

Statement of

The Honorable Richard J. Durbin

United States Senator
Illinois
March 17, 2009

Opening Statement of Senator Richard J. Durbin
Hearing on "Law Enforcement Responses to Mexican Drug Cartels."
March 17, 2009

This hearing will come to order. This is a joint hearing of the Senate Judiciary Committee's Crime and Drugs Subcommittee and the Senate International Narcotics Control Caucus on "Law Enforcement Responses to Mexican Drug Cartels."

This is the first hearing of the Crime and Drugs Subcommittee in the 111th Congress. I want to thank Judiciary Committee Chairman Patrick Leahy for giving me the opportunity to chair this Subcommittee. Vice-President Joe Biden held this gavel for many years and I hope to build on the work that he did.

I want to thank Lindsey Graham, the Ranking Member of the Crime Subcommittee for being here today. Senator Graham and I have had constructive discussions about the Subcommittee's agenda and I look forward to working with him.

I also want to thank Senator Feinstein and Senator Grassley, the Chair and Ranking Member of the Senate International Narcotics Control Caucus, for holding this joint hearing with us. When Senator Graham and I first discussed our agenda for the 111th Congress, we quickly agreed that the problem of Mexican drug cartels would be a top priority.

Over 6200 people died in drug-related violence in Mexico last year. More than 1000 people were killed this January alone, including police officers, judges, prosecutors, soldiers, journalists, politicians and innocent bystanders.

Today we will hear firsthand testimony from two Mexican witnesses about the devastating human consequences of this violence. One of these witnesses was forced to flee his hometown of Ciudad Juárez, a city of 1.5 million where public assassinations are carried out in broad daylight and more than 1600 people were killed in drug-related violence in 2008. Last month, the city's chief of police resigned after drug cartels threatened to kill a policeman every day he remained on the job. And just this weekend, nine bodies were found in a common grave outside Ciudad Juárez.

Mexican drug cartels also pose a direct threat to Americans. According to a recent Justice Department report, Mexican drug cartels "control most of the U.S. drug market" and are "the greatest organized crime threat to the United States." In Phoenix last year, 366 kidnappings for ransom were reported - more than in any other American city - and the vast majority of these kidnappings were related to the Mexican drug trade.

But Mexican drug cartels aren't just a threat in border states. They are now present in at least 230 U.S. cities, up from about 50 cities in 2006. In my home state of Illinois, the Justice Department found that three Mexican drug cartels - Federation, Gulf Coast and Juárez - are active in the cities of Chicago, East St. Louis and Joliet. According to the Drug Enforcement Administration, Mexican drug cartels supply most of the cocaine, methamphetamine, and marijuana distributed in the Chicago area. Just last fall, the Justice Department arrested 11 alleged members of the Juárez cartel for distributing large quantities of cocaine and marijuana in Chicago. And law enforcement officials estimate that \$10 to \$24 million in drug proceeds are sent from Chicago to the Southwest border each month.

What are the root causes of this crisis? As we will hear from our Mexican witnesses, corruption may be the largest obstacle Mexico faces in its efforts to contain drug trafficking. For example, in November, Noe Ramírez, Mexico's former drug czar, was arrested on charges of taking hundreds of thousands of dollars in bribes to pass information to drug cartels.

Mexico also lacks the fair and effective criminal justice system needed to combat the drug cartels. Mexican President Felipe Calderón deployed the military into regions of Mexico where law enforcement was no longer able to maintain order, but that is not a long-term fix. Investigating and prosecuting drug and gun trafficking networks is fundamentally a law enforcement challenge that will require sustained cooperation across the border and at the federal, state and local level.

Mexico and America are in this together and there is enough blame to go around. President Calderón said last week that Mexico's drug cartel problem is exacerbated by being located next to, quote, "the biggest consumer of drugs and the largest supplier of weapons in the world" - the United States of America.

The insatiable demand for illegal drugs in the United States keeps the Mexican drug cartels in business. Mexican government officials estimate that approximately \$10 billion in drug proceeds cross from the United States into Mexico each year in the form of bulk cash. This allows traffickers to expand their operations further into our country, pay off police and politicians and buy more weapons from the United States.

The so-called "iron river of guns" from the United States arms Mexican drug cartels to the teeth. The cartels purchase weapons at gun shows from unlicensed sellers who are not required to conduct background checks. Or the cartels use "straw buyers" with clean criminal records to buy guns for them. According to ATF, more than 90% of guns seized after raids or shootings in Mexico have been traced to the United States.

What can be done to defeat the drug cartels? They are the new face of crime in the age of globalization. The only effective response to this transnational phenomenon is multilateral action with our allies. As President Obama said in his recent address to Congress, "America cannot meet the threats of this century alone."

I look forward to hearing from our witnesses about what Congress can do to contribute to cooperative efforts by U.S. and Mexican law enforcement to defeat the drug cartels. In particular, we must take action to reduce the demand for illegal drugs in the United States and to stem the

flow of illegal guns and money to Mexico.

Let's take just one example: ATF's eTrace system for tracing crime guns. A decade ago, I started calling for 100% crime gun tracing in Illinois. Today, data collected through eTrace has allowed law enforcement to identify numerous gun trafficking routes supplying criminals. Would it help to expand the use of ATF's eTrace system in Mexico and Central America?

One final note: the subjects of guns and drugs often split us along partisan lines. When it comes to Mexican drug cartels, there's too much at stake to allow ourselves to be divided. Democrats and Republicans must work together to find bipartisan, common-sense solutions to this challenge.