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Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs
Chairman Joseph I. Lieberman, ID-Conn.

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**Southern Border Violence: Homeland Security Threats,
Vulnerabilities, and Responsibilities**

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Good morning and welcome. Today, we will examine the ruthless drug violence Mexico is experiencing, the implications of this violence for the homeland security of the United States and, most important, what our government is doing and should be doing about both.

This is the first of two hearings the Committee has planned on this problem for now. The second hearing will take place April 20 in Phoenix, Arizona. Today, we are privileged to have as witnesses top officials from the three federal agencies in Washington at the center of our nation's response to this crisis. This is their first Congressional appearance since yesterday when they released a new administration initiative to deal with Mexican drug violence. Let me welcome Department of Homeland Security Secretary Janet Napolitano, Assistant Secretary of State James Steinberg, and Deputy Attorney General David Ogden. I thank you for being here.

The facts of this matter are well documented and appalling: More than 6,000 Mexicans have been killed in the past year. Most of the dead are associated in some way with the drug trade, but 10 percent of the fatalities are government officials and police. The police chief of Juarez, Mexico, just across the border from El Paso, Texas, was forced to resign when drug cartels threatened to kill one of his officers every 48 hours unless he stepped down. The mayor of Juarez actually lives in El Paso with his family and commutes to work every day. The U.S. Justice Department said in December Mexican drug cartels are "the biggest organized crime threat in the U.S.," and are present in 230 cities.

El Paso is the third safest city in America, but Juarez, Mexico – literally a stone's throw away - is the epicenter of the carnage, with more than 1,500 murders last year. This morning, Secretary Napolitano will describe Mexican drug violence as a homeland security issue in which all Americans have a stake. The danger is clear and is present, threatening to get worse, but also follows some puzzling patterns.

Drug related crime has increased in several U.S. border jurisdictions. With 700 in the last two years, Phoenix ranks first in America and second in the world in kidnappings. Most of the kidnappers and their victims are drug smugglers, but innocent victims are always at risk of being caught in the crossfire, and of course, have been.

The Mexican drug cartels are engaging in brutal and inhumane tactics that we have come to expect from terrorists - attacking police stations and other government facilities, kidnapping family members or children, posting the names of officials and law enforcers marked for execution, then kidnapping or killing many of those officials and informers - by decapitation in several cases.

The cartels tunnel beneath border fences and use their blood money to corrupt officials, mostly in Mexico, but sometimes in the U.S. They are high tech criminals and killers, using satellite phones, encrypted radios, and internet voice technology to shield their communications from the law. According to the Office of National Drug Control Policy (ONDCP), the Mexican drug cartels are operating in 230 American cities – from Appalachia to Alaska.

We must do everything within our power to help the Mexican government disable the cartels and prevent them from exporting more of their drugs and crime to America.

Mexico is a strong country with a courageous national administration. President Felipe Calderone has taken on the cartels. And the Obama Administration clearly intends to support him. Secretary of State Clinton is in Mexico City today. Secretary Napolitano and Attorney General Holder will be there next week, and President Obama will travel to Mexico in mid-April.

In yesterday's announcement, our three witnesses directed the redeployment of Department of Justice and Homeland Security resources to the border to strengthen the prevention and investigation of drug, gun, and bulk cash smuggling and to increase southbound vehicle inspections.

Over the last two years, Congress has also appropriated \$700 million for Mexico under the Merida Initiative to better train and equip Mexican law enforcement, military, and border personnel, to root out corruption, and to reform the judicial system. I look forward to hearing from Assistant Secretary Steinberg about the State Department plans for how to spend the remaining funds.

The Obama Administration's latest response to the southwest border violence represents a significant first step forward. But I don't think it is enough. Last week, in my annual letter to the Budget Committee, I recommended an additional \$100 million for Customs and Border Protection and Immigrations and Customs Enforcement specifically to disrupt the cartels. I proposed providing CBP with \$50 million in additional funding to better coordinate its border response, including providing funding for the establishment or enhancement of fusion centers along the southwest border and for expanding the Integrated Border Enforcement Teams (IBETs) which bring together law enforcement entities from both sides of the border. I also proposed an additional \$50 million to expand ICE's Armas Cruzadas program, which investigates and interdicts the cross-border smuggling of firearms, and its Border Enforcement Security Teams (BESTs). And if Congress closed the gun show loophole that allows purchasers to circumvent background checks, our government's work would be a lot easier.

Cash earned from U.S. drug sales, the lifeblood of the cartels, is increasingly smuggled back to Mexico in stored value cards. A single card can hold thousands of dollars, is far less conspicuous than bundled cash, and does not, as a matter of law, have to be declared at the border. Unfortunately, these cards are not considered legal monetary instruments, and border officials have little authority to police them. That needs to change by a new law if we are going to make it harder for the cartels to launder their illicit profits.

President Calderon's gutsy leadership in battling the drug cartels has provided the United States with an unprecedented opportunity to collaborate with him and the people of Mexico to defeat the drug cartels that threaten both of our worlds. In our interest and theirs, we must seize this opportunity.