

**U.S. Senate Committee on Foreign Relations**  
**Chairman John F. Kerry**  
**Opening Statement for US-Mexico Border Violence Field Hearing**  
**March 30, 2009**

EL PASO, TEXAS. – Today, Senate Foreign Relations Committee Chairman John Kerry (D-MA) released the following opening remarks at the hearing titled “U.S. – Mexican Border Violence.”

*Full text as prepared is below:*

First, let me thank President Diana Natalicio, her assistant Estrella Escobar and the others at UTEP for the hospitality extended to us. And I want to thank Congressman Reyes for his welcome and the help he, Guillermo Valenzuela and the rest of his staff provided.

Our decision to hold the Foreign Relations Committee’s first field hearing here in El Paso underscores the commitment of this committee and the Senate to working with Mexican authorities to end the violence that is endangering our valued neighbor to the south.

We are looking forward to two panels of expert witnesses who will help us understand the problem and the solutions – from the ground level on both sides of the border.

We have all been deeply shocked at the brutal attacks occurring just a stone’s throw across the Rio Grande from where we are sitting this morning. Policemen, soldiers and innocent bystanders are being killed by drug cartels armed with high-powered weapons smuggled in from the United States.

Before we dig deeper into the issue of those weapons, let me say that I am troubled by the suggestion from some quarters that Mexico is in imminent danger of becoming a failed state.

We have to be very careful about that kind of rhetoric – not just because it is simply untrue, but because it makes cooperation more difficult. Mexico is a functioning democracy, with a vibrant and open economy and stable institutions and civil society. I commend President Felipe Calderon for his courage and determination in challenging the cartels. He and the Mexican people must know that we stand beside them in this fight, not that we’ve written him off.

Our response should be made in partnership with the Mexicans. The idea of dispatching the National Guard to the border is premature and possibly counterproductive.

Make no mistake: right now, Mexico’s institutions are under enormous stress from the rising level of violence. The fallout from the warring cartels is visible just across the border in Ciudad Juarez, as our witnesses will describe in detail later.

Beyond those vital concerns, Americans are worried that the cartels will turn our cities and neighborhoods into the next front in the war. Drug trafficking and the ruthless violence it spawns know no borders.

So far, the United States has largely been spared. But it is in our national interest, and it is our solemn obligation, to take steps today to help curtail the killing in Mexico.

Americans are consumers of the drugs that pass through Mexico. As long as there is demand, the trade will produce the billions of dollars that fuel the cartels, corrupt public officials in Mexico and buy the guns killing those who get in their way. It is our responsibility to try our best to curb America’s addiction to drugs.

We have another responsibility. The vast majority of the weapons used by the cartels as they fight each other over drug smuggling routes and target army and police officers come from the US. And they are horrific weapons. In Juarez and other battleground cities, the thugs aren't armed with Saturday night specials. The cartels maintain well-trained paramilitary hit squads that are often better equipped than the police. Their encrypted communications gear is state-of-the-art, and they have mobilized up to 80 vehicles in simultaneous strikes against multiple targets.

Let me give you an example. A year ago there was a shootout in Chihuahua City, about three hours drive south of here. A squad of Mexican soldiers cornered a team of hit men from the Juarez cartel hiding inside a safe house. The gun battle lasted three and a half hours. An army captain was killed and so were six hit men.

When the army entered the house, they found the six dead hit men wearing Level 4 body armor. This is designed to stop a high-powered rifle round – and it is a restricted export under U.S. law.

The killers were armed with M-16 style assault rifles with laser sights. They had hand grenades and tear gas canisters. They also had a .50 caliber Barrett sniper rifle, the weapon used by U.S. army snipers. This super rifle fires five-inch long cartridge that are accurate up to 1,500 meters and cut a body in half. Oh yes, the safe house was set up for a siege – there were IV bottles and other first-aid material.

The Mexican army called in the US Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms to trace the weapons. The trail led to two gun sellers in the United States who have since been arrested.

Unfortunately, this is a common story. Ninety percent of the weapons seized from the cartels and traced by ATF originated in the United States.

What is less common, however, is the cooperation that occurred in this case. Only about one out of every four weapons seized by Mexican authorities last year was submitted to the ATF so they could be traced back to purchasers and sellers in the United States. The Mexican government should provide the ATF with fuller access to these weapons.

Cooperation is a two-way street. We in the US need to work harder to enforce existing gun laws against exporting weapons across international borders. We should revive the ban on importing assault rifles into the United States. It was allowed to expire in 2004, resulting in a flood of cheap assault rifles, and many of them find their way to Mexico.

Stopping the guns also requires a strong US-Mexico partnership. Just a few miles from here is the Bridge of the Americas, one of the busiest border crossings in the country. Drivers coming north from Mexico are stopped by US agents and subjected to a thorough examination for drugs and other contraband.

This doesn't happen to southbound traffic. We do not have the barriers and booths in place to stop vehicles headed into Mexico. Four lanes of traffic from US Highway 54 speed over the border. An agent who gets intelligence about a car carrying contraband would risk life and limb stepping into traffic to stop the suspect vehicle.

On the Mexican side of the bridge, traffic zooms past the check point. Only rarely are vehicles stopped and inspected. When the Mexican authorities conduct a special check, the resulting traffic backup alerts smugglers and they use a convenient turn-around a couple hundred yards before the border. Structural changes must be made at both borders to address this issue.

We are getting the message. Last week, the Obama administration announced it will send more resources to the border – more DEA and ATF agents and mobile X-ray equipment to check for weapons going south. It won't solve the problem overnight, and more is needed. I hope these steps encourage the Mexican government to step up its interdiction efforts.

The drug trade recognizes no border and neither should law enforcement. We need to build trust in both countries and the barriers between them. We have improved intelligence sharing immensely, but we need to do more to develop a combined front against the traffickers and their networks. This means making sure that law-enforcement intelligence is combined with information picked up from license plate readers and other surveillance systems in the US and passed quickly and effectively to the proper authorities in both countries. And that those authorities respond quickly.

Finally, the US Senate should ratify the Inter-American Convention against Illicit Trafficking in Weapons and Explosives. We were one of the first countries to sign the convention in 1997, and one of the negotiators will be with us later this morning. But, sadly, we are among the few countries that have not ratified the convention. It does not contradict any American gun laws. But ratification would send an important message about our commitment to fight the weapons trafficking that is fueling the violence in Mexico.

We often hear politicians fall back on the mantra that “we must fight them over there so we don't have to fight them here.” When it comes to the drug cartels in Mexico, this happens to be undeniably true. We must help our neighbors reclaim their streets because it is the right thing to do – and because we will keep ours safer in the process.

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