CSIS | CENTER FOR STRATEGIC & INTERNATIONAL STUDIES | Americas Program

HEMISPHERE FOCUS

Volume XVI, Issue 2 September 9, 2008

A Farewell to Arms: Managing Cross-border Weapons Trafficking

Catherine R. Dooley and Ariadne Medler

On June 30, President George W. Bush signed into law a 2008 supplemental budget bill that included $465 million for a project called the Mérida Initiative: a multiyear billion dollar program aimed at combating the increasingly urgent threat of drug trafficking and related crime. The supplemental allots $400 million for Mexico and an additional $65 million for the countries of Central America, Haiti, and the Dominican Republic, with $450 million for Mexico and $100 million for Central America requested for fiscal year 2009. The money will be used for equipment, training, and intelligence sharing, with the majority of the funds going to civil agencies responsible for law enforcement. President Bush has described the initiative as one of "shared responsibility." More than simply another aid package, Mérida is recognition of the necessity for a multilateral approach to confront the transnational challenges that originate on both sides of the border.

Mexico's drug wars have imposed rising costs in the region, and this new U.S. assistance will supplement the growing efforts made by the Mexican government. President Felipe Calderón has already committed 25,000 troops to more than a dozen Mexican states in an attempt to stem the violence. He has also increased security spending by more than 60 percent this year. Despite these efforts, the problem has continued to escalate. Approximately 4,000 people have died in drug-related violence since President Calderón declared war on the drug cartels after taking office in December 2006. Some 1,400 people have been killed this year alone, an increase of almost 50 percent from the same period last year. In May 2008, Mexico's chief of police was shot nine times as he entered his home, one of the most disturbing murders in a battle that has taken the lives of more than 400 police officers and public officials. The escalating number of deaths due to drug-related violence has made the commitments in Mérida critically important.

Fulfilling Mérida's purpose, however, necessitates looking beyond headline violence elsewhere to the situation on the U.S. side of the border. Supply and demand drive the hemisphere's drug wars in an interchange that intimately involves not only the citizens of Latin America but those of the United States. Illicit trafficking pathways flow both ways across the border. Approximately 90 percent of the cocaine that finds its way into the United States transits through Mexico, and 90 percent of arms recovered in Mexico are traced back to the United States. While drugs move north, guns move south.

Legally purchasing a weapon in Mexico is nearly impossible, and arms traffickers take advantage of this opportunity to fulfill the unmet demand. Gun stores in U.S. border states sell twice as many weapons as those in other regions of the country, and every day approximately 2,000 weapons enter Mexico through the 2,000-mile border shared with the United States. This past May, the U.S. Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, and Firearms arrested three men involved in arms trafficking in Phoenix, Arizona, seizing 1,300 weapons bound for Mexico. Though the law enforcement and governance improvements proposed by the Mérida Initiative may help to stem the tide of weapons flowing in and out of the region, the agreement itself contains no language specific to the issue of arms trafficking.

While Mérida's focus on Mexico is understandable when the country's proximity to the United States is taken into account, drug routes do not end at the border. Central America and the Caribbean are also awash in small arms. This heightens citizen insecurity and challenges governance throughout the region. These countries are pathways for both drug and arms trafficking, and the guns that exist there also entail a "shared responsibility." During the mid-1990s, El Salvador, a country with a population of less than 7 million, was the seventh most important export market for U.S. handguns. Arms remain from the region's bloody civil wars, continuing to threaten countries that have worked to rebuild societies torn apart by violence. Central America has some of the highest homicide rates in the world, and numbers are climbing steadily. Guatemala's murder rate rose dramatically between 2003 and 2006, from a level of 32 per 100,000 to 47 per 100,000. In the United States, the rate is 5.6 per 100,000. According to a recent report from the UN Office on Drugs and Crime, between half and two-thirds of all weapons in Central America are held illegally.

The Mérida Initiative is not the first multilateral response to illicit trafficking and organized crime in the region. The Inter-American Convention against the Illicit Manufacturing of and Trafficking in Firearms, Ammunition, Explosives, and Other Related Materials (CIFTA) entered into force in 1998. Former president Ernesto Zedillo of Mexico praised CIFTA as "the first international legal instrument of its sort," and former President Bill Clinton called gun trafficking "an issue of national security for our governments and a matter of neighborhood security for all of us in the Americas." CIFTA, like Mérida, is based on a foundation of dialogue, exchange, and mutual accountability. The convention has been signed by all of the 34 active OAS members and ratified by 29. However, the United States is one of the few signatories that have failed to ratify the agreement. Originally signed by the United States in 1997, the agreement has been sidelined in the Senate for 10 years. CIFTA calls for intergovernmental cooperation in solving a problem that cannot be addressed unilaterally. The long-awaited ratification of the document by the United States, the world's top arms producer, would restore the credibility of the convention and serve as an appropriate complement to Mérida.

The Mérida Initiative is a praiseworthy step toward accomplishing the shared goals of security and governance. It is not, however, a complete solution. Small arms fuel today's unconventional wars—battles that do not occur between two opposing sides wearing uniforms. In Central America, it is estimated that the number of weapons in civilian hands is five times the number held by law enforcement officials. A renewed focus on arms trafficking, which can be obtained in part by ratifying CIFTA, is necessary due to the nature of this conflict. The dual threat of drug and arms trafficking presents a transnational challenge that can be solved only through multilateral commitment and cooperation. Mérida is only the next chapter in what must be a continuing partnership.

Catherine Rebecca Dooley and Ariadne Medler are former intern-scholars with the Americas Program at the Center for Strategic and International Studies in Washington, D.C.

Hemisphere Focus **is produced by the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), a private, tax-exempt institution focusing on international public policy issues. Its research is nonpartisan and nonproprietary. CSIS does not take specific policy positions. Accordingly, all views, positions, and conclusions expressed in this publication should be understood to be solely those of the author(s).**