

**INTERNATIONAL NARCOTICS AND LAW ENFORCE-
MENT SHOULD FIGHT CRIME, NOT FIGHT CON-
SERVATIVES**

HEARING
OF THE
SUBCOMMITTEE ON WESTERN HEMISPHERE
BEFORE THE
COMMITTEE ON FOREIGN AFFAIRS
U.S. HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES
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INTERNATIONAL NARCOTICS AND LAW ENFORCEMENT SHOULD FIGHT CRIME, NOT FIGHT CONSERVATIVES

Thursday, March 27, 2025

HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES,
SUBCOMMITTEE ON THE WESTERN HEMISPHERE,
COMMITTEE ON FOREIGN AFFAIRS,
Washington, DC.

The subcommittee met, pursuant to notice, at 11:21 a.m., in room 2172, Rayburn House Office Building, Hon. Maria Elvira Salazar [chairwoman of the subcommittee] presiding.

Ms. SALAZAR. Welcome to all of you. Thank you for staying after votes.

The subcommittee on the Western Hemisphere will come to order. The purpose of this hearing is to discuss the Bureau of International Narcotics and Law Enforcement for the purposes of the subcommittee's reauthorization of J family programming at the State Department. Now I am going to recognize myself for an opening statement.

OPENING STATEMENT OF CHAIRWOMAN MARIA ELVIRA SALAZAR

Once again, thank you to the witnesses for coming and giving us your time and your expertise. Always welcome. So the Bureau of International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs, INL, acronym, the motto is security through justice. But, unfortunately, for the last 4 years they have been more interested in security through ideology, trading fight against narcotics for seminars to teach pronouns and workshops on gender diversity.

I believe that the result of this alien ideology has been damaging to our national security, especially in a region which is very close to my heart, Central America. As some of you know, I was the Central American bureau chief for Univision Network during the Civil War in El Salvador, I lived in that country for many years until 1992 when they signed a peace treaty. Central America, don't I know it, has suffered for decades, and this was the perfect time to help them.

Let's go to Guatemala. Almost 9 million migrants passed through their territory trying to come to the United States in the last 4 years. The Guatemalans needed INL's assistance to tackle the human trafficking and narcotics. But, unfortunately, the Biden administration refused to work with the attorney general of that

country because, apparently, she was too conservative. They sanctioned her. Her name is Consuelo Porras. I don't know her, but I do know that she is the head of ministerio publico, which is for us, the United States, the attorney generals—the attorney general.

Unfortunately, the previous administration refused to work with her. I believe that if the Guatemalans put her there, the Biden's bureaucrats don't have any business in telling her that she was not fit for the job and they attacked her over and over again.

This is the perfect definition of putting politics and ideology before safety and respect for our neighbors' political views. If the Guatemalans are conservative, well, so be it. We have got to respect it.

Let's talk now about El Salvador, the country which has been tackling a terrible gang problem for 30 years. I was killed—I mean, I was about to be killed in few instances; I lived it, I know it and things were terrible in El Salvador until President Bukele arrived in the picture.

El Salvador should have been a perfect partner for the INL Bureau—which, by the way, it says that its mandate is to bring down transnational criminal organizations like MS-13 and Tren de Aragua. But instead of training the Salvadorian police forces, INL law enforcement academy taught gender and inclusion as one of their main goals for El Salvador. I believe, I am sure, that at that moment the Salvadorian were going to be saying, the gringos have gone crazy. I am no law enforcement expert, but I am fairly confident that getting MS-13 to learn how to pronounce correctly pronouns is not going to destroy them from committing any crimes.

I am a witness—I have spoken to him—that Bukele wants to work with the United States. But, instead, the Biden administration cut funds to the Salvadorian police by 50 percent. Why? And INL concentrated its budget for El Salvador to give it to NGO's that attack his security plan.

With or without us, Bukele was successful. His strategy reduced one of the world's highest homicide rates to nearly zero. He presented the strategy to INL, and they said, no, we are not going to work with you.

During the last 4 years, unfortunately, woke ideology has replaced common sense. But thankfully, things have changed under President Trump, and we are going to return the Bureau of International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs to its original mission, which is helping allies fight crime, dismantling gangs, restoring law and order.

They have a budget of \$2 billion a year, and I think we owe it to the American taxpayers to commit and re-establish their mandate; finding drugs, stopping human trafficking, training police forces worldwide with American-made weapons bought by our allies. INL is one of the best tools we have as Americans to create a safer, stronger, and more prosperous country, while helping our neighbors to do the same, whether it is in Central America or anywhere else in the world.

I believe that we are still the United States. We are the point of reference for the rest of the hemisphere at least when it comes to good governance, the beacon of hope that there is a political sys-

tem that respects human dignity. Thank God we are back on the right side of history.

I yield back. And now I recognize my dear ranking member, the gentleman from Texas, Mr. Castro, for any statements he may have.

**OPENING STATEMENT OF RANKING MEMBER JOAQUIN
CASTRO**

Mr. CASTRO. Thank you, Chairwoman. Good afternoon, everyone. Thank you, Chairwoman, for convening this hearing, and thank you to our witnesses for testifying at the subcommittee's first hearing in Congress—this Congress.

The topic of this hearing is broadly to discuss the reauthorization of the State Department's Bureau of International Narcotics and Law Enforcement. This is certainly important, and I look forward to the discussion on this issue, but I first need to paint a picture of what's going on right now.

In just the last few weeks, we have witnessed a deeply troubling pattern of executive overreach and undermining of congressional authority. The administration has attempted to dismantle congressionally established agencies—USAID, the Inter-American Foundation, and the U.S. African Development Foundation—all without a single hearing from this committee where the administration has defended its actions.

The Trump administration is trying to shut down the U.S. Agency for Global Media, a move cheered by autocrats and dictators from Havana to Moscow to Beijing to Caracas. They are trying to do this without this committee, the full committee, demanding the administration even explain themselves. The committee has given up its role of oversight. It has abandoned any oversight of the Trump administration, which is astounding in the history of Congress.

The committee has abandoned—I am sorry. We, as a Nation, because of the Trump administration, have abandoned brave human rights defenders in Cuba, Venezuela, Nicaragua, and everywhere else in the world as we went back on our word and froze programs that support them. We left them to get rounded up and put in prison. That is what this administration has done.

The committee has not called Secretary Rubio in or any other administration official to explain these actions. That is why I say they have abandoned any oversight responsibilities.

Donald Trump has canceled temporary protected status and humanitarian parole for hundreds of thousands of Venezuelans, Nicaraguans, Haitians, and Cubans who have sought refuge in our country as millions of people have over generations. These were people who had status to be here. This is after President Trump said that he would only go after criminals.

Masked ICE agents are pulling people off the streets in Texas, in Florida, and in cities across our country and sending them to prisons in El Salvador without any due process at all. President Bukele has become a mercenary for prisoners—to house prisoners from the United States and, I imagine, other parts of the world.

Every day we learn of new horrors and innocent people brutalized by the administration. To do this, the Trump administration

has used a wartime authority, the Alien Enemies Act, and claimed that we are being invaded by Venezuela. The idea that we are currently at war with Venezuela would be news to most Americans. In fact, it would be news to almost all Americans. If we are truly at war, I certainly—I certainly think this committee should be holding a hearing on it.

Unfortunately, what we are seeing from the Republican majority is a total surrender of their power as legislators. Why hasn't this committee demanded testimony from Secretary Rubio, Pete Marocco, and others on all of this? We need answers, we need accountability, and we need this committee to do its job.

We meet at a time when the United States is facing serious, complex threats abroad, and the responses from this Congress and this administration have too often been silence, confusion, or political theater. Across the world vital U.S. foreign assistance programs, many of them managed through the INL Bureau, have been cut, delayed, or outright canceled.

We have seen freezes to police academy training in Mexico, programs designed to disrupt human trafficking, and efforts to equip law enforcement agencies across the globe with the tools to fight money laundering, fentanyl production, and organized crime. These aren't just line items in a budget. They are lifelines to communities here and abroad.

The impacts of those decisions are not abstract. They absolutely make Americans less safe. When you see more fentanyl entering this country, when violent cartels operate with impunity, this is part of the reason why. These decisions will haunt us in the coming years.

As we turn specifically to the reauthorization of the INL Bureau and its programs, we must approach reauthorization with clear eyes. INL has been a critical tool in our foreign policy toolkit, but I agree that it must evolve. Synthetic drugs like fentanyl are not only devastating American families, they are destabilizing entire regions. Scam centers and cyber-enabled fraud schemes are preying on our most vulnerable citizens. INL must be equipped and reoriented to tackle these challenges.

At the same time, we must resist the impulse to think that security means police alone. Sustainable progress requires more than just training and equipping security forces. It means building robust justice systems, effective prosecutors, professional judges, strong defense attorneys, independent courts, prisons, and investing in the civil society actors who hold their leaders accountable. Funding police while defunding anti-corruption and Rule of Law programs is not just shortsighted, it is dangerous, and it is counterproductive.

Today's hearing is an opportunity to begin a serious, hopefully sober, conversation about what INL needs to succeed and what reforms we need to pursue to ensure its work aligns with our values, advances our interest, and keeps our communities safe.

Thank you, Chairwoman, and I yield back.

Ms. SALAZAR. Thank you, Mr. Castro. Thank you for your statement.

Now we are pleased to have a distinguished panel of witnesses before us today on this important topic. Let me introduce Ms.

Chelsa Kenney. She is the Director, International Affairs and Trade, for the U.S. Government Accountability Office. Thank you and welcome.

Mr. Andres Martinez-Fernandez, senior policy analyst, Latin America, Allison Center for National Security at the Heritage Foundation.

Mr. Adam Isacson, Director for Defense Oversight, Washington office, on Latin America.

This committee recognizes the importance of the issues before us and is grateful to have you here to speak to us today. Your full statements will be made part of the record, and I will ask each of you to keep your spoken remarks to 5 minutes in order to allow time for members' questions.

Now I recognize Ms. Kenney for her opening statement.

STATEMENT OF CHELSA KENNEY

Ms. KENNEY. Chairwoman Salazar, Ranking Member Castro, and members of the subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to discuss our findings and recommendations related to the Bureau of International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs.

INL contributes to some of the U.S. Government's top security priorities. These include combatting the flow of illicit narcotics into the U.S., promoting Rule of Law around the world, and combatting transnational crime. We have reviewed many of INL's programs in recent years and identified successes as well as opportunities for improvement in at least 15 reports, many at the request of this committee.

Since 2020, we have made 16 recommendations to improve the effectiveness of INL programs. I will highlight three key areas of improvement related to performance management, program monitoring, and program evaluation.

First, we have made five recommendations to improve how INL is managing the performance of its projects. Of these, INL has implemented one recommendation on combatting firearms trafficking in Mexico, but four related to firearms trafficking in the Caribbean and on assistance to Mexico more broadly remain unaddressed. Performance management is meant to ensure that the U.S. Government is spending taxpayer dollars effectively and achieving U.S. goals.

For example, since 2008, the U.S. has provided over \$3 billion in assistance to Mexico to address crime and violence and enhance the country's Rule of Law. However, in 2023, we reported that INL could not demonstrate that it was achieving its goals because of gaps in its approach to performance management.

Specifically, we found that INL had established goals and objectives but had not identified which of its projects were key to achieving them. So, for example, under the goal of preventing transborder crime, INL had established a joint objective with Mexico to disrupt and dismantle narcotics production; however, while INL implemented and collected data on individual projects, it had not linked which of these projects were helping to meet this goal.

We recommended that INL strengthen its performance management approach to determine whether it was achieving its goals in Mexico. Considering the importance of the U.S.-Mexico relationship

and the level of U.S. investment, we have identified this to be a priority recommendation for the agency.

Second, we have made six recommendations to improve INL's program monitoring. Of these, INL has implemented three, but three related to its wildlife trafficking programs remain unaddressed. Consistent program monitoring helps assess progress and identify problems that might prevent the Bureau from reaching its goals. Wildlife trafficking is a crime that fuels corruption and destabilizes communities.

In recent years, media reports have alleged that park rangers trained by U.S.-funded entities had committed human rights abuses, including sexual assault and murder. Since 2020, State has taken steps to enhance safeguards to prevent these abuses; however, we found that INL had not conducted consistent program monitoring to ensure that these U.S.-funded entities reported on the implementation or effectiveness of these safeguards. We also found an alleged incident of sexual abuse by a ranger that INL was unaware of.

INL agreed with our recommendations, including that it clarify reporting requirements for human rights abuses.

Third, we have made two recommendations to INL to conduct program evaluations or studies that would determine how well a program is working. For example, in 2024 we reported that, despite years of support for activities to strengthen the security situation in Haiti, including specific efforts to improve the capacity of Haiti's national police, INL had no formal plans to evaluate the effectiveness of its activities. We recommended that INL conduct such an evaluation, and the Bureau agreed.

INL plays a critical role in achieving U.S. security priorities, such as combatting transnational crime and supporting Rule of Law worldwide. INL's effectiveness depend on robust performance management, program monitoring, and program evaluation. While INL has made some progress, important gaps remain.

We urge INL to fully implement our recommendations to help ensure that it is spending taxpayer dollars effectively and achieving U.S. goals.

Thank you, and I would be pleased to respond to your questions.
[The prepared statement of Ms. Kenney follows:]



United States Government Accountability Office

Testimony
Before the Subcommittee on Western
Hemisphere, Committee on Foreign
Affairs, House of Representatives

For Release on Delivery
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STATE DEPARTMENT

Bureau of International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs Needs to Fully Address Prior GAO Recommendations

Statement of Chelsa Kenney, Director,
International Affairs and Trade

GAO Highlights

Highlights of [GAO-25-108189](#), a testimony before the Subcommittee on Western Hemisphere, Committee on Foreign Affairs, House of Representatives

Why GAO Did This Study

Combating transnational crime and drug trafficking are long-standing national security priorities for the U.S., and the opioid crisis has been a public health emergency since 2017. Hundreds of thousands of Americans have died from misusing drugs, with more than 66 percent of these deaths involving synthetic opioids such as fentanyl. According to the Office of National Drug Control Policy, criminal organizations in Mexico supply most of the illicitly manufactured fentanyl smuggled into the U.S. INL's mission is to keep Americans safe by countering crime, illegal drugs, and instability abroad.

This statement discusses four key areas where State and INL have faced challenges implementing programs overseas: (1) performance management, (2) program monitoring, (3) program evaluation, and (4) fraud risk management.

This statement is based on GAO's prior work on a variety of State and INL programs. For that work, GAO analyzed State documents and data and interviewed agency officials. For a full list of the reports, see Related GAO Products at the conclusion of this statement.

What GAO Recommends

GAO made 16 recommendations in the reports covered by this statement, including to improve performance management, program monitoring, and program evaluation. As of March 2025, six of the recommendations have been implemented, and 10 remain open. GAO continues to monitor State's and INL's progress in implementing the open recommendations.

For more information, contact Chelsa Kenney at kenneyc@gao.gov.

March 2025

STATE DEPARTMENT

Bureau of International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs Needs to Fully Address Prior GAO Recommendations

What GAO Found

The Department of State is responsible for coordinating U.S. assistance supporting international efforts to combat illicit narcotics, a role fulfilled by the Bureau of International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs (INL).

Fentanyl Seized in Nuevo Leon, Mexico



Source: Department of State; Bureau of International Narcotics and Law Enforcement. | GAO-25-108189

GAO previously identified challenges State and INL face in determining the effectiveness of assistance they provide to foreign partners. Performance management can help INL identify whether the billions of dollars appropriated to help meet its mission are spent effectively and help achieve its goals. In September 2023, GAO found that INL's efforts to implement assistance to Mexico had been hampered by incomplete performance management efforts. As a result, the U.S. government could not demonstrate that the more than \$3 billion of assistance it had provided to Mexico was spent effectively and helped achieve goals. GAO made three recommendations to INL to better ensure that it spends such assistance effectively. INL has taken steps to address these recommendations but has not fully implemented them.

GAO also previously identified challenges State and INL face in monitoring and evaluating projects. For example, in March 2023, GAO found that State had not conducted a comprehensive evaluation of the collective efforts of U.S. agencies to combat cybercrime and ensure that programs were achieving intended goals. GAO recommended that INL conduct a comprehensive evaluation of capacity building efforts to counter cybercrime. State officials said that INL planned to conduct such an evaluation. INL has taken steps to address this recommendation but has not fully implemented it.

In addition, GAO previously identified challenges INL faces in managing fraud risk in assistance to Mexico. Specifically, in March 2021, GAO found that INL had not fully assessed the potential risks of fraud in assistance to Mexico and made three recommendations to INL to help improve efforts in this area. While INL has developed a preliminary anti-fraud strategy for that assistance, it has not yet issued or implemented a final anti-fraud strategy.

Chairwoman Salazar, Ranking Member Castro, and Members of the Subcommittee:

Thank you for the opportunity to discuss our work on the Department of State Bureau of International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs (INL). Combatting transnational crime and drug trafficking are long-standing national security priorities for the U.S., and the opioid crisis has been a public health emergency since 2017. Hundreds of thousands of Americans have died from misusing drugs, with more than 66 percent of these deaths involving synthetic opioids such as fentanyl.¹ According to the Office of National Drug Control Policy, criminal organizations in Mexico supply most of the illicitly manufactured fentanyl smuggled into the U.S.²

State is responsible for coordinating U.S. assistance supporting international efforts to combat illicit narcotics, a role that INL and its predecessors have fulfilled since 1978. INL's mission is to keep Americans safe by countering crime, illegal drugs, and instability abroad. To help inform the subcommittee's reauthorization of INL, my statement today focuses on 16 recommendations we have made over the past five years to help State and INL assess progress toward achieving their goals. Specifically, I will discuss recommendations we have made in four key areas: (1) performance management, (2) program monitoring, (3) program evaluation, and (4) fraud risk management. As of March 2025, State and INL have implemented six of these recommendations, and 10 remain unaddressed. Several of our open recommendations, if implemented, could strengthen efforts to combat illicit narcotics trafficking and firearms trafficking, which contribute to high levels of violence and instability in Mexico, Central America, and the Caribbean.³ We continue to

¹See The White House Executive Office of the President's Office of National Drug Control Policy (ONDCP), *National Drug Control Strategy 2022* and ONDCP, *National Drug Control Strategy 2024*. In March 2021, we added national efforts to prevent, respond to, and recover from drug misuse to our High-Risk List. See GAO, *High-Risk Series: Dedicated Leadership Needed to Address Limited Progress in Most High-Risk Areas*, [GAO-21-119SP](#) (Washington, D.C.: Mar. 2, 2021). GAO's High-Risk Series identifies government operations with vulnerabilities to fraud, waste, abuse, and mismanagement, or in need of transformation to address economy, efficiency, or effectiveness challenges.

²ONDCP, *National Drug Control Strategy 2022* and ONDCP, *National Drug Control Strategy 2024*.

³We have also reported on U.S. government efforts to combat transnational criminal organizations and illicit drug trafficking in Venezuela and Colombia. References to those reports may be found in the Related GAO Products at the conclusion of this statement.

monitor State's and INL's progress in implementing the open recommendations.

This statement is based primarily on reports published from May 2020 to October 2024 related to State and INL programs where we made recommendations. For these reports, we analyzed State and INL documents and data related to the programs we reviewed and interviewed agency officials. We made 16 recommendations in the reports covered by this statement, including to improve performance management, program monitoring, program evaluation, and fraud risk management.

More detailed information on the objectives, scope, and methodology for that work can be found in the issued reports listed in [Related GAO Products](#) at the conclusion of this statement. We conducted the work on which this statement is based in accordance with generally accepted government auditing standards. Those standards require that we plan and perform the audit to obtain sufficient, appropriate evidence to provide a reasonable basis for our findings and conclusions based on our audit objectives. We believe that the evidence obtained provides a reasonable basis for our findings and conclusions based on our audit objectives.

INL Has Opportunities to Better Meet Its Mission by Strengthening Its Performance Management

Improved performance management can help INL identify whether the billions of dollars appropriated to help meet its mission are spent effectively and are helping achieve its goals. Performance management includes identifying goals, objectives, and indicators. However, we have identified issues with INL's performance management and, since 2021, have made five recommendations to State and INL to address performance management issues. Of those five recommendations, State implemented one, related to combatting firearms trafficking to Mexico. However, it has not fully implemented the remaining four, which are related to assistance to Mexico and firearms trafficking in the Caribbean. As a result, opportunities remain to strengthen INL's performance management efforts and better support U.S. national security goals.

Assistance to Mexico. Since 2008, the goals of U.S. assistance to Mexico have generally focused on promoting the rule of law and

countering the drug trade, with U.S. funding totaling over \$3 billion.⁴ According to INL, U.S. assistance to Mexico has helped equip hundreds of courtrooms with technology, supported the training of thousands of forensic specialists, and helped Mexican law enforcement detect and seize tens of thousands of kilograms of illicit drugs and precursor chemicals used in synthetic drug production.

In September 2023, we found that INL's efforts to implement assistance to Mexico had been impeded by incomplete performance management efforts.⁵ We evaluated INL's progress toward the broad strategic goals of the Bicentennial Framework, a U.S.-Mexico agreement to address shared goals. These goals include preventing transnational crime and pursuing criminal networks. Specifically, we analyzed INL's actions to address five key elements needed to assess progress toward those goals. We found that INL had addressed two of the five key elements, and that fully assessing its progress would better position INL to expand on successes and adjust less successful approaches. Without fully addressing the three remaining key elements, the U.S. government does not have assurance that it is achieving its security goals in Mexico and that its investments are being spent effectively.⁶

We made three recommendations to INL to better ensure that assistance to Mexico is spent effectively, including identifying projects, performance indicators, and monitoring and evaluation plans to help assess progress

⁴In 2021, the U.S. and Mexico agreed to the Bicentennial Framework for Security, Public Health, and Safe Communities (Bicentennial Framework). The Bicentennial Framework replaced and expanded on the scope of the 2008 Mérida Initiative by adding new U.S. commitments to reduce drug demand in the U.S. and the flow of illegal firearms from the U.S. to Mexico.

⁵GAO, *U.S. Assistance to Mexico: State Department Should Take Steps to Assess Overall Progress*, [GAO-23-103795](#) (Washington, D.C.: Sept. 12, 2023). Our analysis was based on key elements that we identified for assessing the results of strategic objectives. See GAO, *Foreign Assistance: Better Guidance for Strategy Development Could Help Agencies Align Their Efforts*, [GAO-18-499](#) (Washington, D.C.: July 12, 2018).

⁶Specifically, INL had not (1) identified projects needed to achieve results, (2) established milestones and performance indicators to assess progress towards broad goals, and (3) established monitoring and evaluation plans.

towards goals.⁷ INL has not fully implemented these recommendations. In February 2025, State officials told us that foreign assistance efforts were paused pending the results of a review directed by Executive Order 14169.⁸

Firearms trafficking. The Caribbean, Central America, and Mexico all face high rates of violence, often perpetrated by transnational criminal organizations and exacerbated by the availability of firearms to these criminal organizations.⁹ We have reported that as much as 70 percent of the firearms recovered and traced in the Caribbean and Mexico, and 40 percent from Central America, originated in the U.S. In some countries, violence and insecurity have been identified as contributing factors in migration to the United States.¹⁰ State bureaus, including INL, provide assistance to countries to help address violence and firearms trafficking, alongside several other U.S. agencies. For example, INL supports activities providing training, technical assistance, policy guidance, and basic equipment to enhance the capacity of countries to combat illicit small arms and ammunition trafficking through operational forensic ballistics. However, limitations in State's and INL's performance management related to their efforts to combat firearms trafficking have

⁷In June 2024, we designated as a priority recommendation our recommendation that INL should develop monitoring and evaluation plans critical to assess progress towards the goals and objectives of the Bicentennial Framework. Priority recommendations are those that GAO believes warrant priority attention from heads of key departments or agencies. They are highlighted because, upon implementation, they may significantly improve government operations, for example, by realizing large dollar savings; eliminating mismanagement, fraud, and abuse; or making progress toward addressing a high-risk or duplication issue. See GAO, *Priority Open Recommendations: Department of State*, [GAO-24-107318](#) (Washington, D.C.: June 4, 2024).

⁸See Exec. Order No. 14169, *Reevaluating and Realigning United States Foreign Aid*, 90 Fed. Reg. 8619 (Jan. 20, 2025).

⁹This statement discusses our work on U.S. efforts to combat firearms trafficking in Mexico and the Caribbean. In addition, we have reported on efforts to combat firearms trafficking in Central America. See GAO, *Firearms Trafficking: More Information Is Needed to Inform U.S. Efforts in Central America*, [GAO-22-104680](#) (Washington, D.C.: Jan. 11, 2022). We recommended that State's Bureau for Western Hemisphere Affairs coordinate with relevant bureaus and partner countries to identify country-specific conditions in Belize, El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras to inform U.S. efforts to counter firearms trafficking. The State Department implemented this recommendation.

¹⁰See [GAO-22-104680](#).

limited their ability to determine whether those efforts have been effective.¹¹

In October 2024, we reported on U.S. efforts to combat firearms trafficking in the Caribbean, including INL's support for the Caribbean Basin Security Initiative (CBSI), a U.S. security partnership with 13 Caribbean countries.¹² We found that INL had developed a strategic framework to manage performance for CBSI, including identifying indicators and results to track progress toward goals such as reducing transnational crime. However, the framework lacked indicators related to reducing firearms trafficking in the Caribbean. We recommended that INL establish specific firearms trafficking indicators to better enable it to measure progress of its efforts. INL concurred with our recommendation, and we are monitoring its actions to implement it.¹³

In February 2021, we reported on U.S. efforts to combat firearms trafficking to Mexico, including State's and INL's programs to build the capacity of local law enforcement.¹⁴ We found that U.S. agencies and their components—including INL and other State bureaus—had undertaken efforts to disrupt firearms trafficking to Mexico but lacked fully developed performance measures and were therefore unable to assess progress toward disrupting trafficking. We recommended that State develop performance measures to assess the results of its assistance to Mexico related to firearms trafficking. State has since implemented our

¹¹In addition to State, other U.S. agencies that have roles in combatting firearms trafficking include the Department of Justice's Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives, and the Department of Homeland Security's U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement.

¹²GAO, *Caribbean Firearms: Agencies Have Anti-Trafficking Efforts in Place, But State Could Better Assess Activities*, [GAO-25-107007](#) (Washington, D.C.: Oct. 15, 2024). Our analysis was based on practices that agencies can take to assess progress. See GAO, *Evidence-Based Policymaking: Practices to Help Manage and Assess the Results of Federal Efforts*, [GAO-23-105460](#) (Washington, D.C.: July 2023).

¹³In February 2019, we reported on prior efforts to establish a mechanism to assess CBSI. See GAO, *Security Assistance: U.S. Agencies Should Establish a Mechanism to Assess Caribbean Basin Security Initiative Progress*, [GAO-19-201](#) (Washington, D.C.: Feb. 27, 2019). The report included two recommendations to State and INL to develop a reporting mechanism for CBSI and implement a data management system for collecting reliable CBSI data. State and INL implemented these recommendations.

¹⁴GAO, *Firearms Trafficking: U.S. Efforts to Disrupt Gun Smuggling into Mexico Would Benefit from Additional Data and Analysis*, [GAO-21-322](#) (Washington, D.C.: Feb. 22, 2021). This report also addressed recommendations to the DOJ's Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives, DHS's U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement, and DHS's Customs and Border Protection.

INL Has Opportunities to Improve Its Program Monitoring

recommendation by updating its Mexico Integrated Country Strategy to include information on firearms-related activities and indicators.

For INL to effectively manage the billions of dollars appropriated in support of its programs, it needs to consistently monitor the programs. In addition to performance management, INL, like other agencies and their components, should monitor implementation and performance at the project level to help ensure that it effectively manages foreign assistance, addresses impediments, and meets its assistance goals.¹⁵ Since 2020, we have made six recommendations to INL to develop and implement internal monitoring procedures and oversight mechanisms for its programs. Of those six recommendations, INL has implemented the three that are related to its assistance to Mexico and rule of law programs. However, it has not fully implemented the three that are related to its wildlife trafficking programs.

Assistance to Mexico. In May 2020, we found that INL generally had not followed our key practices for developing monitoring plans for its programs in Mexico under the Mérida Initiative.¹⁶ Further, we found that INL had not consistently tracked project performance data. As a result, INL may not have had sufficient information to assess the performance of the entities responsible for project implementation and determine whether corrective actions are needed or ensure that it has accurate and reliable performance data.

We recommended that INL establish procedures to verify that monitoring officials for Mérida Initiative projects followed the key practices. INL has addressed this recommendation. It developed new bureau-wide monitoring and evaluation guidance and various implementation tools, drawing on our leading practices, State guidance, and other sources. In addition, INL developed monitoring training that included guidance on establishing regular performance reviews.

Rule of Law programs. INL funds projects around the world that support the rule of law and help to protect fundamental rights, act as a foundation for democratic rule and economic growth, and combat crime and

¹⁵GAO, *Foreign Assistance: Federal Monitoring and Evaluation Guidelines Incorporate Most but Not All Leading Practices*, [GAO-19-466](#) (Washington, D.C.: July 31, 2019).

¹⁶GAO, *U.S. Assistance to Mexico: State Department Could Improve Its Monitoring of Mérida Initiative Projects*, [GAO-20-388](#) (Washington, D.C.: May 12, 2020). This report also addressed a recommendation to the U.S. Agency for International Development.

extremism. In November 2020, we found that INL had followed most, but not all, key practices for monitoring its rule of law assistance for the awards we reviewed from selected countries.¹⁷ For example, we found that INL had not consistently demonstrated that project representatives included project goals and objectives in monitoring plans, identified risks in those plans, and assessed and approved monitoring reports from implementing partners. Without information on project goals and objectives or documentation of monitoring activities, INL could not be sure that projects were implemented effectively or that monitoring practices were followed.

We made two recommendations to INL to improve monitoring of rule of law projects by establishing procedures to ensure that (1) monitoring officials develop monitoring plans that identify project goals, objectives, and risks, and (2) these officials assess and approve monitoring reports from implementing partners. In January 2021, in response to our recommendations, INL updated its monitoring guidance, which summarizes monitoring requirements and explains its practices to implement those requirements.

Wildlife trafficking. INL funds partner organizations that support park rangers' efforts to protect wildlife around the world. Wildlife trafficking fuels corruption and destabilizes communities that depend on wildlife for biodiversity and ecotourism. INL supports activities like ranger patrols within protected areas to detect and deter poaching and training and equipment to enhance crime scene capabilities. In July 2024, we found that INL had not ensured that partners in its wildlife trafficking projects reported on the effectiveness of planned social safeguards, such as human rights training for rangers, and grievance and redress mechanisms for local communities.¹⁸ Additionally, we identified abuse

¹⁷GAO, *Rule of Law Assistance: State and USAID Could Improve Monitoring Efforts*, [GAO-21-14](#) (Washington, D.C.: Nov. 9, 2020). This report also addressed a recommendation to the U.S. Agency for International Development. We also reported in 2020 on State's overseas missions' efforts to coordinate rule of law assistance. See GAO, *Rule of Law Assistance: Agency Efforts Are Guided by Various Strategies, and Overseas Missions Should Ensure that Programming Is Fully Coordinated*, [GAO-20-393](#) (Washington, D.C.: June 9, 2020). While that report discussed efforts by INL, the resulting recommendation was addressed to State's overseas missions and is therefore not included in this statement.

¹⁸GAO, *Wildlife Trafficking: Agencies Should Improve Efforts to Protect Human Rights in Overseas Activities*, [GAO-24-106553](#) (Washington, D.C.: July 23, 2024). This report also addressed recommendations to the U.S. Agency for International Development and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

allegations that INL was unaware of, including an alleged incident involving sexual abuse by a ranger.

We made three recommendations to INL to improve monitoring of wildlife trafficking projects, including developing internal guidance for officials who review social safeguard plans, requiring implementing partners to report on social safeguard implementation, and clarify reporting requirements for grievances and human rights abuse allegations. INL has taken steps to address these three recommendations but has not yet fully implemented them. Without ensuring that partners provide monitoring updates and notify INL of abuse allegations in a timely manner, INL may be unaware of abuses or of whether social safeguards are working as intended.

INL Has Opportunities to Better Determine the Effectiveness of Its Efforts by Conducting Program Evaluations

To ensure that its efforts have intended effects and to inform future expenditures, it is important that INL conducts evaluations of its programs. Program evaluations typically examine achievement of program objectives and assess how well a program is working. They examine a broader range of information than monitoring activities. Since 2023, we have made two recommendations for INL to conduct program evaluations of its efforts to (1) help build police capacity in Haiti and (2) combat global cybercrime. As of March 2025, INL had not implemented either of these recommendations.

Building Haiti's police capacity. After the catastrophic 2010 earthquake in Haiti, INL provided assistance focused on developing the Haitian National Police through trainings, advisory support, and the provision of equipment. In March 2023 we found that program monitoring reports indicated that INL's activities achieved mixed results and focused on outputs such as the number of trainings provided. We also found that INL had no plans to evaluate its efforts, which limited information about their effectiveness.¹⁹ We reported that by evaluating its activities intended to build Haiti's police capacity, INL could better understand the effectiveness of its efforts and how to strengthen assistance.

We recommended that INL conduct an evaluation of the effectiveness of its activities to develop the Haitian National Police. In State's response to the report, State told us that it planned to conduct an independent program evaluation and develop findings and recommendations that

¹⁹GAO, *Haiti: USAID and State Should Improve Management and Assessment of Reconstruction Activities*, [GAO-23-105211](#) (Washington, D.C.: Mar. 16, 2023). This report also addressed recommendations to the U.S. Agency for International Development.

would guide future program decision-making. In March 2025, INL told us that their activities had been delayed due to the security environment in Haiti and other factors, but that they were finalizing a Statement of Work for the evaluation.

Combatting global cybercrime. INL is State's lead office for foreign assistance to combat cybercrime, which includes assisting foreign criminal justice partners and engaging in information sharing with foreign partners and U.S. law enforcement agencies. In March 2023 we found that INL and its interagency partners had accomplished key activities, such as nations joining international treaties aimed at combatting cybercrime and that INL had controls in place to assess the effects of these efforts.²⁰ However, we also found that INL had not conducted a comprehensive evaluation of U.S. agencies' collective efforts to ensure that programs were achieving intended goals. We reported that such a comprehensive evaluation could inform INL as to whether its capacity building efforts are meeting objectives to strengthen partner nations' law enforcement capacity and enhance international efforts to combat cybercrime.

We recommended that INL conduct a comprehensive evaluation of capacity building efforts to counter cybercrime. According to State, INL planned to conduct such an evaluation. In March 2025, INL told us that they had provided a draft evaluation report to implementing partners for review and extended the review and finalization period for the report through April 30, 2025.

²⁰GAO, *Global Cybercrime: Federal Agency Efforts to Address International Partners' Capacity to Combat Crime*, [GAO-23-104768](#) (Washington, D.C.: Mar. 1, 2023).

INL Has Opportunities to Mitigate Vulnerabilities by Assessing Fraud Risk in Assistance to Mexico

Assistance to Mexico. U.S. agencies including those that provide assistance to other countries are responsible for managing fraud risks.²¹ In Mexico, programs face a risk that U.S. assistance could be provided to individuals or organizations involved in illicit activities, such as contract fraud, human rights abuses, drug trafficking, or other crimes. In March 2021, we reported on INL's fraud risk management for programs in Mexico under the Mérida Initiative.²² We found that while INL had some fraud controls for programs under the Mérida Initiative, such as employee background checks and fraud hotlines, INL had not fully assessed the potential risks of fraud in those programs and therefore had opportunities to further mitigate vulnerabilities.²³

We made three recommendations to INL to help improve fraud risk management for assistance to Mexico. INL has implemented two of these recommendations, including establishing a time frame to conduct a fraud risk assessment and updating policies and guidance on requiring fraud awareness training for managers, employees, and stakeholders with responsibility for implementing and overseeing State programs under the Mérida Initiative. However, the agency has not implemented our recommendation to implement an anti-fraud strategy for programs under the Mérida Initiative. While INL officials told us they developed a preliminary anti-fraud strategy, INL has not yet issued or implemented a final anti-fraud strategy for these programs. An anti-fraud strategy is important because it communicates staff roles and responsibilities and

²¹See GAO, *Standards for Internal Control in the Federal Government*, [GAO-14-704G](#) (Washington, D.C.: Sept. 2014). Fraud is obtaining something of value through willful misrepresentation. Fraud risk is a function of likelihood and impact and exists when individuals have an opportunity to engage in fraud, have an incentive or are under pressure to commit fraud, or are able to rationalize committing fraud. Fraud risk management is a process for ensuring program integrity by continuously and strategically mitigating the likelihood and impact of fraud. When fraud risks can be identified and mitigated, fraud may be less likely to occur. Although the occurrence of fraud indicates that there is a fraud risk, a fraud risk can exist even if actual fraud has not occurred. GAO, *Fraud Risk Management: Key Areas for Federal Agency and Congressional Action*, [GAO-23-106567](#) (Washington, D.C.: Apr. 13, 2023). Also see GAO, *A Framework for Managing Fraud Risks in Federal Programs*, [GAO-15-593SP](#) (Washington, D.C.: July 2015).

²²GAO, *U.S. Assistance to Mexico: State and USAID Should Strengthen Risk Management for Programs under the Mérida Initiative*, [GAO-21-335](#) (Washington, D.C.: Mar. 01, 2021). This report also addressed recommendations to the Embassy of Mexico City and the U.S. Agency for International Development.

²³Subsequently, INL officials said that their programs in support of the Bicentennial Framework remain largely the same as under the previous Mérida Initiative, because ongoing projects support shared security goals that have remained consistent. See [GAO-23-103795](#).

documents the program's activities for preventing, detecting, and responding to fraud, among other things, for managing a program's fraud risks. An opportunity therefore remains to further strengthen INL's fraud risk management of assistance to Mexico.

In conclusion, performance management, monitoring, and evaluation are important efforts for U.S. agencies and their components—including State and INL—to ensure taxpayer dollars are spent effectively and U.S. goals are achieved. INL should identify clear goals and activities that can help achieve those goals, monitor whether those activities are implemented appropriately, and evaluate the contribution of those activities to meeting the agencies' goals. As INL provides support to law enforcement around the world and in support of U.S. interests it needs to improve how it assesses the effectiveness of the assistance it delivers. Moreover, fraud risk management is an important aspect of oversight, and while INL has taken actions to address issues related to fraud risk management in its assistance to Mexico, an opportunity remains to further strengthen its oversight.

Chairwoman Salazar, Ranking Member Castro, and Members of the Subcommittee, this completes my prepared statement. I would be pleased to respond to any questions that you may have at this time.

GAO Contact and Staff Acknowledgments

If you or your staff have any questions about this testimony, please contact Chelsa Kenney, Director, International Affairs and Trade at kenneyc@gao.gov. Contact points for our Offices of Congressional Relations and Public Affairs may be found on the last page of this statement. GAO staff who made key contributions to this testimony are Cheryl Goodman (Assistant Director), Benjamin L. Sponholtz (Analyst in Charge), Christopher Hayes, and Debbie Chung. Additional staff who made contributions to this testimony are Kirstin Crook, Rachel Girshick, Chris Koblitis, Donna Morgan, Benjamin Moser, Cameron Shapiro, and Jennifer Young. Staff who made key contributions to the reports cited in the testimony are identified in the source products.

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¹The Department of State determined that this report contained SENSITIVE BUT UNCLASSIFIED information and therefore cannot be released to the public.

²The Department of State determined that this report contained SENSITIVE BUT UNCLASSIFIED information and therefore cannot be released to the public.

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Ms. SALAZAR. Thank you, Ms. Kenney.
Now I recognize Mr. Martinez-Fernandez for his opening statement.

STATEMENT OF ANDRES MARTINEZ-FERNANDEZ

Mr. MARTINEZ-FERNANDEZ. Thank you, Chairwoman Salazar, Ranking Member Castro, and members for holding this hearing and inviting me to participate.

The Western Hemisphere is experiencing a period of surging instability, violence, and criminality, largely driven by increasingly powerful criminal organizations. From Haiti's collapse at the hands of gangs, newfound narcoviolence in a once peaceful Ecuador, increasingly deadly drug cartels in Mexico and Colombia, and more, we are constantly confronted by evidence of a failed status quo for security in our hemisphere.

These threats do not stay in Latin America. Instead, they drive increasingly deadly and destabilizing consequences to the United States and directly to the American people. The absence of robust and effective security engagement from the United States in Latin America is a key driver of the current State of affairs.

Indeed, the collapse of the hemispheric consensus on counter-narcotics is due in no small part to decisions on the part of Washington to blunt and curb security cooperation in the Americas away from the core support from regional security forces. This trend is driven, in part, by Washington's focus on other foreign conflicts, as well as a series of challenges that we continue to focus on in other parts of the world.

However, the impact and inattention that this has brought has exacerbated—been exasperated by mission drift and the watering down of critical institutions like the State Department's International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Bureau. Additionally, hemispheric security and stability has suffered from the Biden administration's politicization of U.S. security engagement and tools in Latin America.

The so-called expert consensus on Latin America security policy has shifted dramatically over the past few decades prompting detrimental changes in the nature and magnitude of U.S. security cooperation. Vocal leaders and activists have successfully framed organized crime in Latin America as primarily being an issue of economic development and judicial institutions, deemphasizing in particular the role of enforcement and security forces.

Today, at the core of this new conventional wisdom in many circles in Washington and in the region, is the increasingly—is increasingly the poorly substantiated claim that confronting Latin America's powerful criminal organizations only serve to exacerbate—exacerbate insecurity and criminality.

One of the key events that provided support for this view was the spike in violence in Mexico during the late 2000's following President Felipe Calderon's efforts to crack down on the cartels. However, notably, today after over a decade during which the Mexican government has pulled back from confronting the cartels, Mexico's homicide rates now exceed the worst years of violence during the Calderon administration. Add to that the over 100,000 over-

dose deaths in the United States due to fentanyl and other deadly drugs.

Indeed, Mexico's disastrous hugs, not bullets strategy on the cartels showcases the dire consequences of deemphasizing enforcement and security forces in our security policies in the Western Hemisphere. When President Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador—apology.

With Mexico, the Merida Initiative drifted away from its initial focus of providing training, equipment, and operational support to Mexican security forces and, instead, shifted support to—instead, U.S. support shifted for reform of the Mexican judicial system increasingly.

Then, when President Lopez Obrador fully abandoned the Merida Initiative, the new security cooperation framework further de-emphasized security forces and the role of enforcement as a core aspect of security policy.

In both Mexico, Colombia, and elsewhere, the United States failed to push back on regional leaders' abandonment of security cooperation and commitments. This was particularly egregious under the Biden administration where we saw the increase of deaths of American people reaching 100,000 each year due to fentanyl and other drugs; and yet, we did not adequately push the administration in Mexico to address the security threat posed by the cartels.

Even worse, at times the Biden administration leaned into its wrongheaded approach within the region to—apologies—leaned into this wrongheaded approach on organized crime by regional leaders. In the case of Colombia, President Biden actively drew attention away from Colombia's deteriorating security situation by ending the long-standing program of U.S. monitoring of coca cultivation.

To confront the dire threats posed by organized crime in our hemisphere, U.S. security assistance through INL and other critical agencies should be bolstered and refocused on the core mission of counternarcotics and transnational organized crime. Failure to do so urgently will bring increasingly deadly consequences for Latin America and for the American people.

Thank you very much.

[The prepared statement of Mr. Martinez-Fernandez follows:]



CONGRESSIONAL TESTIMONY

Restoring Effective U.S. Security Partnerships in the Americas

Testimony Before House Foreign Affairs Committee / Western Hemisphere Subcommittee

United States House of Representatives

March 27th, 2025

Andres Martinez-Fernandez
Senior Policy Analyst, Latin America
Allison Center for National Security
The Heritage Foundation

My name is Andres Martinez-Fernandez. I am the Senior Policy Analyst for Latin America at The Heritage Foundation. The views I express in this testimony are my own and should not be construed as representing any official position of The Heritage Foundation.

In my testimony today, I am drawing from over a decade of experience working on U.S.-Latin America policy issues both in think tanks and the private sector.

The Western Hemisphere is experiencing a period of surging instability, violence and criminality largely driven by increasingly powerful criminal organizations. From Haiti's collapse at the hands of gangs, newfound narco-violence in once-peaceful Ecuador, increasingly deadly drug cartels in Mexico and Colombia, and more, we are constantly confronted by evidence of a failed status quo for security in our hemisphere. These threats do not stay in Latin America. Instead, they drive increasingly deadly and destabilizing consequences to the United States and directly to the American people.

The absence of robust and effective security engagement from the United States in Latin America is a key driver of the current state of affairs in the Americas. Indeed, the collapse of the hemispheric consensus on counter-narcotics is due in no small part to decisions by Washington to blunt and curb its security cooperation in the Americas away from the core support for regional security forces. This trend is driven in part by Washington's focus on other foreign conflicts and crises, including many with far fewer impacts on the safety and prosperity of the American people. The impact of this inattention has been exacerbated by mission drift and the watering down of in critical institutions like the State Department's Bureau of International Narcotics and Law Enforcement (INL). Additionally, hemispheric security and stability has suffered by the Biden administration's politicization of U.S. security engagement and tools in Latin America.

Hemispheric Drift Away from Core Security Cooperation

The so-called expert consensus on Latin America security policy has shifted dramatically over the past two decades, prompting detrimental changes in the nature and magnitude of U.S. security cooperation. Vocal leaders and activists have successfully framed organized crime in Latin America as primarily being an issue of economic development and judicial institutions, deemphasizing the role of enforcement and security forces. Today, at the core of the new conventional wisdom in Washington is increasingly the poorly substantiated claim that confronting Latin America's powerful criminal organizations only serves to exacerbate insecurity and criminality.

One of the key events that has provided support for this view was the spike in violence in Mexico during the late 2000s following President Felipe Calderon's attempted crackdown on the cartels. However, today, after over decade during which the Mexican government has pulled back from confronting the cartels, Mexico's homicide rates now exceed the worst years of violence during the Calderon administration. Add to that the over 100,000 annual American overdose deaths caused by the cartels deadly trafficking of fentanyl.

Indeed, Mexico's disastrous "hugs, not bullets" strategy on the cartels showcases the dire consequences of deemphasizing enforcement and the role security forces. In Colombia, a similar approach by the government of Gustavo Petro has also brought worrying increases in violence, spiking illicit coca cultivation, and dramatically expanded territorial control for narco-trafficking groups.

With Mexico, the Merida Initiative drifted from its initial focus of providing training, equipment and operational support to Mexican security forces and instead shifted to U.S. support for reform of the Mexican judicial system. When President Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador fully abandoned the Merida Initiative, the new security cooperation framework with the U.S. that replaced it further deemphasized the role of security forces and enforcement.

In both Mexico and Colombia, the United States failed to push back on regional leaders abandonment of security commitments. This failure was particularly egregious under the Biden administration. It is well established that the Biden administration had no qualms about imposing controversial social agendas on Latin America's conservative populace. However, President Biden's administration made no substantive efforts to press regional leaders to maintain their commitments to the rule of law, even as hundreds of thousands of Americans and countless more across Latin America paid the consequences with their lives.

Even worse, the Biden administration leaned into this wrongheaded approach to organized crime by regional leaders. In the case of Colombia, President Biden actively drew attention away from Colombia's deteriorating security situation by ending the longstanding program of U.S. monitoring of coca cultivation.

The consequences of these unwise shifts in security policies have been not isolated to the countries where they are adopted or even limited to the ultimate destination for the deadly illicit narcotics trade, the United States. Look no further than Ecuador to see the consequences for countries once safe from these criminal threats. As Colombian guerrilla groups and Mexican cartels have enjoyed new freedom and reach thanks to wrongheaded security policies in their countries, these groups have rapidly

expanded into Ecuador, bringing dramatic violence to what was once one of the safest nations in the Americas.

Clearly, weak and watered-down security policies have failed across our hemisphere. Those who say that cracking down on organized crime also cannot reconcile their claims with the reality of El Salvador restored stability and safety following robust enforcement against the country's once dramatic gang threat.

Resources and Priorities for U.S. Security Cooperation

Washington's attention and allocation of security cooperation resources to Latin America and the Caribbean is shockingly low given the exposure of the United States to regional criminality. For years, overall funding levels for INL and broader security cooperation for Latin America have either remained static or been subjected to budget cuts. However, stagnant funding levels have been accompanied by dramatic increases in the lethality of the threats to the American people posed by illicit narcotics and criminal organizations.

Over the past four years in particular, as illicit narcotic overdose deaths in the U.S. have spiked by over 100% claiming nearly half a million American lives, Washington has failed to direct appropriate resources to these security threats. In 2019, 40% of the Trump Administration's Foreign Assistance budget request for Latin America was dedicated to security cooperation. In the Biden Administration's 2024's request, security cooperation was less than under 27% of the budget.

Worse still, the already scarce security cooperation funding has been increasingly assigned to programs and initiatives distant from core mission of INL. As previously discussed, U.S. training and equipping of regional security forces has for years been on the decline, increasingly replaced by less controversial and less impactful efforts such as support for reforming regional judicial systems.

In addition to not confronting the increasingly deadly threat of organized crime in our hemisphere, the Biden administration further exacerbated the watering down and politicization of U.S. security policies in the Americas.

Perhaps most egregious was the Biden administration's forcing of the so-called Diversity, Equity and Inclusion (DEI) agenda into INL's activities, including by adding specially designed DEI courses to INL's Law Enforcement Academies. The Biden administration also made community engagement programs, gender-based initiatives, and social activism core elements of U.S. security engagement in Central America. In Guatemala, a particularly bizarre INL initiative was recently funding hip hop classes for young people.

Under the Biden administration, other tools traditionally used for combatting organized crime and related corruption became politicized weapons to undermine conservative governments abroad.

Not content to give Guatemala's institutions and democratic processes space to resolve an internal political controversy, the Biden administration, in the closing weeks of 2023, issued an unprecedented wave of sanctions against dozens of democratically elected Guatemalan political and business leaders as well as their families. The Biden administration also took a hostile stance toward El Salvador's

President Nayib Bukele and his government, using sanctions but also activist NGOs and other tools to undermine a pro-U.S. partner. Further south, the Biden administration was quick to issue politically timed sanctions against leading Paraguayan political figures just weeks ahead of presidential elections in the pro-U.S. and socially conservative South American country.

By contrast, the Biden administration spared Venezuela's narco-dictatorship from new sanctions up until the waning days of President Biden's term. The Biden administration also remained silent even as substantial evidence of narco-corruption came to light implicating Colombia's far-left President Gustavo Petro and his associates. Other leftist leading political figures in Argentina, Brazil, and elsewhere were spared from U.S. sanctions despite clear evidence of their corruption and efforts to undermine of democratic institutions.

Conclusion

To confront the dire threats posed by organized crime in our hemisphere, U.S. security assistance through INL and other agencies should be bolstered and refocused on the core mission of counternarcotics and transnational organized crime. Failure to do so urgently will bring increasingly deadly consequences for Latin America and the American people.

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Ms. SALAZAR. Thank you, Mr. Martinez-Fernandez.
I now recognize Mr. Isacson for his opening statement.

STATEMENT OF ADAM ISACSON

Mr. ISACSON. Chairwoman Salazar, Ranking Member Castro, thank you so much for holding this hearing and for inviting me.

The State Department's Bureau of INL manages the largest U.S. aid account for security forces in Latin America and the Caribbean, though it pays for other things, too. Worldwide, it is about a billion and a half dollars. In our hemisphere, it is at least \$600 million.

Now, for years, INL was jokingly known as the drugs and thugs bureau. Its success was measured in hectares eradicated and kilos seized and kingpins arrested. That narrow focus reflects its 1980's-era statute, and it hasn't really worked. You don't have to take my word for it. Just look at overdose deaths, look at street prices.

Meanwhile, our understanding of organized crime and how to combat it has evolved. Yes, drugs are still a top revenue stream for criminal groups, but crime groups also make billions from gold mining, migrant smuggling, extortion, and more; sometimes at even bigger profits than they are getting from drugs. The drug market itself has shifted toward synthetics, like fentanyl and meth, which don't involve most of Latin America outside Mexico. And mass migration has made the question urgent. How can we help people feel safe enough to stay in their own communities?

This reframes success. It is no longer just kilos and hectares. It is whether people feel secure, it is whether justice works, it is whether officials fear punishment for corruption. To its credit, INL has shifted. It no longer tries to fight crime the way you would fight a guerilla insurgency. While guerillas fight governments, organized crime infiltrates them and hollows them out by bribing, threatening, co-opting, and corrupting. That makes it a much harder, much more complex fight.

Now, in response, INL has begun putting more emphasis on the L, Rule of Law and civilian law enforcement, rather than just the N. Funding has increasingly gone to prosecutors, judicial institutions, police academies, oversight bodies, and independent experts and investigators, a whole comprehensive security sector, a table with many legs, and not just the people wearing uniforms.

There is a growing realization that real progress is going to take time, and it depends on breaking collusion between government and crime. That is why efforts like the Commission Against Impunity in Guatemala, the CICIG, mattered so much. Brave people made historic anti-corruption gains, and INL was there to support them.

Ironically, de-narcotizing INL's mission may be the best way to reduce drug supplies in the long-term. But that shift also means we need to rethink some obsolete frameworks, like the annual drug certification process. As the 2020 Western Hemisphere Drug Policy Commission noted, it is a relic. It hasn't been used to seriously cut aid since the 1990's, and even then a Republican majority Congress and a Democratic White House scrambled in the late 1990's to restore it when security began deteriorating in Colombia.

So, yes, INL needs reform. WOLA supports a serious rethink to bring the Bureau and its statutes into the mid-21st century. What

we don't support is a rushed 90-day review full of abrupt freezes and cuts with no input from partners around the world, many of whom have been risking their lives to fight corruption and crime and really depend on the relationship with us.

The little we have seen of the proposed cuts so far is worrying. Aid to police and military agencies looks mostly untouched, but support to civil society, justice institutions, U.N. programs, that looks like it is cut by about half. The risks turning—that risk is turning INL back into what it once was, a little drugs and thugs bureau, and we know where that leads; brief dips in violence or drug supplies followed by resurgence.

It is just a constant game of whack-a-mole. Organized crime figures get taken down, but organized crime remains strong. Corrupt officials keep operating with impunity. People keep fleeing their homes, often coming here.

I am not asking to preserve the status quo. Frankly, I can't defend much of it because I can't see it. Public reporting on INL aid has become vague, inconsistent, and far less quantitative. It is hard to track where the money goes and what it achieves. And reporting requirements, if we do reauthorize INL, have to improve. Right now, oversight is difficult, and it makes the whole program hard to defend when an administration comes to power questioning its entire value.

This committee can help. First, it can urge INL to keep expanding its focus on organized crime, corruption, and citizen security, not just counternarcotics.

Second, it can press for much better transparency.

Third, it can insist that any reform effort be thoughtful, inclusive, and deliberate, not a 90-day rollback. There is lots of space for bipartisan agreement here, I think.

I look forward to exploring that here and any other time that you would like in the future. Thank you again for organizing this discussion.

[The prepared statement of Mr. Isacson follows:]



Testimony of

Adam Isacson

Director for Defense Oversight

Washington Office on Latin America

Before the

U.S. House of Representatives

Committee on Foreign Affairs Subcommittee on the Western Hemisphere

Hearing: “INL Should Fight Crime, Not Fight Conservatives”

Washington, DC

March 27, 2025

As a U.S.-Latin America security relations specialist since the 1990s, I’ve observed U.S.-funded programming firsthand in seven countries around the hemisphere. Much of that has been supported by the State Department’s Bureau of International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs (INL), which manages the largest single account assisting the security forces of Latin America and the Caribbean, International Narcotics Control and Law Enforcement or INCLE.

Unlike most USAID programming or military assistance, INCLE can assist both uniformed security forces and civilian institutions, like justice systems. At the outset of the “Plan Colombia” aid packages during the early 2000s, INCLE paid for priorities ranging from Black Hawk helicopters for Colombia’s Army to chickens for farmers who agreed to eradicate their coca plants (through a pass-through to USAID).

I never expected to see so-called “hard side” INCLE aid—the funding that supports security forces and security operations—frozen or cut back severely region-wide, as appears to be happening now. But here we are. Many of the Black Hawk helicopters at the core of those Plan Colombia aid packages were grounded, at least as of February.¹ So were training programs for Mexican authorities carrying out operations against fentanyl.² So was some assistance for the international security force fighting armed gangs in Haiti (though I cannot confirm whether that was INCLE or Peacekeeping Operations (PKO) aid).³

Similarly, I never expected to see the Bureau forced to justify its mission and existence, although that is less surprising for two reasons. First, it is an outcome of **poor public reporting** about the content and results of INL and INCLE programming. Transparency and vagueness in publicly available information have been an issue: the Bureau has not told its story well.

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Second, though, **INL's mandates and underlying statutes** are overdue for review, as they reflect a 40-year-old view of security challenges. This view upholds illicit drugs as a cause and a driver of security problems instead of an effect or a consequence of deeper, more comprehensive challenges. And they betray a belief that illicit drug supplies can be controlled by just cracking down harder—something that 40 years of unsuccessful crackdowns supported by INL have proved incorrect.

Working more closely with other agencies, a more transparent, rights-respecting, and holistic INL could be central to long-term efforts to build democratic security sectors, help states govern long-abandoned territories, and deprive organized crime of the corruption and impunity it requires to thrive. That would be a better counter-drug strategy than has been tried over the last several decades.

Evolution

INL used to be jokingly called the “Drugs and Thugs” bureau. While you can still hear that, the Bureau has moved away from that in recent years, to the extent permitted by its statutes (discussed below) and by political pressure for short-term counter-drug gains.

In the last 10 or 15 years, at least in the Americas where I work, INL has adopted a **broader counter-organized crime focus**. In the past five to ten years, that has blossomed into an increasing “**law enforcement and justice reform**” focus, with an important anti-corruption component.

While this shift from the “N” to the “L” in “INL” can be overstated, it is real. The broader vision is the result of some notable trends.

First, **plant-based drugs** (cocaine, opium and heroin, marijuana) now account for a smaller share of the U.S. illicit drug market. That somewhat reduced the salience of countries—anywhere except Mexico, its immediate neighbors, and precursor producers—that are not significant source or transit states for fentanyl, methamphetamine, MDMA, and other non-plant-based drugs. Crop eradication, in particular, became less of a focus.

Second, since the spring of 2014, the U.S.-Mexico border has experienced far greater migration of children and families from Central America and, after 2020, from elsewhere. This population turns itself in to U.S. border authorities to seek protection and, in a non-trivial percentage of immigration court outcomes, qualifies for asylum.

This migration greatly increased U.S. interest in the “**root causes**” of this migration, which include citizen insecurity. In the late 2000s, INL and other agencies had launched the Central American Regional Security Initiative (CARSI), the Mérida Initiative in Mexico, and other programs to take on rapidly growing gang and organized-crime challenges.⁴ With the mid-2010s increase in people fleeing violence and arriving in the United States, programming expanded in scale and in scope, and the term “root causes” came into more frequent use. Dollar amounts increased, and emphasis expanded from combating criminal gangs and their leaders to improving

institutions' ability to protect communities from their abuses, like homicides, extortion, recruitment, and gender-based violence.

With the goal of making people feel safer at home, the expanded emphasis on **"citizen security,"** with new programming ranging from "place-based" protection strategies to community-level violence initiatives, was a departure from security assistance programs' narrower earlier focus on defeating insurgencies and reducing drug supplies. This sort of assistance is something that the United States, which has neither a national police force nor a reserve of police trainers and advisors ready to be deployed, is still learning how to do.

Third, the "citizen security" challenge meant addressing why states in the region were not protecting their citizens from organized crime and gangs. The answer, often, was **corruption**. Criminal groups had made significant inroads into government institutions at many levels of government, and officials—politicians, security forces, judicial personnel—saw little likelihood of ever being held accountable for colluding with them.

This focus on corruption as a major indirect driver of insecurity—and thus migration—underlay the Obama administration's robust support for the Commission Against Impunity in Guatemala (CICIG) and the adoption of individual sanctions for people credibly alleged to be participating in significant corruption.

INL's mandate remains narcotics-centric

In my view, and that of my organization, this evolution in INL's role has been welcome. Still, though, the Bureau continues to be principally a counter-drug agency. A narrower focus on drug supplies has had the most political support and the most pressure for quick results.

The Bureau's statutory authority upholds that. Sec. 481(a)(1)(A) of the Foreign Assistance Act reveals a **"Just Say No"-era focus on drugs to the exclusion of other, tightly related security challenges**: "International narcotics trafficking," it reads, "poses an unparalleled transnational threat in today's world, and its suppression is among the most important foreign policy objectives of the United States."

This results in an operating environment in which **the INL Bureau's success gets measured in hectares (eradicated), kilograms (seized), kingpins (arrested and sometimes extradited)**, and little else. These don't seem like the correct measures or objectives for dealing with a mid-21st-century security and criminal landscape.

For one thing, they cover only one of organized crime's current revenue streams. Other highly lucrative streams include illicit mining, human trafficking, human smuggling, ransom kidnappings, extortion, and illegal timber harvesting. At times, some of those—especially precious metals mining and human smuggling—may be more profitable than drugs. However, the INL Bureau's underlying statutes (Chapter 8 of Part I of the Foreign Assistance Act) say little about these other income streams.

They also say little about the reasons why the drug trade and other organized crime revenue thrive. Illicit drugs are not a force of nature: soil and climate are not the main conditions they

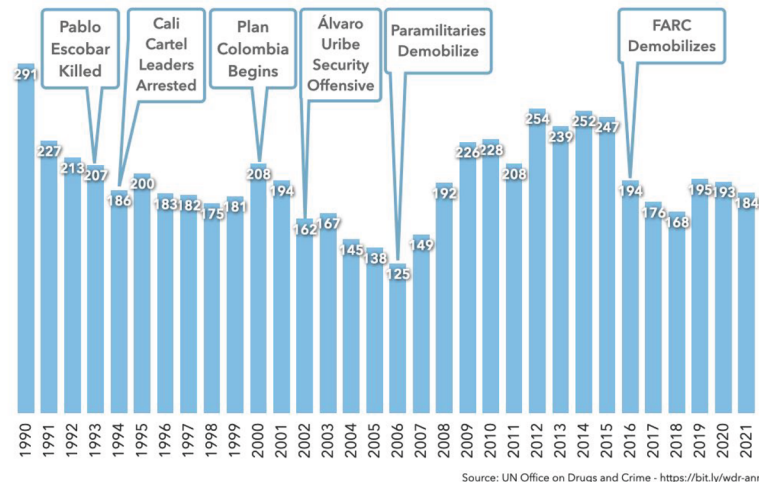
require to prosper. They need the same conditions that benefit other profitable organized crime activity: **ungoverned spaces** (or criminally governed spaces) in which to operate, high expectations of **impunity**, **collusion** with government officials who also count on impunity, weak **justice systems and civilian law enforcement**, and **honest reformers** lacking resources or even basic security protections.

Why hasn't the narcotics focus worked?

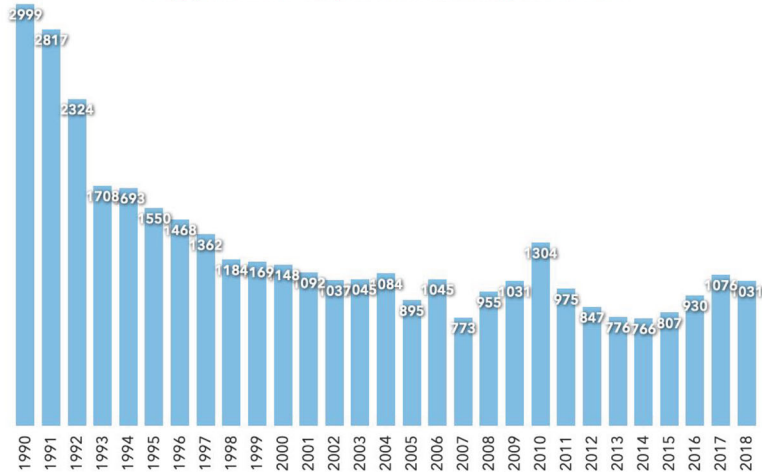
After 40 years, the best one can say about the results of INL-backed drug supply reduction programs is that perhaps they've kept supplies from being greater than they are, although that is a hard-to-prove hypothetical.

If you believe in the law of supply and demand, then the ultimate measure of a drug supply-reduction program is the price of an illicit drug on U.S. streets, adjusted for inflation and purity. Here is the inflation and purity-adjusted price data for cocaine and heroin purchased on U.S. streets since 1990, according to White House Office of National Drug Control Policy (ONDCP) data as compiled in the 2024 *World Drug Report* published by the UN Office of Drugs and Crime (UNODC, [table 8.3](#)).⁴

Average cocaine retail prices (street prices) in the United States, in U.S. dollars per gram, adjusted for purity and inflation in 2021 U.S. dollars
(Supply and demand: if the product were scarcer, the price would rise)



Average heroin retail prices (street prices) in the United States, in U.S. dollars per gram, adjusted for purity and inflation in 2018 U.S. dollars
 (Supply and demand: if the product were scarcer, the price would rise)



Source: UN Office on Drugs and Crime - <https://bit.ly/wdr-annex>

According to supply and demand, a successful supply reduction policy would make the drug more expensive. If supplies are meeting demand, drugs would become cheaper.

These charts show **a general steadiness in street prices**. Fluctuations happen, but they are not radical and tend to even out. Even big events like cartel takedowns barely register as blips.

Some of this is due to the difficulty of discouraging the production and transit of products that are cheap to make but have gigantic profit margins, as prohibition inflates their prices. The big downstream markups make the supply-side effort next to impossible. Making coca so scarce that coca-leaf prices double from \$10 to \$20 per bushel, for instance, barely hits the bottom line of a criminal managing a sophisticated cocaine lab and selling their product for \$2,000 per kilo.

Crop eradication, too, happens mainly in areas with almost no government presence, in a vacuum. As a result, growers replant, as they remain far from law enforcement but also without land titles or ways to get legal crops to market. Over the years, I've heard U.S. officials who help manage coca bush eradication programs refer to their work as **"mowing the lawn."** Even as they defend keeping the bushes shorter and forcing growers to adapt, they know they are doing a "forever job" as long as the conditions encouraging coca cultivation persist.

INL's **interdiction** programs can point to impressive numbers of tons seized by U.S.-aided forces. (The Bureau's International Narcotics Control Strategy Reports, however, inexplicably tend only to report January-through-September prior-year seizures for most countries, which

makes it hard to measure progress.) Seizures of cocaine and other drugs have increased, but that may also indicate greater supply, and the impact on street prices and purity is hard to discern.

The narrow focus on stopping drugs, while neglecting conditions that fostered their production and transshipment, often ended up spreading the problem geographically. A classic example is coca in Colombia, which expanded massively from the south-central part of the country to its Pacific coastal region, and other areas, in response to forced eradication in the late 1990s and early 2000s.

A big part of INL's supply-control strategy is creating and sustaining "**vetted units**," segments of the security forces that undergo regular background checks and are held somewhat separate from a country's regular forces. These units often work closely with DEA, HSI, FBI, or other agencies on investigations. While these units can point to many arrests and extraditions, a lack of information keeps me, an outside observer, from being able even to list the units that exist. I am also unable to evaluate how many of their arrests are genuinely "high level" in the sense of having taken important "nodes" off of the criminal network or broken important links between organized crime and the corrupt government officials on whom that network relies.

I also lack information necessary to evaluate INL's support for judicial and investigative units tracking illicit **financial flows**. This complex and labor-intensive work can be uncomfortable for host-country government officials, some of whom may participate in corruption and sit along the "money trails" being investigated. Financial investigations could undoubtedly use more INL resources and emphasis.

The statutes establishing INL, written in the 1980s and 1990s, reveal a belief, prevalent at the time, that short-term gains against the drug trade would endure. Policymakers who worked in the early 1990s have told me that they believed, for instance, that taking down the Medellín Cartel (Pablo Escobar was killed in 1993) would deal a severe blow to the cocaine trade.

That proved inaccurate. We are in the long term now, and we need to adjust goals and objectives for a longer-term strategy to help partners tackle transnational organized crime, its many income streams, and its fundamental upstream causes.

What would a more "upstream" approach look like?

Getting at the underlying challenges means "de-narcotizing" INL's mission. It may sound counterintuitive, but loosening the fixation on hectares and kilograms, in favor of attacking the conditions that foster organized crime, offers the best hope of reducing hectares and kilograms in the long term. In other words, you can more permanently address the "N" in "INL" by focusing on the "L": law enforcement, or the rule of law.

To understand why requires considering why organized crime is so hard to combat in the first place: much harder to fight, it turns out, than an insurgency. That is because, unlike guerrillas, mafias prefer not to fight governments. They will do so if cornered, but it is bad for business. Organized crime prefers to bribe or individually threaten government officials while penetrating institutions to render them inoperable against them.

Guerrillas may attack a naval checkpoint on a river used to traffic cocaine. An organized crime group is more likely to ensure that the personnel at that naval checkpoint wave their cocaine-laden boats through. That makes the organized crime group harder to confront.

Organized crime thrives on its relations with government. Those relations, in turn, depend on government officials' calculation of how likely it is that they will ever be punished or held accountable for colluding with organized crime. Breaking links between organized crime and government means reducing impunity for collusion, and INL can play a key role here.

The Bureau's **support for justice systems**—judges, prosecutors, investigators, witness protection—is crucial, even as it gets less investment than military and police efforts. It has become increasingly evident that for a wide variety of missions, all roads lead through the justice system. A weak, overwhelmed, inefficient, or corrupt judiciary makes all other goals harder to achieve.

INL has been increasing its focus on judicial and rule of law programs. Many appear to be in partnership with the Justice Department's Office of Overseas Prosecutorial Development, Assistance and Training (OPDAT) and USAID.

Many of these judicial programs focus on training judicial-sector personnel. While this is useful, improved indicators are needed to assess the effectiveness of this training, and programs could expand to address other priorities:

- **Physical security**, since organized crime investigations are hazardous; this also means security from “judicialization” if a more corruption-prone government takes power.
- Increasing staffing and thus reducing crippling large **caseloads**.
- Helping increase the use of **technology**, from databases to DNA to ballistics to drug testing.
- Since the judicial system is not immune to corruption either, its own **internal controls** need capacity, autonomy, and protection.
- **Transportation** to remote crime scenes before they can be altered.

The security sector

While justice systems need more emphasis within INL programming, so do other institutions and reformers, not just those who wear uniforms.

The “security sector”: more than just uniforms



Reducing organized crime penetration and collusion means, alongside a robust judicial system, strong internal controls, vigilance from other branches of government like legislatures, and a skilled community of outside monitors like credible NGOs and a free press. These are all legs to a table that will not stand when some are missing.

Every nation, including the United States, should aspire to have a balanced, functioning **security sector** with all these elements. Together with reform-minded allies worldwide, the U.S. government, with a rejuvenated INL Bureau, could deal organized crime a severe and enduring blow by helping to build these sectors. Though less specifically “counter-narcotic” on the surface, a turn toward security sector building would be more likely to bring lasting reductions in illicit drug supplies and other organized crime revenue streams.

Security sector reform would be even more effective if paired with a strategy to guarantee a whole-of-government presence—not just security forces—in vast **ungoverned areas** in the Americas where drugs are produced and where eradication efforts today just result in replanting.

I understand that this “security sector” approach is a hard sell because it takes a while to consolidate. Though the benefits would be longer lasting, they are not always visible in the short term. This is the opposite of an “iron fist” security strategy that brings violence measures down for a few years—often at great human rights cost—only to see them rise again because the security sector remains weak and unbalanced.

A reformed INL should be part of a larger effort to help U.S. assistance **break out of this cycle of short-term crackdowns** followed by recoveries in violence or drug supplies.

INL is providing aid for this, though it’s harder to evaluate

Especially since the launch of the Central American Regional Security Initiative (CARSI), Caribbean Basin Security Initiative (CBSI), and Mérida Initiative nearly two decades ago, INL

has moved its programming in more of a law enforcement or rule-of-law strengthening direction aimed at making people feel safer where they are, rather than just helping fight drug supplies.

Support for **police reform** has been going on the longest, especially in Mexico, Central America, and the Caribbean. There have been some positive experiences, but it is hard to point to a police force transformed due to U.S. aid. Colombia's National Police comes the closest, though it continues to suffer persistent human rights and corruption challenges.

INL-backed police training is carried out heavily by private contractors, Colombian police (through the "U.S.-Colombia Action Program" for which little recent public information is available), or other agencies like DEA, Coast Guard, and CBP. The U.S. government does not have a ready corps of civilian police trainers who can be surged like military trainers.

From our non-governmental vantage point, it is hard to evaluate these law enforcement programs region-wide due to information access challenges: reporting is poor, difficult to obtain, and often quite vague—press release-level—when obtained. Still, known initiatives have included the following, and I encourage Congress to explore their effectiveness and lessons learned:

- Establishing police precincts, including "model precincts" in high-crime areas, building and hardening police stations, and equipping police units.
- Reforming and developing curricula for police academies, including some state and municipal academies.
- Advising to help make policing more of a profession with accountability mechanisms and clear guidelines for promotions, raises, and rewards.
- Assistance for community policing, data-driven policing, call centers, and other place-based methods.
- Technology (biometrics, logistics, databases, DNA, forensics, ballistics, and similar).
- Inter-American Law Enforcement Academies: a longstanding effort in six countries, but very low profile. The 2025 International Narcotics Control Strategy Report discusses all 6 of them in just 572 words.⁴
- Support for police inspectors-general and other internal controls.
- Prison reform and certification efforts are advanced in some countries, particularly Colombia.
- Judicial sector training, much of it carried out by OPDAT or USAID.
- Rule of Law programs carried out by non-governmental actors like the American Bar Association and local civil society organizations throughout the region.
- Support for academic and think-tank studies of organized crime and law enforcement challenges.

Between many of these programs' recency, long-term time horizons, small size, and spotty public reporting, it is hard to evaluate them for this testimony. Many seem promising but deserve greater inquiry from Congress from a "constructive criticism" posture.

I fear, though, that this is not the current posture. While information about waivers and cuts is difficult to confirm, it seems that this kind of "security sector" and "long-term rule of law" assistance has been deeply affected by **this year's aid freeze and aid cuts**, just like a lot of the "harder side" aid discussed above.

It is essential that this not happen. **It would be a grave mistake to diminish INL to the point that it reverts to a rump "drugs and thugs" bureau.** That would mean ignoring decades of bipartisan learning and turning back to short-term approaches that haven't worked and don't respond to the reasons millions have sought to migrate.

Evaluation is difficult because of a lack of public information

A lot of my assessment of INL here lacks specificity. That is because, from outside the U.S. government, INL is hard to get to know. I don't mean that INL officials are standoffish: they tend to have pretty open doors and like talking about their programs.

However, they are less prepared to share **quantitative data or lists of program efforts or grantees**. I have found it difficult to get basic breakdowns of what INCLE has paid for in specific Latin American countries in recent years, and some regional programs, like CARSI, don't even get broken down by recipient country. I have spoken to congressional staff who have had similar difficulty getting details.

That not only makes INCLE hard to evaluate, but also makes it hard to defend when an administration comes to power questioning its programming.

As Congress considers reforming INL, it must require the Bureau to improve its reporting about its activities. This **reporting has lost specificity over the years**. Annual International Narcotics Control Strategy Reports (INCSRs) now provide much less quantitative data, and less current data, than they did as recently as the 2000s.² The "Program and Budget Guides" that the Bureau used to produce, with helpful tables breaking down assistance to key countries by function, disappeared in the early 2010s.³

The INCSRs need a fundamental rethinking, more than I can lay out here, to be valuable reports again. They especially need more hard, quantitative data instead of boilerplate text that tends to get copy-pasted from previous years. The INCSRs now don't even include the prior year's illicit crop hectare estimates, and interdiction estimates are incomplete and tell us little.

To make evaluations minimally possible, for each country, the INCSR should report **official statistics or estimates about programming**:

- Total U.S. counter-drug and counter-TOC budget for the past five years, at least, by functional category as determined by country strategy (e.g., eradication, interdiction, justice, police reform). This should make it possible to discern approximate dollar amounts for military forces, police forces, justice systems, other civilian agencies, or NGOs, separating what often gets called "hard side" and "soft side" assistance. It should also make it possible to discern what is equipment, training, or other services.
- How much programming in each country is considered purely "anti-narcotics." To give the complete picture, budget breakdowns must include all sources of aid that could be construed as having a counter-drug nexus, including Defense Department accounts, not just INCLE.
- Identities of principal recipient units, including vetted units. Estimates of those units' personnel strength.
- If units are judicial/prosecutorial, estimates of personnel strength and caseload per professional employee.
- Units operating at borders, including principal units, should be discussed and their performance evaluated.
- How much of appropriated funds are passed through other agencies, like:
 - CBP

- DEA
- DOJ and OPDAT
- Colombian trainers
- Major private contractors: who are the most-contracted companies, and what services are they providing? Do their employees face security risks as a consequence of their duties?

The INCSR should also include **effectiveness measures**, both outcome-based measures, and its traditional output-based measures. Examples might include:

- Listing of some municipalities or neighborhoods where crime statistics or survey data indicate that people feel safer, and less inclined to migrate, after significant INL investment.
- Survey data or other measures indicating that U.S.-aided units, at any level, have experienced increased public trust and effectiveness.
- Public reporting of inflation and purity-adjusted U.S. street prices for drugs, correlating these price and availability trends, if possible, with the impact of INL programming. If there is no impact, explanations of why and what needs to change about this programming.
- Successful investigations of money laundering that can be publicly reported, including the number of cases, convictions, and estimates of importance to illicit finance networks.
- Successful investigations of organized crime-tied corruption, including number of cases, convictions, and estimate of importance to corruption networks.
- Metrics showing results against other forms of organized crime, like illicit mining, human trafficking, human smuggling, and successful investigations of related corruption and financial flows.
- Drug seizures, by drug and weight, for the past five years at least.
- Cultivation estimates, by crop and acreage, at least for the past five years.
- Eradication totals by crop, acreage, and ideally by jurisdiction (province/state/department) for the past five years at least.
- Interdiction/seizure totals by drug, weight, and domain (air, land, sea, riverine).
- Identities of major criminal groups active in the country.
- Narratives should include a more frank, specific discussion of successes (including in countries without close relations) and pending challenges (including in countries with close relations). The level of frankness and specificity—especially in discussions of corruption—should match that of the State Department’s annual human rights reports and should, to the extent possible, note when impunity for human rights abuse or corruption has hindered or prevented U.S. assistance programs or operational cooperation.

The certification process does not help

The annual drug certification process, laid out in Sec. 490 of the Foreign Assistance Act, has outlived its usefulness. It establishes a means of cutting aid, having the U.S. representative to multilateral banks vote “no” on loans, and other punishments for governments viewed as not cooperating on counter-drug efforts. Though often an irritant in bilateral relationships, the certification process has not cut off assistance to a major U.S. aid recipient for many years.

The last time it did cut off significant aid—to Colombia during the mid-1990s, when scandal-plagued President Ernesto Samper was in office—the Clinton administration and the Republican-majority Congress ended up scrambling to restore much of it through rarely used Foreign Assistance Act authorities like emergency drawdowns and Sec. 614 waivers.

In recent years, the only countries “decertified” have been Bolivia (which, in fact, has not experienced significant growth in coca cultivation), Burma, and Venezuela.² The impact on those states’ behavior, and their concern about lost prestige from the U.S. seal of disapproval, have been minimal.

If the certification process were abolished, it would remove an irritant in U.S. relations with Latin America while having no impact on counter-drug efforts’ effectiveness. We recall the 2020 recommendation of the U.S. government’s Western Hemisphere Drug Policy Commission:

The current certification process offends our partners and does little to deter corrupt practices in unfriendly nations. Instead INL should produce a global report reviewing country efforts to counter trafficking and other transnational crimes, including US policies. This report should also assess whether US sanctions, such as the Kingpin Act, effectively target the most dangerous criminal organizations, especially those responsible for trafficking or producing fentanyl and other highly toxic substances.³

An INL Bureau for the mid-21st century

An INL Bureau that is less blinkered by a specific focus on drug supply and able to address larger rule of law and security sector reform needs would be a much more appropriate organization to confront today’s metastasizing transnational organized crime challenges. The ability to focus on justice and civilian law enforcement systems, breaking ties between states and organized crime, and governing ungoverned spaces would make the Bureau a more effective tool alongside other J bureaus and offices with overlapping missions.

A final issue is the presence or absence of committed government partners in the region. INL programming is far more effective when governments share the same goals and are willing to devote their own political will and resources to a strategy that is developed through dialogue, and not just handed down from Washington. Programs developed and informed with the governments themselves, along with civil society actors known for credibility and expertise, would be much more likely to achieve their goals. This raises the reality that some governments just are not as committed to the rule of law and citizen security; when that happens, the program must creatively seek partnerships with reformers elsewhere in the broader “security sector.”

I congratulate the Subcommittee and members of both parties for encouraging a conversation about modernizing this approach, and I hope there is consensus about a way forward.

Endnotes

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Ms. SALAZAR. Thank you, Mr. Isacson. Now—for your testimony, I now recognize myself for 5 minutes of questioning.

I am delighted to hear, Mr. Isacson, that you believe certain quotes here, that INL needs to be modernized and needs to be reformed, and that maybe they are just following some of the precepts of the 1980's. But, specifically, I agree that they are not—that they need to be reorganized, and there needs to be some revamped, but let's go to the last 4 years.

Do you really believe that talking to the Guatemalans and to the Salvadorians about gender ideology or the pronouns or how you can—there are many genders—do you really think that talking to them was going to make the United States and themselves safer? I mean, you are going to keep people home? So explain how one thing comes linked to the other.

Mr. ISACSON. I would like to know what percentage of the program actually was about gender and identity and things like that. If it is—we don't have that data.

Ms. SALAZAR. Focused, main focus. The Guatemalans were complaining.

Mr. ISACSON. In terms of dollar amounts?

Ms. SALAZAR. Of course. And in terms of political willingness and desire to infiltrate these forces with our ideology, the American Biden administration ideology. Don't you think that it was—we did a disservice to them and to us?

Mr. ISACSON. If you are fighting human trafficking where most victims are women—

Ms. SALAZAR. Yes.

Mr. ISACSON [continuing]. you need to ignore the gender—

Ms. SALAZAR. How can you be talking about sex, when you are trying to find human trafficking?

Mr. ISACSON. If you are fighting gender violence, that is true.

Ms. SALAZAR. How do you do that?

Mr. ISACSON. I just need to know, you know, how much of the programming really did go in that direction instead of—like Joint Task Force Alpha in Guatemala—

Ms. SALAZAR. Ask the Guatemalans.

Mr. ISACSON [continuing]. which was fighting human smugglers—

Ms. SALAZAR. The Guatemalans—perfect example. They hated a lady by the name of Consuelo Porras. Do I know her? No, I don't. But I know that she is the AG of the country. So why don't we work with her? Oh, because she is too conservative. Who are we to say that—to the Guatemalans. Why?

Mr. ISACSON. I don't know if Consuelo Porras is hated—

Ms. SALAZAR. Everything I am saying is quoted. Consuelo Porras is detested.

Mr. ISACSON. Oh, I think she is detested, yes.

Ms. SALAZAR. It was—OK. But who are we, the Americans, to come and say, oh, Consuelo is not the person that you need to work with? She is the AG.

Mr. ISACSON. I have never heard that she was held at arm's length because of—because she favored free markets or like, you know—

Ms. SALAZAR. She was too conservative.

Mr. ISACSON [continuing]. because she was too conservative. It was because of—

Ms. SALAZAR. She was too conservative.

Mr. ISACSON [continuing]. significant corruption, according to what I saw.

Ms. SALAZAR. You know what I am telling you. So please help me understand why the Biden administration wanted to concentrate its resources when it talks to reforming and securing the Salvadorian-Guatemalan police, concentrated on something that had nothing to do with national security for the United States.

Mr. ISACSON. My impression was that INL and the justice department worked very hard with—not with Consuelo, but with the rest of the public ministry in Guatemala on something called Joint Task Force Alpha, which was a big effort to get at the nodes of the network of migrant smuggling. And they have actually taken out a lot of migrant smugglers working with the attorney general's office in Guatemala in the last few years. And the Trump administration is expanding that.

Ms. SALAZAR. INL, did you know this, would give money to the NGO's in Guatemala to help the migrants go have a smoother ride while they were going to Guatemala and getting to Mexico?

Mr. ISACSON. I think that would have been illegal in Guatemala where they actually arrest and deport more than 20,000, 30,000 migrants a year back into Honduras.

Ms. SALAZAR. Nine million went through it.

Mr. ISACSON. Yes. A lot do get through, yes.

Ms. SALAZAR. All right. Let's go to El Salvador. Bukele, what do you think—what ranking do you give to Bukele from one to ten?

Mr. ISACSON. I would give him—I would give him a four, perhaps. I think he is a brilliant communicator, but I do worry about checks and balances.

Ms. SALAZAR. Forget about the communicator. What has he done with the country?

Mr. ISACSON. He has put 3 percent of the male population in prison, which, yes, by doing so did eradicate for now a lot of the gangs.—feature of democracy.

Ms. SALAZAR. And you and I agree that if there is one innocent guy in the CECOT, I was the first one who told him you got to get him out because we don't want innocent people in jail. But the thing is that, you know, CECOT, the people who are full of tattoos that are revealing who they were and what they did, you know, each drop meant one murder. So you think he did something right?

Mr. ISACSON. If these people were facing judges and if their families knew what was going on with them, it would be right. But right now, almost everybody there is pretrial, and there is not even dates for most of their trials. So, yes, they need a fair shake. I mean, it was right to clean out the streets.

Ms. SALAZAR. I agree with you, that everyone needs due process, yes, sir.

Mr. ISACSON. That is just not happening right now.

Ms. SALAZAR. All right. But what about us working with him? Maybe if INL would have done its job, then Bukele would have been able to really help—we would help him to do a better job, don't you think?

Mr. ISACSON. I——

Ms. SALAZAR. Talking about diversity and inclusion and pronouns.

Mr. ISACSON. I think one of INL's biggest obstacles actually there is—and I actually support it—is language that both Republicans and Democrats put in the foreign aid bill saying that half of aid—I believe it is half—to El Salvador is cut until they can certify that the human rights situation is good and is improving.

Right now more than 300 people dying in the jails in the last 3 years and widespread allegations of torture, it has been hard to certify that.

Ms. SALAZAR. What happens to the human rights of the people who were outside being killed by those gang members, which is why he got 90 percent of transparency——

Mr. ISACSON. Oh, yes.

Ms. SALAZAR [continuing]. internationally observed elections; we agree with that, right?

Mr. ISACSON. Oh, yes. If I was a shopkeeper being extorted——

Ms. SALAZAR. Why do we have to hate him? Who are we to say to this guy, don't do it that way?

Mr. ISACSON. I think we are just worried about what it is going to look like in 5 years. But, yes, right now if I am a shopkeeper who had to pay——

Ms. SALAZAR. That is—don't you think that they should be concerned about what they are going to be looking like 5 years from now? That is their concern, not ours. We are here to help them have a better police force.

All right. You agree with that, right?

Mr. ISACSON. We are certainly here to help them have a better police force, but we don't want to be funding abuses in the short-term.

Ms. SALAZAR. I think that I am exceeding my time. I yield back.

Now I am going to recognize the ranking member for 5 minutes. Thank you.

Mr. ISACSON. Thank you.

Mr. CASTRO. Thank you, Chairwoman. I want to take up this issue really quickly because, you know, we disagree, Maria, on this. I don't think there has ever been a bias of the United States in—against conservative leaders and in favor of leftist leaders.

In fact, when you look at the history of the U.S. involvement in Latin America, Latin America has often—I mean, the United States, unfortunately, in decades past worked to undermine the leadership of leaders on the left and treated leaders on the right as friends; and, in fact, supported what were some of the most brutal dictatorships, like the Pinochet ruling in Chile.

When we think about how we—how we provide U.S. assistance, how we provide taxpayer money, the way we should be thinking about it is, who is operating consistent with U.S. values and what we stand for? So democracy, freedom, respect for human rights.

Really, regardless of where you are in the political spectrum, whether you are on the left or the right as a leader, we ought to support leaders who are pursuing those things.

Consuelo Porras, as I understand, had been sanctioned for severe corruption. That is why we are not working with her, not because

she has got a certain ideology. And Bukele also, I think it is true—I mean, he has gotten a lot of crime off the streets and has scared a lot of people, especially young men, but so has Xi Jinping in China.

So, you know, if the question is, well, why don't we just let people do what they are going to do, OK, I get that. But the question for us is, are we going to back them up with money to commit human rights abuses and other things that we would never allow for in the United States ourselves?

Now, bear in mind, in the last few weeks we have seen some disturbing instances of people literally being picked off the street for having exercised their First Amendment rights by government agents who don't identify themselves, who aren't dressed in uniform, and who barely present credentials, if at all. Those are the kinds of activities that you are used to seeing in countries that violate people's rights.

So just with that disagreement, let me get into a question really quick.

Ms. Kenney, as you know, the administration is conducting multiple reviews of foreign assistance programs. And I believe those programs have been incredibly disruptive and that the review has not been done in good faith.

In 2019, the first Trump administration did something similar on a smaller scale. They unilaterally froze \$400 million in foreign assistance funding in Central America for over 14 months. At the time I, along with other colleagues, requested the GAO assess the impacts of that freeze. The GAO determined that many programs, including State Department INL Bureau programs, had been adversely affected.

Based on your experience with the 2019 freeze, do you expect adverse effects from the ongoing freeze on many INL programs?

Ms. KENNEY. Thank you for that question. Yes. Where we reviewed the freeze in 2019, we found that there were a number of adverse effects.

To the State Department, we found that about 65 or 39 percent of INL programs actually suffered adverse effects where they had to reduce the geographical region in which they were implementing programs, they had to reduce the number of beneficiaries who could participate in trainings, they had to reduce the quality of programs. And programs that relied on implementing partners suffered even more consequences because they had to lay people off, and they were unable to pick up those programs when the funding resumed.

However, that funding was really just a freeze of 1-year funding. In a lot of ways those programs were able to continue because the funding that was still available in the pipeline from prior year's funding.

We haven't had an opportunity to review the funding freeze that is occurring right now, but my understanding is that those programs aren't able to access prior year funding either, and so my understanding is that they are not continuing at all. We haven't had—I am sorry.

Mr. CASTRO. Sure. Thank you for that. And let me ask a followup really quick.

Will the GAO be willing to conduct a review of the ongoing freeze and cancellation of hundreds of millions of dollars in foreign assistance programs?

Ms. KENNEY. Yes, we would be happy to do that work.

Mr. CASTRO. Thank you so much.

With that, I yield back, Chairwoman.

Ms. SALAZAR. Thank you, Ranking Member Castro.

I now give the opportunity to Representative Lawler from the State of New York.

Mr. LAWLER. Thank you, Chairwoman. It is common practice for transnational criminal organizations in South and Central America to source precursor chemicals from China and synthesize illicit substances like fentanyl. These criminal organizations then traffic them into the United States where they have infiltrated far too many communities and led to unimaginable tragedies for a lot of families across our Nation. 70,000 Americans are dying on an annual basis from fentanyl overdose.

Mr. Martinez-Fernandez, how do you assess INL's role in stopping the influx of deadly fentanyl into the United States?

Mr. Martinez-Fernandez. Well, clearly, INL and the U.S. Government is not adequately acting either on resources or focus to stop the flow of fentanyl. As you mentioned, over 70,000 just—overdose deaths just from fentanyl; when you add in all the other illicit drugs, 100,000. And I think there is a very real resource question that has to be addressed.

There is also a partnership and cooperation side to that where our relationship with Mexico, particularly over the past 4 years under the Biden administration, the cooperation, security cooperation was almost nonexistent. Even offers to support port security to identify fentanyl precursors coming in were rejected by the Mexican government.

The challenges of migration, which grew out of control under the Biden administration as well, led to a de-prioritization, in my opinion, of the fentanyl threat with dire consequences.

Now, President Trump has, obviously, rallied significant resources, particularly from the Department of Defense, to the border. I think that is an important aspect of the—confronting this threat, but we also need to press the Mexican government to take action.

There is also—certainly, the administration is making progress on that front and bringing to bear some economic tools. I think INL is going to play an important role because at some point we need to restore the security relationship with Mexico to a functional arrangement with actually targeting the cartels rather than just having symbolic actions by the Mexican government be the sum total of the relationship, which is essentially what we have seen for the past 4 years.

Mr. LAWLER. So what can INL do to address China's role related to the precursor chemicals that are exported into Mexico and other parts of the Western Hemisphere?

Mr. MARTINEZ-FERNANDEZ. So I think certainly with the Chinese presence in Mexico is also significant. So there is action to go after some of the brokers, as well as some of the trade infrastructure,

which is utilized by the Chinese in Mexico to facilitate the—the flow of illicit precursors.

I think more action also needs to be done in Asia on this front. We have seen movement of illicit fentanyl supply chains even out of China. Unfortunately, we don't have a cooperative relationship on this issue with the government in China. So there are significant limitations on INL's ability to act there.

But I think ensuring that, in Mexico in particular, we are confronting the presence of Chinese criminal organizations, as well as further south, we have already seen countries like Guatemala the movement of these illicit supply chains of fentanyl to new countries, and we need to make sure that we are reinforcing border security, port security, and those security relationships to make sure that it doesn't just migrate to another country.

Mr. LAWLER. What—in what way is the INL working with other entities within the U.S. Government, like the DEA, on this particular issue, and how can they improve upon that to really crack down on this?

Obviously, we have a demand issue in this country that is part of the problem of the deadly flow of fentanyl.

Mr. MARTINEZ-FERNANDEZ. Yes. So I think there is some important cooperation with other agencies, particularly the Department of Homeland Security, on the issue of border security within the region and ensuring that regional partners can have those capacities to ensure that those flows don't move through their country without their ability to intercept them.

And on the U.S. side and the side that you referred to, I think there—as I understand it, there is some conversations happening here in Congress about potential changes as far as consequences, judicial consequences in the United States where—that are going to align, I think, the reality of the threats and the deadliness of this drug with the consequences that people face.

Ms. SALAZAR. Thank you, Representative Lawler.

Now I give the word to Representative Stanton of the State of Arizona. You have five—been recognized for 5 minutes.

Mr. STANTON. Thank you very much, Madam Chair.

The fentanyl crisis is especially acute in my home State of Arizona where thousands of Arizonans die from opioid overdose every single year. I know my colleagues and I across the aisle agree, we need to do more to stop the flow of fentanyl and other deadly narcotics into the United States of America.

That is why I am at a loss to understand why the Trump administration has moved to cut funding for the State Department's Bureau of International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs' work in Mexico. Drastic cuts. INL works across law enforcement agencies, intergovernmental agencies, and with the courts in our partner countries to disrupt the illicit drug trafficking and bring criminals to justice.

Under previous administrations and with funding approved in a bipartisan manner, Mexico has been the third largest recipient of INL funds. INL supports more than a hundred projects working to combat fentanyl trafficking and transnational crime by providing services, training, and much-needed equipment.

One project that has benefited from the INL has deployed cargo scanners and drug testing equipment to Mexico's Port of Manzanillo, critical technology to detect and interdict precursor chemicals from the People's Republic of China.

Another INL project supported a recent operation in Tucson, Arizona, that led to the arrests of drug trafficking leader and six other operatives, a good return on taxpayer investment.

Since the Trump administration's freeze on foreign aid, only 15 percent of INL's programs in Mexico have received waivers to resume their work, and many of those have not yet received payment. As former Ambassador marine helicopter pilot John Feeley phrased it recently, quote, "They shot the golden goose right in the leg," unquote.

Make no mistake about it, the Trump administration is hamstringing our response to fentanyl in the region, and while the—while using this crisis as a justification to raise taxes on working families through the misguided across-the-board tariffs on Mexico.

Mr. Isacson, how does this massive cut to INL program hamper our ability to stem the flow of fentanyl into the United States?

Mr. ISACSON. It definitely deals a blow to our efforts against fentanyl. This is the hardest drug challenge we have ever faced. All pure fentanyl that is consumed in the United States in a year can fit in the beds of two or three pickup trucks spread out across a 2,000-mile border, unfortunately, about two-thirds of it coming right to your State right now.

In order to fight this, it is not just a matter of scanners at the border. You need cooperation from Mexico on everything you named, investigators, prosecutors, ports, intelligence, all capital letters, and you cut that off in 90 days and then maybe restart it? You have to restart everything all over again. It is incredibly disruptive.

Mr. STANTON. I appreciate that. Now, I have—in my time in public life both here in Congress and formerly as mayor of Phoenix, Arizona, I have been a friend to Mexico, making the case that we need to have a stronger economic unit between United States, Mexico, Canada, and that is how we are going to win this economic battle with China.

As a result, I have been a critic of the recent judicial reforms in Mexico, which I think is a step backward in terms of promoting U.S. investment in Mexico. INL has helped to train Mexican institutions to build and present strong legal cases against organized crime. Mexico's forensic labs and prisons are accredited to reach higher standards for forensic testing due to INL support. U.S. officials help to train police investigators in Mexico City, reducing violent crime in Mexico City by 58 percent, in partnership with now President Sheinbaum. And INL's support helped Mexico law schools update their curriculums to include Mexico's criminal law reform.

These offices that train police and prosecutors and relied on INL funds are now cut drastically by the dismantling of foreign assistance.

So another question for Mr. Isacson. You hosted a podcast last October about Mexico's constitutional reforms where you open by

saying, quote, “There promise to be serious setbacks in the struggle to hold powerful people and institutions accountable for corruption.”

How do Mexico’s constitutional changes, including reorganization of National Guard and judicial reforms concern you? Maybe you could go on a little bit—for those who haven’t listened to your podcast, go on a little bit more about the threat of the constitutional reforms.

Mr. ISACSON. Sure. And I hope you call in my colleague who runs our Mexico program, Stephanie Brewer, who really knows this stuff.

But Mexico, they just changed their judiciary so that judges are now popularly elected, like people are going to come and vote for a long list of judges. A justice system, especially when they are working on these very complicated, very dangerous cases against these networks of corruption and powerful people who are ready to kill them need to be free of political pressures and need to be—need to be autonomous. And this just dealt a strong blow to that.

As well, substituting police and detectives and people who are in the community with National Guard troops who rotate in and out, that also makes it harder to actually—you can find crimes when they are happening, but you can’t really get to the root of who is behind them.

Mr. STANTON. Thank you very much. Madam chair, I yield back.

Ms. SALAZAR. Thank you. I now recognize Representative Shreve of the State of Arizona.

Mr. SHREVE. Representative Shreve, Madam Chairwoman, is from the State of Indiana and is happy to be here.

Ms. SALAZAR. State of Indiana. I am sorry. Indiana is one of—

Mr. SHREVE. Madam Chair, we agree. I thank the witnesses for being here.

I have a question that, in fairness, I will address to Ms. Kenney because I wasn’t in the room to hear the testimony from our other witnesses, but I appreciate all of you sharing time and expertise with us.

Of course, INL defines its core mission as keeping America safe by countering crime, illegal drugs, and instability abroad. We recognize America is vulnerable to external threats, certainly including narcotics. We recognize that on both sides of the aisle.

In my view, the Trump administration is demonstrably making headway in securing our border and curbing some of the trafficking that was making its way up I-65 and across I-70 in Indiana, particularly on the fentanyl trafficking, we are seeing headway palpably within the district that I represent.

The most pressing drug-related threats in my part of the country would stem from the trafficking efforts of the Sinaloa cartel and the Jalisco cartel. These organizations, I am informed in part by some of the county sheriffs that I represent, dominate the wholesale supply of illicit opioids, particularly fentanyl and heroin in through my district.

The crisis is personal to me. I have friends and constituents who have lost loved ones to fentanyl poisoning, and this must continue to be a part—bipartisan priority. And Mr. Stanton had to step out, but I do think this is a bipartisan priority.

Since 2008, INL has overseen some 3 billion in funding for security counternarcotics and Rule of Law programs in Mexico. And, Mr. Isacson, you talked about the abrupt curtailing of some of that.

There were a few GAO reports of late highlighting gaps in INL's metrics in monitoring, raising concerns about the effectiveness of these programs. Certainly, the administration is attuned to those.

The GAO report concluded, without fully addressing the key elements for assessing progress, the U.S. Government cannot be assured that it is achieving its security goals in Mexico and that its investments at over 3 billion since 2008 are being spent effectively.

So I will direct my question to the witness that I heard from in her testimony, though invite anyone else that may have expertise to respond. Ms. Kenney, what lessons should INL pull from, take away from the GAO evaluation of its programs in Mexico that can be used to inform our future initiatives, our future investment in this cause?

Ms. KENNEY. Thank you for this question. We reviewed the effectiveness, the results of the Merida Initiative and the Bicentennial Framework. We did our work sort of at a time period that straddled both of these strategies. And we looked to see what were the results of the \$3 billion plus investment that the U.S. had made in Mexico.

What we found is that there were key elements of INL's performance management approach, if you will, that limited our ability to really evaluate its effectiveness. So in these strategies, both Merida and the Framework, the Bicentennial Framework, we found that they had established those top-level goals and objectives and that they had a number of individual projects and activities that address things like counternarcotics flows, fentanyl flows, and they are tracking data on the implementation of all of these activities.

They had not identified which of these activities were critical, which were the ones that were really critical to being able to assess the effectiveness of these top-line goals. They just hadn't identified the indicators and then monitored to align them to be able to say this suite of activities is going to demonstrate our progress in achieving this goal.

When we talked to the State Department about what were the challenges in being able to complete this—because this went back to the Merida Initiative which started in 2008—they said that they—that the U.S. Government was working with the Mexican government to come up with some shared set of indicators. These strategies are designed to be sort of shared approaches, both for the U.S. and Mexican government to be able to address these shared issues, shared challenges.

And that there were some challenges in being able to develop a common set of indicators. And some of the complicating factors were at the time, you know, new administrations both in Mexico and the United States. However, we would point out that, given the level of investment and given the continuity of these challenges, it is really important that the State Department figure out what these indicators are, figure out what these suite of activities should be to be able to support those top-line goals and be able to measure and share the effectiveness of those efforts going forward.

So that is really our recommendation. Our recommendation should be identified as a priority recommendation for the State Department. Of all of the recommendations that we make, we believe this is one of the most critical ones to be able to really make progress on the individual activities and efforts to be able to address this critical issue between U.S. and Mexico.

Mr. SHREVE. Ms. Kenney, I appreciate it very much. My time has expired. Madam Chair, I yield back.

Ms. SALAZAR. Thank you, Representative Shreve, of the State of Indiana. Appreciate your time with us.

Now I am going to recognize Representative Jackson of the State of Illinois for 5 minutes.

Mr. JACKSON. Thank you, Representative Salazar. Thank you, Ranking Member.

Colombia is a regional leader in coordinating the multinational operation Campaign Orion, a Naval campaign focused on dismantling the transnational network of drug trafficking and related crimes.

During the 13th Edition of the Orion Naval Campaign last year, operations in which 125 institutions and 62 countries from Africa, the Americas, Asia, Europe, and for the first time Oceania-participating forces seized more than 400 tons of drugs thanks to the exchange of intelligence and the culmination of capabilities to counter the illicit trafficking of drugs and other illegal activities linked to narcotrafficking.

I must say that was a very diverse network. It had a high level of intelligence being interchanged, and they had shared interests. They had equity amongst all participants. DEI does work. I don't know where we get off on this tangent that makes no sense to me on diversity is bad. Diversity and equity is in quite a few constitutions around the world. We are going through a temporary period of some insanity to act as if E Pluribus Unum, out of many we are one, in the Americas.

I would like to let it be for the record that two-thirds of our hemisphere and population is not in the United States, and we are one contiguous land mass.

The operations reach record figures in narcotics seized, reducing the supply worldwide and dealing significant blows to the finances of multicrime organizations, preventing them from receiving more than \$18.7 billion, according to the Colombian military forces. Authorities seized a total of 402 tons of solid chemical precursors and 1.6 million liters of liquid chemical precursors and destroyed 302 illegal infrastructures used for the extraction and processing of drugs.

The Colombian navy reported 112 boats seized and 211 vehicles and on and on. Since this program started about 7 years ago, with only narco trafficking the Orion 12 have included other crimes that are present in the maritime land domain as well, such as arms and migrant smuggling, trafficking, money laundering and the like.

The 13 addition of the Orion Naval Campaigns have consolidated it as the most important and influential international cooperation strategy in the global fight against narco trafficking. And it has also managed to transcend in time thanks to innovation and rapid

adaptation to respond to this highly complex and changing phenomenon.

Once again I want to thank each of you for coming. And this question will go to you, Mr. Isacson. Thank you for your outstanding service as well. Was is the impact of aid cuts in this program such as Orion Naval Campaigns.

Mr. ISACSON. Well, the main impact has been that the Colombian national police and it is part of the effort to interdict cocaine has had some real disruptions, even many of their Black Hawk helicopters were grounded for a while because they didn't have money for maintenance or fuel. Trainings have been disrupted and the intelligence that you need in order to maintain this level of interdictions has been disrupted.

I don't know for how long because I just don't have the information for how long it has been cutoff and whether decisions have been made to give waivers. And if so, is that going to be mean a few blank months this year where the level of interdiction dips which has been at record levels or whether they are going to be able to recover that. But we will find out soon.

Mr. JACKSON. Do you think that the money that might have been saved theoretically will come back to be a penny saved and a dollar foolish?

Mr. ISACSON. I think so, because it's just not good government practice to stop all of your programs for 90 days and then to selectively restart them. Your partners just don't work like that. And it may cost them months and months, if not a couple of years to really recover from that, even if they do get to keep the level of funding they had before.

Mr. JACKSON. Well, thanks so much.

Are you saying the whiplash, the backlash, the frenetic, the hectic pace, the capitulation, this erratic behavior is bad for a long-term goal of reducing the drug trafficking in our region?

Mr. ISACSON. It was definitely good for the organized crime groups who wanted to evade the police and the navy and others in Colombia.

Mr. JACKSON. I yield back. I thank you so much.

Ms. SALAZAR. Thank you, Representative Jackson.

I now am going to recognize Representative Titus of the State of Nevada for 5 minutes.

Ms. TITUS. Thank you madam chairman, ranking member.

Mr. Isacson, will you go over this for me just again very simply, what was the justification given by President Trump for levying tariffs against Mexico.

Mr. ISACSON. The main justification was that Mexico wasn't cooperating enough in stopping Fentanyl coming into the United States.

Ms. TITUS. And now the President has threatened a trade war with Mexico, has that compelled greater cooperation from their authorities on this issue?

Mr. ISACSON. I guess that Mexico thinks they can stop the tariffs then they will come up with some seizures and they will bomb some labs and things like that, but it won't help with things like complex investigations and intelligence, no.

Ms. TITUS. So it really hasn't moved—

Mr. ISACSON. No, if the tariffs happened, then what incentive does Mexico have once their economy is cratering to keep cooperating.

Ms. TITUS. That is part of the problem. Will they happen, will they not, from what products, how much, what percent, that sort of thing.

Will, cuts to it the INL programs in Mexico help or hurt our ability to stem the flow of Fentanyl into the country.

Mr. ISACSON. Yes, we have seen this before, you can't just have better scanners at the border and hope—or bomb a few labs. It costs \$60,000 to start a new Fentanyl lab. You need a lot of things that INL does, which is building intelligence, building core security programs, canine, courts. All this other stuff so that you can stop the whole network that is doing this rather than just trying to stop it at a scanner on the border. And if you disrupt INL programs, you are disrupting that very, very, very important ingredient in the fight.

Ms. TITUS. So it is working counter to what you claim is the purpose of tariffs and other dealings with Mexico.

Mr. ISACSON. Yes, threatening your partners, really taking away their incentive to cooperate, while freezing and restarting and halting and putting waivers and confusing the programs that you are running is obviously not going to be helpful. It is going to be helpful maybe to the people producing Fentanyl.

Ms. TITUS. So in the meantime, in addition to the tariffs, can you talk about the effect of the Trump administration's prioritizing arbitrary mass deportations over things like root causes of terrorism, transnational crime, drug trafficking, human trafficking, weapons trafficking, et cetera?

Mr. ISACSON. The Trump administration is trying to do mass deportation with the existing people they have, right? Like, 5,500 ICE enforcement removal officers, which means where do they get the manpower? They are taking it from DEA, they are taking it from DOJ, everything, Bureau of Prisons. His, Homeland Security Investigations, these are the agencies that are supposed to be working on these drugs cases, as well as cases everything from child pornography to human trafficking. They are all be devoted to rounding up migrants now, often even migrants without criminal records. And it is a really, really disastrous diversion of our law enforcement resources.

Ms. TITUS. So could you sum that up by saying that it has made us less safe not more safe?

Mr. ISACSON. Put it this way, if you are a Fentanyl trafficker or a child pornographer or something like that, you are feeling less pressure from the Federal law enforcement since January 20th because of this diversion of resources.

Ms. TITUS. Because you know they are focused somewhere else and you can get away—

Mr. ISACSON. Yes, they are focusing on migrants. And if you are not in the migrant smuggling business, you have less to worry about.

Ms. TITUS. So if we are going to impose tariffs on Mexico, that is going to be attacks on families in my district. People in Nevada are going it pay more out-of-pocket. If you don't have money in

your pocket, you can't go on holiday, people won't be coming to Las Vegas for a holiday. Certainly if you are from Canada or Mexico you are not going to be as likely to come as a tourist and that is our main source of tourism. And at the same time, what we are doing is undercutting our response to the flow of Fentanyl. Does that pretty much summarize the problem?

Mr. ISACSON. There is—the arguments against tariffs are pretty strong economically here at home. But also yes, I mean, if you are a Mexican government official who even one who really believes in this fight, what is your incentive to cooperate if you're being punished without even any clear benchmarks or guidelines about how to stop the punishment. And the same goes for Fentanyl as well as working against migrant smuggling through Mexico too. What is going to push you to work harder to do the Americans a favor and work harder and together on this if you already have a 25 percent tariff on all of your goods.

Ms. TITUS. Well, thank you. I yield back.

Ms. SALAZAR. Thank you, Representative Titus.

Now we have—we are going to start a second round of questioning, not too long. And I am going to recognize myself for 5 minutes.

We all agree that we want to revamp and make INL a better agency, we all agree with that. And I was—just wanted to tell my respected ranking member that what the Trump administration is doing is trying to cut waste on important programs like INL because INL funded hip-hop classes in Guatemala. I go back to things that they should not be doing. We all agree that we have to cooperate with Mexico and that we have to help to help the Guatemalan police force and El Salvador. And by the way, one of the things I also wanted to—and I want to talk to three of you, I am not going to just hone in on Mr. Isacson. We decertified El Salvador, INL decertified El Salvador as a partner which led to the cuts in funds. These are the things I don't understand why, because you think Bukele may not be ideologically aligned with the State Department. Why are you going to do that? And the same thing with Guatemala. I am just stating what I think is commonsense.

Right now, in Latin America projects that prove to be effective are back online. For instance, targeting systems in Mexico and Peru that provide intelligence on foreign passengers and cargo. Dogs in Costa Rica.

So my question to Mrs. Kenney. Since you are an impartial force in this hearing, tell me in very simple terms for those people who are at home that do not want to spend taxpayers' money on things that are futile like hip-hop classes in Guatemala in which way that \$2 billion that we give INL every year where do you think should be spent? Give it to me in 30 seconds like a good television sound bite so people back at home will say, OK, INL should be back on track. Tell me.

Ms. KENNEY. So based on our review of the INL programs what we have found is that there are some consistent patterns in terms of implementation. GAO would not identify the policy choices that INL should make but we are happy to talk to you about the effectiveness of the implementation. And what we have found consistently is that there are opportunities to improve performance man-

agement, ensuring that the activities that you are funding are meeting your strategic goals. We saw it in Mexico, we saw it in firearms trafficking, we saw it in efforts in the Caribbean, making sure that the specific activities that you are funding are linking up and actually helping you achieve your goal.

Ms. SALAZAR. Why do you think that happens? So what you are telling me basically is that I am going to do this, but I am not sure if it is being effective or not, but I am going to put the money behind it anyway. Is that what you are telling me? So why do you think that happened? And how can it be changed? Why did it happen?

Ms. KENNEY. Well, I think our recommendation is that the State Department figure out how to create that alignment that these activities should be funded to the overall strategic goals.

I think in Mexico what we found, what we heard is that there was some effort to coordinate with the Mexican government which is a good idea. However, we have been funding the Merida Initiative since 2008 and the administrations were going to change so that needed to be done.

I think when we looked at firearms trafficking we found similar programs or similar issues. We found that everyone would tell us of firearm trafficking in the Caribbean and in Central America and Mexico that these were important U.S. goals. But when we asked about where the metrics were, how they were measuring effectiveness, it didn't show up. They didn't have firearms trafficking as one of their performance measures so they weren't able to track it and demonstrate progress. It didn't show up in their strategies. So it is just important that whatever it is you decide your strategy, whatever your goal is you need to be sure that your activities are aligned with it and that you are able to track and line those up to be sure that you are achieving the goals that you want to achieve.

Ms. SALAZAR. So I am sure the State Department is listening to you.

Now let me ask you, lets go to Mexico, maybe we can talk to Mr. Fernandez or Mr. Isacson. Mexico is a very important ally. It is our next door neighbor. We have got to work with them because no one is going to move, right? So we are going to stay where we are and so are they.

I remember that under AMLO, Mexico, President Trump had a very good relationship with President AMLO who had a completely different ideology than President Trump and that AMLO sent 37,000 troops to the southern borders with Guatemala. That worked very well. All of a sudden, they cooperated. So why did that stop? And what incentives are we giving now Sheinbaum who comes from that same Morena party. I hear that relationships are good between both governments. So what can they really do and in which way we could help them do it? And do they have the political willingness to receive money from the United States? We know that it is like we are neighbors but we are not necessarily love each other, but we have got to live with each other, correct? Am I right in my assessment? Let me start with you, Mr. Fernandez. What can we do?

Mr. MARTINEZ-FERNANDEZ. I think it is important to your question about whether they will receive that assistance. I think it goes to the core of the issue.

Ms. SALAZAR. Will they receive the assistance?

Mr. MARTINEZ-FERNANDEZ. They have rejected significant—

Ms. SALAZAR. What with they rejected?

Mr. MARTINEZ-FERNANDEZ. I think because there are issues with corruption, there is issues with nationalism as well. I mean, we tried, I think very clearly under the Biden administration, to not pressure and do—

Ms. SALAZAR. Irrespectful.

Mr. MARTINEZ-FERNANDEZ.—positive engagement as was alluded to here. It obviously didn't result in anything substantive as far as countering the Fentanyl threat. It only expanded more greatly and—

Ms. SALAZAR [continuing]. simply what happened during those 4 years once—why so much Fentanyl was able to come through? What did the Mexican government should have done that didn't do? And what can they do now under Sheinbaum, simple?

Mr. MARTINEZ-FERNANDEZ. What happened over the past 4 years is we stopped pressuring them.

Ms. SALAZAR. We stopped pressuring them?

Mr. MARTINEZ-FERNANDEZ. Yes.

Ms. SALAZAR. What pressures we should have implemented.

Mr. MARTINEZ-FERNANDEZ. Economic pressure I think is certainly the most potent that we have in the bilateral relationship with trade and the USMCA.

Ms. SALAZAR. Stop right there. You see Mr. Isacson, so I agree that tariffs are bad for our constituents, I get it. But then what other tool do we have as a country to send the message to our neighbors that we need help because we don't want any more American kids dying.

Mr. ISACSON. Prosecutorial cooperation. From 2023 to 2024 there was a 22 percent decrease in Fentanyl seizures at the border. So far this year it is down another 23 percent. Less seems to be produced in Mexico, I think because of better cooperation. This may be premature but no one is declaring victory but there has actually been progress in the last 2 years.

Ms. SALAZAR. Very little, very little progress. We had 100,000 kids dying every year.

Mr. ISACSON. And deaths, thank goodness, are down about 30 percent.

Ms. SALAZAR. And the concoction of the chemicals are put together in Mexico.

Mr. ISACSON. Yes, I agree.

Ms. SALAZAR. Right? And we just passed legislation that the Congress voted for where we are giving money so we can destroy those precursors before they get composed into a little pill and our kids die. So I am saying, what I am trying—political do we have political lenience as Sheinbaum, does she have political willingness to really work with us. We want to work with her.

Mr. ISACSON. I think Sheinbaum does. I would be worried at about people at the State level in Mexico. I would be worried about corrupt military and police people.

Ms. SALAZAR. She had her own swamp.

Mr. ISACSON. Yes, she does have a swamp that she has to clean up, as does their judicial system. The INL can help.

Ms. SALAZAR. Thank you. All right. I yield back.

Now I recognize Ranking Member Castro from the wonderful State of Texas for 5 minutes.

Mr. CASTRO. With respect to effective and serious and thoughtful cutting of waste, fraud, and abuse in government, I don't think it is going to be carried out by this DOGE committee that is being lead by folks who have absolutely no expertise in this area, by 22-year olds and 20-year olds with a nickname of Big Balls. They are not going to accomplish what we are trying to accomplish here. They have no background in any of this. Hardly any life experience, quite honestly. And more than that, they are keeping all of their work secretive.

In fact, Elon Musk, as I recall, threatened the press that he would file suit or said that it was illegal if they just identified who these people were, that are making these massive decisions about how our government operates. And that is not fair to the American people. It is not fair to American taxpayers to have a secret group in charge of what is going on in government that won't show its face at the United States Capitol.

Even more than that, a majority party in Congress that sent even asking them to show up, isn't even demanding that they show up and account for the work that they are doing. That is where we are right now. I hope that everybody in the full committee on this dais when we have our full committee meetings will join me and others in asking Elon Musk and those responsible for cuts to INL, cuts at the State Department, USAID to come here and present to us their work.

We can't even get a clear answer of what percent of INL, for example, is being cut. And that applies to other agencies and bureaus as well. So why doesn't this full committee ask Elon Musk to come and sit in these chairs as our three witnesses have today and explain the cuts that have been made and why they have been made?

The one person we had come as I recall Pete Marocco, whose job title has now changed, he came and I don't know who insisted, I don't know if the committee insisted or he and his people insisted that it not be a public hearing, that it be a closed door private briefing and instead of having 5 minutes to ask questions we had 2 or 3 minutes to ask questions. Just bizarre.

This is the U.S. Government and we are running our country right now or the country is being run like these countries that we have been critiquing for decades and decades, by people who are doing secretive things, not transparent. And so look, I agree that that is why you have a GAO, that is why you have inspectors general. Yes, can we do more than that? Yes, I think that we could do more than that. I think we should do more than that. And we do need to make adjustments because things do get stale and, you know, need to change and money.

Maria Elvira, I was your Democratic colead on that Fentanyl bill on precursors. I thought that was a good piece of legislation.

Remember, I have been presented now I think at least twice we have been told in this committee and then in my other committee

in unclassified information that, you know, 70 to 90 percent of the precursors or the original source material for Fentanyl comes to the United States first and then goes over to Mexico and it ends up coming back.

So these are serious problems, but they demand serious approaches and they demand people with expertise who actually know what they are doing, you know, really nothing against people in their early twenties, I wish I was still in my early twenties. But the people who have been put in charge of overseeing this have absolutely no background or no expertise to do it.

With that, I yield back, chairman.

Ms. SALAZAR. Thank you, ranking member. I thank the witnesses for their valuable testimony and the members for their questions. The members of the subcommittee may have some additional questions for the witnesses. We will ask you to respond to these in writing.

Pursuant to committee rules, all members may have 5 days to submit statements, questions and other materials for the record subject to the length limitations.

Without objection, this committee stands adjourned. Once again thank you for your participation.

[Whereupon, at 12:41 p.m., the subcommittee was adjourned.]

APPENDIX

MATERIAL SUBMITTED FOR THE HEARING RECORD



Chairman Brian Mast

**COMMITTEE ON FOREIGN AFFAIRS
SUBCOMMITTEE HEARING NOTICE**
U.S. HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES
WASHINGTON, DC 20515-6128

**Subcommittee on the Western Hemisphere
Maria Salazar (R-FL), Chairwoman**

March 25, 2025

Revised

TO: MEMBERS OF THE COMMITTEE ON FOREIGN AFFAIRS

You are respectfully requested to attend an OPEN hearing of the Committee on Foreign Affairs to be held by the Subcommittee on the Western Hemisphere at 11:00 a.m. in Room 2172 of the Rayburn House Office Building. The hearing is available by live webcast on the Committee website at <https://foreignaffairs.house.gov/>.

DATE: ~~Wednesday, March 26, 2025~~
Thursday, March 27, 2025

TIME: ~~2:00 p.m.~~
~~9:30 a.m.~~
11:00 a.m.

LOCATION: ~~2200 RHOB~~
2172 RHOB

SUBJECT: INL Should Fight Crime, Not Fight
Conservatives

WITNESSES: Ms. Chelsa Kenney
Director
International Affairs and Trade
U.S. Government Accountability Office

* Mr. Andrés Martínez-Fernández
Senior Policy Analyst, Latin America
Allison Center for National Security
The Heritage Foundation

* ~~Mr. Rodrigo Arenas~~
~~Editor in Chief~~
~~Republica.com~~

*

Mr. Adam B. Isacson
Director for Defense Oversight
Washington Office on Latin America

*NOTE: Witnesses added/changed.

**NOTE: Witnesses may be added.

By Direction of the Chair

The Committee on Foreign Affairs seeks to make its facilities accessible to persons with disabilities. If you are in need of special accommodations, please call 202-226-8467 at least four business days in advance of the event, whenever practicable. Questions with regard to special accommodations in general (including availability of Committee materials in alternative formats and assistive listening devices) may be directed to the Committee.

COMMITTEE ON FOREIGN AFFAIRS
MINUTES OF FULL COMMITTEE HEARING

Day Thursday Date March 27, 2025 Room 2172 RHOB

Starting Time 11:21 Ending Time 12:41

Recesses ☐ (____ to ____) (____ to ____) (____ to ____) (____ to ____) (____ to ____) (____ to ____)

Presiding Member(s)

Chairwoman Salazar

Check all of the following that apply:

Open Session ☒

Executive (closed) Session ☐

Televised ☒

Electronically Recorded (taped) ☒

Stenographic Record ☒

TITLE OF HEARING:

INL Should Fight Crime, Not Fight Conservatives

COMMITTEE MEMBERS PRESENT:

Attached

NON-COMMITTEE MEMBERS PRESENT:

N/A

HEARING WITNESSES: Same as meeting notice attached? Yes ☒ No ☐

(If "no", please list below and include title, agency, department, or organization.)

STATEMENTS FOR THE RECORD: *(List any statements submitted for the record.)*

N/A

TIME SCHEDULED TO RECONVENE _____

or

TIME ADJOURNED 12:41

Meg Wagner
Full Committee Hearing Coordinator

Meeting on: INL Should Fight Crime, Not Conservatives
Date: March 27, 2025

[illegible]

**Questions for the Record Submitted to
Ms. Chelsa Kenney
Representative Dina Titus
House Foreign Affairs Western Hemisphere Subcommittee
March 27, 2025**

Question 1:

INL does important counter-narcotic work in the hemisphere, but it also plays a vital role to stem the trafficking of weapons around the world. Unfortunately, as with most of our international engagement under the Trump Administration, various activities under INL's jurisdiction have been halted. Programs that counter international illicit weapons trafficking have either been paused or received a waiver, but funds for the programs still have not been released. Millions of trafficked small arms and light weapons are currently in circulation that fuel violence and instability and prop up narcotics trafficking operations. Can you please speak to the importance of INL programs that support international law enforcement abilities to track, trace, and interdict illicit weapons, and the opportunity for INL to play a greater role in this space, such as in the Northern Triangle and the Horn of Africa?