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SUBJECT: CONGRESSIONAL STAFFERS DESCEND ON MEXICO TO  
DISCUSS MERIDA INITIATIVE

Classified By: Deputy Political Counselor James P. Merz.  
Reason: 1.4 (b),(d).

1. (U) Summary. Congressional staffers from the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, the House Foreign Affairs Committee, and the House Appropriation Committee visited Mexico the week of March 24 to discuss the Merida Initiative with government officials and representatives of civil society. They also got the opportunity to conduct a number of site visits, including the Santa Lucia air base, PGR\'s Forensics Lab and customs/immigration operations at the airport exposing them to current GOM efforts to go after drug trafficking organizations and providing them with greater insight about how the Merida Initiative could expand capabilities. Mexican officials drew attention to the high stakes in their fight against organized crime and the importance they attached to deeper cooperation with the U.S. in facing

down this shared challenge. They called for greater U.S. efforts to stem the flow of weapons into Mexico from the U.S. Confronted with the prospect that the U.S. Congress could significantly cut back on certain elements of the Merida Initiative, they worried this would set back cooperative efforts. Human rights NGOs and security experts conveyed concerns about the Merida Initiative\'s \\'disproportionate\' provision of assistance to law enforcement elements on the federal level, arguing more needed to be done with local police officials and making the case for greater focus on judicial reform and economic development assistance. All recognized however that greater U.S.-Mexico cooperation in combating the drug trade was imperative. End Summary.

2. (U) Senate Foreign Relations Committee (SFRC) staffers Mark Lopes and Paul Rosen were in Mexico 3/24-3/27 coinciding for many of their meetings with House Foreign Affairs (HFAC) staffers Eric Jacobstein and Robyn Wapner in Mexico 3/24-3/26. House Appropriations Committee on Foreign Operations (HACFO) staffers Christine Kojac and Anne Marie Chotvacs visited Mexico 3/26-29.

Core Merida Initiative Team  
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3. (U) SFRC and HFAC staffers met with members of Mexico\'s \\'Core Merida Initiative (MI) Team\' including representatives from the Foreign Ministry (SRE), the President\'s Office, and the Center for National Security Information (CISEN). Enrique Rojo, SRE\'s Senior Advisor to the Under Secretary for North America, described MI as a great opportunity for the U.S. and Mexico to further cooperation by attacking the problems facing us all at once. MI constitutes a relatively small portion of what the GOM already is spending. The GOM\'s 2008 budget will dedicate approximately \$3 billion to security spending -- about 25% over last year (Note: Rojo\'s office has

since provided a new projection showing that the GoM will spend close to \$4 billion in 2008 fighting organized crime, which would constitute a 50% increase over 2007. End Note.)

MI will combat consumption and corruption and enhance intelligence contributing to more effective interdiction efforts. He spoke specifically to the benefits of non-intrusive inspection methods for customs with new

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technology funded by MI, helping accelerate customs' transformation from a tariff based entity to a fortified investigative body. When Rosen/Lopes asked how the GOM would react if MI funding were cut in the first year by \$200M with the hard side taking a particular hit, Rojo explained inasmuch as MI was a complementary, interconnected package, any cut of that degree would damage the program's effectiveness. Rojo urged the U.S. to do more to stem the flow of arms into Mexico.

4. (U) In the HACFO staffers' meeting with the GoM MI Team, Kojac painted a fairly grim picture of the prospects for the MI. Not only would it be competing against other interests in a tough budget environment, but there were concerns in Congress about a perceived over-emphasis on hardware supports -- helicopters in particular, asking if Mexico could live with fewer. Congress would likely scale down the request and shift the program emphasis in some fashion. Sigrid Arzt, the Director of the President's National Security Council described MI as the product of a holistic approach that reflected the priorities of a variety of security elements and was designed to fit well with what each was already undertaking. Each piece was important to the whole. On the question of helicopters, GOM participants stressed the extra lift capability and mobility were key to the government's effort to seize the initiative from the cartels. Given Mexico's size and varied terrain, as well as the fortified presence of narco-traffickers in outlying areas, speed and mobility were

essential to operational success. SRE's Rojo pointed out that additional helicopters for SSP were part of MI's second installment for FY 09 -- and would support the GOM's move to shift operations away from the military to civilian law enforcement. GOM participants took exception to the characterization of the Mexican military as a chronic rights abuser. SEDENA had recently constituted a Directorate General for Human Rights that would investigate abuse allegations in conjunction with the National Human Rights Commission (CNDH). It would also be charged with engaging the NGO community and with training soldiers.

The Attorney General's Office  
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5. (U) In their meeting with representatives from the Attorney General's (PGR) Office, HFAC staffers asked about human rights and SFRC staffers focused on whether MI funds would trickle down to the state and local levels. PGR said that it viewed MI assistance as complementing GOM efforts to reform the judicial system. Reform at the federal level of the police was much farther along than at the state and local level and as such fewer abuses occurred at that level compared to the state and local level. Despite problems at the state and local level, however, many states are also making improvements with innovative programs and are seeking federal assistance.

6. In his meeting with HACFO staffers, Attorney General Medina Mora described MI funds as serving the function of a catalyst and as such would allow the GOM to tackle more rapidly its counter drug priorities. MI was important on a political level because it demonstrated U.S. readiness to assume shared responsibility. On that same score Medina Mora urged the U.S. to do more to stop the flow of weapons into Mexico as they were falling into the hands of traffickers who use them to kill Mexican

law enforcement officials.

The GOM had every intention of transferring authority for fighting the war on drugs to the police but for the time being the military was the only institution prepared to effectively assume this role. When asked about the potential political fallout if the U.S. cutback on MI assistance, Medina Mora insisted the GOM would go forward in fighting trafficking organizations as a priority but also solemnly stated that such a decision would prompt Mexico to conclude that the U.S. was not committed to assuming shared responsibility.

#### Human Rights NGOs

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7. (U) Human rights NGO representatives used their meeting with HFAC and SFRC staffers to signal appreciation for deeper U.S-Mexico cooperation in fighting organized crime and reluctant support for the Merida Initiative. At the same time, a number of the groups conveyed concern about the military\'s expanded role in law enforcement and argued for dedicating more funds to police reform efforts, particularly on the local level. In their meeting with HACFO staffers, representatives from Amnesty International and Mexican NGO Pro Derecho presented a proposal for the creation of an entity for more effectively monitoring security force compliance with human rights norms particularly in connection to MI funding. They acknowledged greater transparency about abuses and greater access to public officials but complained that GOM officials rarely addressed their concerns effectively. They hoped creation of a monitoring mechanism made up of independent representatives would hold the GOM more accountable for abuses. AI and Pro Derecho representatives proved unable, however, to address HACFO staffer Kojac\'s questions about exactly how they envisioned this entity working.

#### Security Analysts

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8. (U) Each delegation participated in separate meetings

with security analysts.

-- Jorge Chabat, a researcher with the Center for Investigation and Economic Education (CIDE), told SFRC staffer Lopes that MI would not solve the drug problem but that it at least offered the potential to break up the major cartels into smaller ones. On a broader level, MI would foster deeper U.S.-Mexican cooperation.

-- In their meeting with HFAC staffers, ITAM professor Jeff Weldon and INSYDE (Institute for Security and Democracy) representative Luis Villalobos Garcia agreed Calderon's efforts to combat organized crime were unprecedented for their scope and intensity. His commitment represented an opportunity to deepen cooperation. While Villalobos supported MI he was concerned that it did not address much of the economic basis for the drug problem. He also thought more needed to be done to address corruption within the police forces. Weldon appreciated the U.S. Congress' concern about writing a blank check to the GOM but cautioned against a strict certification process that Mexicans would find offensive. Weldon rejected the suggestion that the Mexican military was suspect of widespread abuses. On the contrary, he remarked it was one of the more respected Mexican institutions and had not been implicated in many abuses. Both believed Calderon had taken up the fight against drugs for "political" reasons. Villalobos cynically posited it was easier for Calderon to be tough on drugs than to tackle poverty. Weldon remarked

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Calderon was responding to the importance citizens attached to security and concern about corruption. He believed Calderon's priority was gaining greater cooperation out of the U.S. on the question of fighting arms trafficking than MI assistance itself. While Calderon continued to poll high, the polls had also begun to demonstrate less confidence on the efficacy of his efforts on the drug front given high levels of violence particularly in the North.

-- Luis Astorga of UNAM and Julian Gudino of INSYDE stressed with HACFO staffers that the drug trade was driven by U.S. demand. The GOM had scored some noteworthy successes over the last year and MI might contribute to more. However, as long as demand in the U.S. remained high, criminal elements in Mexico and elsewhere would continue to seek to make their fortunes trafficking drugs into the U.S. Both worried not enough attention was given to ridding Mexican institutions of corruption particularly at the state and local level of the police. They similarly argued for devoting more funding to economic development.

Senator Adriana Gonzalez Meets with SFRC Staffers  
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9. (C) PAN Senator Gonzalez told SFRC staffers that most members of Congress support MI. She complained, however that the executive branch (run by her own Party) needed to do a better job of explaining the initiative to Congress. She opposed overemphasis on soft side assistance and verification on grounds it would offend Mexican sovereignty.

SFRC Staffers Meet with the Mexican Military  
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10. (C) SFRC staffers signaled the U.S. Congress may fund MI at lower levels, cutting hardware, and queried about priorities. They requested clarification from SEDENA as to the number of aircraft proposed under MI vs. those the GOM planned to acquire on its own and which institutions would receive them. They indicated a desire to see more U.S.-Mexican joint operations. SEMAR indicated that it planned to purchase at least four and as many as seven new aircraft, in addition to the two surveillance aircraft provided by MI. Both SEDENA and SEMAR signaled appreciation for the increased cooperation between the U.S. and Mexico, especially in technical areas, maintaining they believed this would increase with MI. SRE\'s Rojo stressed Mexico\'s willingness to exchange information on operations in a mutual fashion could become even more intense with forward movement on MI.

Secretariat of Public Administration on Corruption

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11. (U) HACFO staffers met with Guillermo Huerta at the Secretariat of Public Administration

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(SFP). Huerta is the SFP official who coordinates the auditing of resources expended on security across all Mexican federal law enforcement and security agencies. He explained that SFP provides the Executive Branch with internal preventative, concurrent and ex-post audits, while a Congressional body associated with the lower house provides external ex-post audits. In this context, the SFP follows the respective body's fulfillment of its Annual Operating Plan, tracking the associated metrics. Finally, it also provided a means for citizens to redress through administrative means a public official's abuse of authority. These mature mechanisms -- established in 1988 -- could provide an alternative means to track GOM usage of MI funding and to process allegations of abuse of power that might

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result in human rights abuses.

HACFO's Staffers Meet with SSP's Garcia Luna

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12. HACFO staffers were received by SSP Secretary Genaro Garcia Luna, who provided a concise outline of the expected evolution of the Mexican police over the next five years. In that period, Garcia Luna said that the federal police would grow significantly, while the role played by the military would diminish. Central control over the state and municipal police would enforce professionalization and break the back of the pervasive corruption. Garcia Luna also committed to meeting with any human rights NGO, noting parenthetically that most problems with human rights abuses existed primarily at the state and municipal levels. He described



efforts to promote greater respect for human rights through more education, including a potential cooperative training initiative with Amnesty International. He took seriously every claim of human rights abuse but complained many organized crime figures were the first to claim falsely of human rights abuses to gain an advantage in criminal proceedings.

#### Site Visits

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13. (C) The Embassy arranged a number of site visits for staffdels demonstrating current GOM efforts to combat organized crime and speaking to what more Mexico could do if MI were funded.

-- PGR Forensics Lab: SFRC and HACFO made separate visits to PGR\'s Mexico City headquarters to learn more about Mexico\'s national forensic lab system. They received presentations on the various types of support PGR has received in the past from both the FBI and ATF, as well as from NAS. They learned that the core of the request under MI would be used to fund the purchase of 12 new Integrated Ballistics Identification System (IBIS) for installation in PGR offices across the country. They also heard that the Mexico City office is moving into a new building in mid-2008, a complex of five buildings purchased by PGR for \$10 million. The lab is already ISO-certified for its processes (ISO 9000/9001) but cannot be certified as an ISO-compliant laboratory (ISO 17025) until it has more space within which to operate. The PGR staff also act as core trainers for the specialists employed by the other forensic labs at the state level.

-- Airport: The same two groups also visited Mexico City\'s airport, separately, to meet with immigration and customs authorities. The National Immigration Institute (INAMI) showed how it used SIOM today to track entering visitors and described how it wanted to extend this system to the southern border (issuing biometric-encoded border crossing cards to Guatemalans working along the border) and across more air and land ports of entry. SFRC staffers asked to have their names run in the SIOM database, and were

somewhat non-plussed when they did not appear in SIOM, even though both said they had visited Mexico on several occasions since the system went live in 2001. The INM port director gave satisfactory explanations about why the records might not have appeared, due to system availability problems and confusion regarding matronyms and patronyms in the early days of SIOM. Customs explained its use of non-intrusive inspection equipment (NIIE) and how it was investing in its most critical input ) its human resources ) to ensure the professionalization of its staff and the breaking of its history of corruption. The visitors were especially impressed with the

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benefits of NAS-provided VACIS non-intrusive inspectional equipment (tens of millions of dollars worth of seized cash and narcotics) versus the relatively low initial installation cost of around \$1 million.

-- Santa Lucia Airbase: SEDENA hosted HACFO staffers at its airbase in Santa Lucia (home to the sole air force squadron that operates Bell 412s and Sikorsky (UH-60) Blackhawks). The status of the squadron was impressive, and it appeared ready to absorb new equipment that would allow the air force to pursue cartel traffickers at night. The group also observed the Embraer radar platform that would be used in conjunction with new equipment to intercept drug traffickers. Finally, the group received a briefing on interception in SEDENA HQ.

-- SSP: SFRC staffers received a demonstration on the technology that SSP has brought to bear on its own (its new Op Center, Plataforma Mexico), as well as initiatives it has undertaken or equipment it has received with Embassy (NAS, IAC, DEA, etc.) support, including its interception model, CLANLAB trucks for dealing with HAZMAT meth labs and the corps of dog/handler teams).

14. (U) Comment: All three groups tended to focus on common themes -- concerns about human

rights abuses, corruption and the need to do more to reform the police at the state and local level. Similarly, all signaled the potential for significant cuts in MI funding particularly in connection to hardware including helicopters. GOM officials did a good job addressing concerns expressed. They discussed the benefit to be derived from MI support on a programmatic level but also stressed the importance Mexico attached to MI on a political level.

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