illegal narcotics and other contraband north to the United States. These organizations use unsecured areas throughout Central America and Mexico to establish lucrative trafficking routes. In return, they further destabilize weak governments and terrorize vulnerable citizens.

The United Nations Office on Drugs and Crimes estimates that approximately 200 metric tons of cocaine are transited through Central America and Mexico before reaching the United States. The profit for these narco-traffickers is estimated at upwards of six billion dollars annually. As a result, DTOs are well-funded and well-organized. They will also go to any lengths to protect their very lucrative business, including the corruption of government officials and even mass murder.

These criminal organizations are very adept at shifting their operations and trafficking routes to the paths of least resistance. As the Government of Mexico, with the help of the United States, has cracked down on the drug traffickers operating within its borders, it has increased its presence farther south in the countries of Central America. According to a recent article in *The New York Times*, 84 percent of known cocaine shipments moving north to the United States crossed through Central America in 2010, an enormous increase from 2008 when 44 percent of cocaine shipments went through that region.

These countries are very attractive to criminal organizations because they are already weakened by high unemployment, high crime rates, and endemic government corruption. The porous border between Guatemala and southern Mexico is extremely vulnerable right now. The border is 600 miles in length but has only 8 official checkpoints with a very weak or non-existent governmental presence to halt traffickers. Criminal organizations move freely over national borders and throughout the entire region from Central America to Mexico with little concern that anyone will try to stop them.

At a recent Senate Armed Services Committee hearing, General Douglas Fraser, Commander of U.S. Southern Command, stated that “The northern triangle of Guatemala, El Salvador, and Honduras is the deadliest zone in the world outside of active war zones.”

The Los Zetas drug trafficking organization is considered the most violent criminal organization operating in Central America. The Zetas are a paramilitary criminal organization formed over a decade ago when members of the Mexican elite special operations unit deserted and became the armed wing of the Gulf drug cartel. After several years on payroll, the Zetas split with the Gulf cartel and now control several lucrative territories and trafficking routes.

According to media reports, the Zetas have been linked to the rising violence in Central America as they battle local gangs for control of territory. Earlier this week, Guatemalan President Alvaro Colom declared a state of siege in the province of Peten after 29 migrant workers were brutally murdered. Guatemalan government officials believe that members of the Zeta drug cartel were responsible for the murders.

The Zetas are not simply limiting their operations to moving narcotics. For example, an article written in April states that when Guatemalan police raided an alleged Zetas warehouse in April 2009, they found nearly “600 grenades, eleven machine guns and 5,000 rounds of ammunition, stored in boxes labeled „Guatemalan Military Industry.”” The article also states that these weapons were obtained from a Guatemalan military based in sales or theft. Further, the article added that the Zetas stole an arms shipment “including rocket and grenade launchers” that were traveling over land. Another article from the Associated Press in 2009 discussed the same bust. These articles paint a disturbing picture of lax oversight of military stockpiles that can be looted or sold to drug traffickers. This is unacceptable and we should work with these nations to secure military stockpiles.

Aside from these issues, perhaps the biggest obstacle to tackling the drug traffickers in the region is the current fiscal situation. Central American governments cannot afford many large-scale efforts to combat the cartels. Instead, they rely heavily on training and technical assistance from countries throughout the region to help combat the cartels. The United States recognized the need for a more regional approach to combat drug trafficking with the Merida Initiative. Congress included counter-narcotics funding for the countries in Central America, as well as Haiti and the Dominican Republic in the Caribbean. Through July 2010, Congress provided \$248 million in Merida funding to Central America and an additional \$42 million for Caribbean countries.

Building on the efforts of the Merida Initiative, the United States established and funded the Central American Regional Security Initiative (CARSI) and the Caribbean Basin Security

Initiative (CBSI). These programs focus on economic development, building democratic institutions and judicial reform as a way to combat drug violence in communities. They also include counter-narcotics anti-drug provisions designed to increase regional security and strengthen governments.

I am also heartened to hear that the Government of Colombia is sharing its expertise with the governments in Mexico and Central America. The United States has provided billions in assistance to Colombia over the last decade through Plan Colombia and the country is now using the lessons learned to help other countries combat the influx of criminal organizations.

I look forward to hearing the testimony from the witnesses and the opportunity to question them about ways we can strengthen our efforts to attack this multi-faceted problem.