

# Trafficking in the Mesoamerican Corridor

## A Threat to Regional and Human Security

A Report of the CSIS Americas Program

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Katherine E. Bliss

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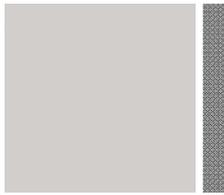
Center for Strategic and International Studies

1800 K Street, NW, Washington, DC 20006

Tel: (202) 775-3119

Fax: (202) 775-3199

Web: [www.csis.org](http://www.csis.org)



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# TRAFFICKING IN THE MESOAMERICAN CORRIDOR

## A THREAT TO REGIONAL AND HUMAN SECURITY

*Katherine E. Bliss*

The trafficking of illicit goods in the Mesoamerican corridor is not a new phenomenon. For more than a century, the Mesoamerican region, defined here as the region encompassing Mexico and the isthmus of Central America and Panama, has served as a conduit for drugs moving north to the United States and for arms moving south. In the 1920s, League of Nations inspectors observed the regional trafficking of women for the purposes of sexual exploitation. Since the Convention on the International Trade in Endangered Species (CITES) entered into force in 1975, observers in Mesoamerica have monitored the circulation of protected birds, reptiles, and animals through illegal commercial routes. But, while the demand for and supply of arms, drugs, humans, and animals in the region is not novel, the rapid expansion of global trade over the last 15 years has multiplied opportunities for legal business and illicit commerce alike. At the same time, the Internet and global positioning systems tracking technology make it easier for traffickers to market, sell, and distribute goods across borders.

The international treaties, as well as bilateral agreements, regarding the trafficking of drugs, arms, humans, and wildlife are overseen separately by a wide array of organizations and managed by diverse law enforcement agencies with distinct practices and mandates. While the UN Convention against Transnational Organized Crime and the related Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons, known as the Palermo Protocol, structure work on human trafficking, the Convention on the International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora structures work on wildlife trafficking. With no UN agreement on arms trafficking, the Inter-American Convention against the Illicit Manufacturing of and Trafficking in Firearms, Ammunition, Explosives, and Other Related Materials (CIFTA) provides guidance for implementing countries in the region, while the UN Convention against Illicit Traffic in Narcotic Drugs and Psychotropic Substances provides a framework for action against narco-trafficking. Historically, the links between trafficking and security have been handled on a bilateral basis, with specific agreements between the United States and Mexico, on the one hand, and arrangements between Mexico and the Central American countries, on the other.

The recently implemented Mérida Initiative acknowledges the importance of regional collaboration in the effort to bolster security and halt the traffic of drugs and arms. The multiyear project includes provisions for funding to “provide equipment and training to support law enforcement operations and technical assistance for long-term reform and oversight of security

agencies.” Through the Sistema de Integración de Centroamérica (SICA), countries in the region meet regularly to discuss security issues of mutual concern. But given the apparent integration of illegally trafficked people, wildlife, and products into flows of arms, drugs, and illicit funds, it will also be important to consider not just the movement of drugs and arms but also the circulation of humans, plants, and animals throughout Central America, Mexico, and the United States.

To facilitate discussion among the diverse law enforcement, advocacy and research sectors that play roles in surveillance, prevention, and control of trafficking involving Mexico, Central America, and the United States, the CSIS Americas Program convened a one-day meeting on September 24, 2009, at CSIS in Washington, D.C. The purpose of the meeting was to raise awareness of the relationships among arms trafficking, drug trafficking, human trafficking, and wildlife trafficking in the Mesoamerican region; identify similarities and differences in approaches to the organized movement of diverse illegal products in the region; discuss the challenges and opportunities for promoting cooperation not just among law enforcement agencies but also among advocacy groups, technical agencies, and research entities; and articulate recommendations for enhanced cooperation in the future.

Over the course of four panels and a keynote address, speakers and the audience considered the following questions:

- What is the history and current context of trafficking (of arms, drugs, humans, and wildlife) in the Mesoamerican corridor?
- In what contexts do the diverse flows of trafficked goods, animals, and people overlap and why?
- How does trafficking of humans, drugs, arms, and wildlife affect bilateral and regional relationships?
- What international treaties and agreements structure governments’ work on these issues?
- What potential is there for greater multi-sectoral collaboration at the international, regional, and subregional levels?
- What is the role of trade agreements, immigration law, and other legal instruments in preventing or fostering trafficking?
- What is the business model that trafficking organizations follow—what are the relationships among the cartels and other groups undertaking trafficking activities, and how do they recruit staff and carry out their work?
- What is the role that civil society groups and the media can play in identifying, monitoring, and raising awareness about the diverse forms of illegal trade and trafficking and their overlapping activities?

- What are the opportunities for greater regional and inter-sectoral cooperation on overlapping trafficking and law enforcement issues?

This report summarizes the presentations and conclusions drawn from the meeting and offers practical recommendations for policymakers in and out of government in the region. The report, as well as the meeting presentations and audio recordings, are available on the CSIS Web site at <http://www.csis.org/americas>.

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## **Panel I: Political, Social, and Economic Implications of Trafficking in the Mesoamerican Corridor**

**Raúl Benítez Manaut, Centro de Investigaciones sobre América del Norte, Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México and Colectivo de Análisis de la Seguridad con Democracia**

Raúl Benítez Manaut focused his presentation on recent trends with respect to drug and arms trafficking in the region. He began by noting that current security challenges in Mexico are heavily influenced by organized crime and characterized by increasing links between Mexican cartels and Central American criminal organizations. For many years, he added, Mexico was largely segregated from Central American security challenges, such as the civil wars that dominated politics there in the 1970s and 1980s. However, as the wars concluded, weapons from the conflicts began to circulate in Mexico and contributed to increasing levels of violence. With most of those arms from the Central American conflicts now out of commission, the bulk of weapons, many of them of much more recent manufacture, including military grade arms, currently enter Mexico from the United States, where laws regulating gun sales are relatively permissive. Guns that originate in the United States are now being found circulating in Central America where, as in Mexico, they are used by drug cartels to resolve rivalries and threaten local security forces that attempt to halt their engagement in illegal commerce.

Benítez, who is a professor at the Universidad Autónoma de México (UNAM) and president of the Colectivo de Análisis de la Seguridad con Democracia, said that in recent years Mexico-based cartels have expanded their influence over regional drug and arms trafficking by establishing strategic alliances with criminal organizations, such as local-level groups or Colombian cocaine traffickers, or by using violence to eliminate competitors. He observed that the Gulf Cartel and the Michoacán-based La Familia control much of the traffic of arms in Mexico. While some cartels are known to possess missile launchers and antitank weaponry, so far they have not deployed them.

Mexico-based criminal groups with regional connections to Central American criminal organizations include the Gulf Cartel, the Sinaloa Cartel, and the Juárez Cartel, which maintain operations in Costa Rica, Honduras, Guatemala, El Salvador, and Panama. The Mexican

trafficking organizations have established operations in Central America, according to Benítez, because efforts to disrupt their activities elsewhere have been successful. At present, Benítez said, the Central American contacts serve as middlemen between Colombian drug suppliers and the Mexican cartels. And Mexican and Colombian traffickers use the gangs in Central America for lower-level operations.

The increased flow of drugs and weapons through Central America and Mexico has had negative social implications, Benítez noted. One paradox is that more drugs have been confiscated over the last five years than at any other point, even as regional use of cocaine, marijuana, opiates, and amphetamines fluctuates. For example, while marijuana use has risen in Belize, Costa Rica, and Guatemala, it has decreased in El Salvador and Mexico. However, the use of opiates is up in the United States, while cocaine use seems to be rising in Belize, Costa Rica, Panama, and Mexico. The cartels seek to develop local consumer bases in transit areas even as they move their product north to more lucrative markets in the United States, Europe, and elsewhere.

Violence has increased in almost every region. The greater availability of weapons contributes to higher rates of violence, which in turn fuels public perceptions that governments are failing to protect public security. In Mexico this perception has led to citizen demands for greater commitments of government resources, including security and military forces, to address the social and political challenges posed by trafficking. However, according to Benítez, state efforts to stem the flow of drugs and arms in Mexico and elsewhere in the region are undermined by the fact that the intelligence services in many countries are weak, underscoring the importance of bolstering intelligence operations, especially in border areas.

### **Ana Hidalgo, International Organization on Migration (IOM)**

Ana Hidalgo framed her discussion of the social, political, and economic implications of human trafficking in Mesoamerica by noting that human trafficking is not a new phenomenon in the region. Hidalgo noted that in previous decades there was a tendency among public officials to ignore the challenges posed by trafficking. However, recent government commitments to international agreements regarding crime and trafficking have strengthened regional political will to prevent trafficking, protect victims, and improve the capacity of law enforcement agencies to investigate and prosecute human trafficking cases.

Hidalgo, who coordinates the International Organization on Migration's regional anti-trafficking in persons unit, noted that there is a common perception that human trafficking is the same as sex trafficking, but she indicated that in Central America human trafficking also implies labor trafficking and affects men, women, and children alike. Sex trafficking primarily involves women, who may be forced to work during the day as domestic servants or agricultural workers and then required to deliver sexual services at night. Women are the most frequent victims of human trafficking in the region, but the number of cases involving men and children is on the rise. Importantly, women who are pregnant or who become pregnant in the context of being

trafficked often experience the compounding trauma of seeing the children to whom they give birth taken from them and sold.

There are diverse markets for trafficked humans in the Americas, according to Hidalgo. While many trafficked people do wind up in the United States, there is also demand for trafficked persons in Guatemala, Costa Rica, and Mexico. In addition, the IOM has confirmed that people are also enslaved and illegally trafficked within their home countries. According to Hidalgo, more than half of the victims the IOM assisted in Mexico between June 2005 and August 2009 were under the age of 18 and reported having been trafficked for labor purposes, including agriculture and domestic service; more than half of that group was made up of women. The majority of female trafficking victims report being single mothers with small children. Another trend is the increase of migratory flows from Asia and Africa.

As countries in the region implement new legislation, there has been increased attention to the detection and prosecution of cases within public ministries. For example, in 2007 El Salvador only brought 4 out of 39 cases to trial, while in 2008 authorities successfully prosecuted 8 of 58 detected cases.

To further enhance regional approaches against human trafficking, Hidalgo stressed, it will be important to improve victim services, reduce demand for sexual services, better understand the relationship among migration, trafficking, and the enslavement of people, build the capacity of police and law enforcement officials to investigate and prosecute crimes, create specialized government units to deal with human trafficking, and improve inter-institutional cooperation.

### **Adrian Reuter, TRAFFIC**

Adrian Reuter began by noting that the international wildlife trade is big business. Some experts believe that wildlife trafficking—that is, illegal wildlife trade—is worth \$20 billion annually, making it one of the most lucrative forms of commerce in the world. Given the global demand for wildlife, it is not uncommon, Reuter noted, for illegal trade to develop around wildlife products that are rare and not generally available legally. He defined illegal wildlife trade as “the illicit procurement, transport, and distribution of plant and animal specimens, in contravention of laws and treaties.”

Developing countries with rich biodiversity frequently have weak capacity to enforce laws against wildlife trafficking, according to Reuter, the country representative in Mexico for the wildlife trade monitoring network TRAFFIC. Impoverished communities are particularly vulnerable to the negative consequences of wildlife trafficking. Mesoamerica is home to 7 percent of the earth’s species and is a biodiversity hotspot, but it has growing and urbanizing populations, as well. Countries in the region thus face challenges in managing population growth and urbanization without sacrificing biodiversity. The plants and animals regularly trafficked from Mesoamerica include macaws and parrots, orchids, tarantulas, marine turtles, cacti, bromeliads, butterflies, and poison dart frogs, among others.

Reuter said that there appear to be strong links between organized crime and wildlife trafficking, in part because the enforcement of laws regarding wildlife trafficking in many countries is relatively lax, and the likelihood that strict sanctions will be applied to those found guilty of trafficking is limited. Reuter noted that many of the factors that characterize other kinds of organized criminal activity also characterize wildlife trafficking. These include detailed planning, significant financial support, the use of threats or violence, international management of shipments, sophisticated forgery and alteration of permits and certifications, well-armed participants, and the opportunity for considerable profits. In the Mesoamerican region, wildlife specimens are smuggled in three principal ways: hidden in secret compartments of luggage; not declared on customs forms and trade permits; or trafficked using forged or stolen permits. Wildlife trafficking is linked to other forms of trafficking, as the 2004 seizure of 20 kilograms of liquid cocaine in a shipment of live fish from Colombia to the United States and the 2009 seizure of a ton of cocaine concealed within frozen fish in Mexico show.

Beyond the negative social and political threats posed by the association of organized crime with wildlife trafficking, related threats include the loss of biodiversity, disruption of ecosystems, transmission of diseases among animals and to humans, and fragmentation of plant, animal, and bird habitats, leading to economic losses in some regions. In some areas, the removal of too many species from an ecosystem can lead to “empty forest syndrome,” where very few native species can be found.

## **Panel II: International Organizations and Treaties Relating to Trafficking and Organized Crime**

### **Fernando García Robles, Organization of American States (OAS)**

Fernando García Robles began by noting that it is very difficult to estimate the extent of human trafficking in the Americas, as the crime of human trafficking is underreported and thus the quality of official figures varies widely. He said that it is important to recognize that trafficking is a process that begins with the recruitment of the victim and ends with his or her exploitation. In the Mesoamerican region, the estimated number of women, children, and adolescents who are trafficked is quite high. Evidence suggests that many victims begin as migrants and then become victims of trafficking. Overall, the trend is that victims are trafficked from less developed countries to more developed countries. Trafficking in the Mesoamerican region is also characterized by significant sex trafficking and the exploitation of minors for sexual purposes. While most victims are trafficked from the south to North America, there are also traffic patterns that create flows of people from Central and South America to Europe and Asia and from Asia to South America.

The Central American countries are points of origin, transit, and destination for trafficked people. According to García Robles, who coordinates the OAS’s anti-human trafficking activities, several factors “push” victims into human trafficking; these include poverty, a lack of regularized civil

registries that makes it difficult for would-be migrants to secure formal migration documents; a lack of legal opportunities for migration; the negative effects of conflicts and natural disasters; lack of formal education opportunities; gender discrimination; unemployment; domestic violence; cultural traditions and values. García Robles identified as “pull factors” the expectation of employment and financial reward, particularly in the sex industry; demand for cheap labor; demand in some countries for sexual services of “exotic” women; a perception that the destination countries are glamorous; and a demand for the productive work of women.

The OAS undertakes various activities to assist countries in addressing human trafficking issues, including helping countries set up specialized anti-trafficking units; helping them identify victims; and working with member countries to facilitate data collection. There are a number of international organizations with which the OAS collaborates on human trafficking challenges, including the International Organization on Migration, the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, UNICEF, the International Labor Organization, and Save the Children–Sweden, along with the public-sector agencies. Most of the 35 OAS member states have ratified the Palermo Protocol regarding the prevention, punishment, and suppression of trafficking in persons, and states are modifying their penal codes to implement it.

García Robles suggested that countries in the Mesoamerican region could do more to enhance support services for victims of trafficking. He also emphasized the importance of building the capacity of law enforcement agents, particularly participants in peace keeping operations and consular officials, to identify victims of human trafficking in order to ensure victims receive the services they need.

### **Juan Carlos Vázquez, Secretariat, Convention on the International Trade in Endangered Species (CITES)**

Juan Carlos Vázquez initiated his discussion by noting that the mission of the Convention on the International Trade in Endangered Species and Wild Flora and Fauna (CITES) is to ensure that wildlife and products destined for international trade are neither over-exploited nor obtained in an illegal manner. According to the CITES, there are 800 species, including precious hardwoods, listed as endangered, and their trade is monitored by member states and the CITES Secretariat. Most states that produce or consume wildlife products are members of CITES, and the number of member states has grown since 1975, when the agreement entered into force, said Vázquez, who is a senior resource mobilization officer with the CITES Secretariat.

The CITES Secretariat manages four kinds of activities: strengthening governance with respect to the trade in wildlife products; promoting science for sustainability; encouraging law enforcement efforts with respect to the wildlife trade; and building institutional capacity to investigate, monitor, and address wildlife trafficking. Activities carried out to promote wildlife governance include strengthening national legislation and policies; enhancing reporting mechanisms; compliance assessment; monitoring; and stakeholder engagement. CITES supports population surveys of wild species to promote scientific investigation of biodiversity and wildlife issues. To

bolster law enforcement operations the CITES Secretariat shares information with and engages in joint programs with other international organizations, including Interpol, the UN Office on Drugs and Crime, and the World Customs Union. Finally, CITES helps strengthen institutional capacity by developing manuals, publishing training materials, and offering problem-solving workshops to member governments and other parties.

According to Vázquez, criminal organizations are involved in the wildlife trade in Mesoamerica because there are profits to be made. Criminal organizations in Mesoamerica have realized that law enforcement agencies dealing with environmental issues tend to be poorly funded and understaffed, making wildlife trafficking appear more appealing. He also noted that while states are slow to adapt to new equipment or enforcement methods, criminal organizations are more flexible. With a legalistic and bureaucratic tradition hampering government efficiency in some places, organized crime follows relatively simple rules. Recent seizures of cocaine smuggled in false compartments of reptile shipments or inside boa constrictors provide evidence of organized crime's involvement in the wildlife trade and the links between drug and wildlife trafficking. Vázquez noted that the illegal trade in precious hardwoods provides an especially clear link with organized crime and is associated with arms trafficking and forced labor systems, as well.

Vázquez also warned that wildlife trafficking is not the only form of trafficking in Mesoamerica that has negative implications for the environment. Drug traffickers cut down endangered trees in remote areas to create landing strips for their airborne commerce, and the loss of trees, as well as the discarding of precursor chemicals used in narcotics production, contributes to the contamination of scarce water resources. He emphasized the importance of devoting greater resources to customs and law enforcement agencies to help them recognize and prosecute crimes involving the trafficking of wildlife and other illicit products.

### **José Manuel Martínez Morales, UN Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC)**

The negative effects of increasing drug trafficking in the region are of special concern for the UNODC, which focuses on the implications of trafficking for the rule of law and governance, according to the regional representative in Panama, José Manuel Martínez Morales. Not only are the Central American countries “trapped” in drug and arms transit routes, but the use of drugs in many countries is on the rise. Among the many challenges is the fact that when laws are effectively enforced in one area, the traffickers move to another area that is more vulnerable to their influence. As the cartels become more powerful in Mexico and Central America, they are acquiring military-grade weapons. Not only does an increase in violence and trafficking undermine legitimate economic activities, it fosters an increase in levels of corruption and contributes to a perception of insecurity on the part of the public. In this context, citizens become more accepting of authoritarianism and democratic processes are threatened.

UNODC organizes its regional work around several guiding principles: fostering a regional, integrated approach to deal with organized crime and drug trafficking; facilitating the integration of programs at the national and regional levels; and continually assessing countries' needs and

capacities. Its regional program focuses on integrating activities promoting the rule of law and human security by countering illicit trafficking, organized crime and terrorism; promoting crime prevention and building justice and integrity; and improving health and human development.

UNODC has devoted considerable resources to supporting a number of regional security processes. Over the past year countries met in Costa Rica to determine a regional approach to drugs and crime within the Central American Integration System (SICA). Meeting in Nicaragua this past summer, the countries established a regional UNODC office in Panama. Through the Santo Domingo Pact and Managua Mechanism, the region will promote an intraregional technical assistance program to facilitate periodic consultations and strategic planning between partners at technical and policy levels to develop coordinated actions to fight illicit drug trafficking and related organized crime through and to Central America and the Caribbean. Countries have also agreed to develop centers of excellence to showcase regional research and expertise; promote capacity building; and facilitate information sharing and cooperation on such issues as maritime security, urban crime, community policing, and prison reform.

### **Luis Guillermo Medina Alfaro, Interpol**

Interpol comprises 187 member countries, with a central office in each to deal with issues ranging from immigration and customs to police training. Through its international network, Interpol connects law enforcement authorities across the world in an effort to address criminal activity. The regional office for Central America is based in San Salvador, El Salvador, and responds to requests from regional police forces for assistance, information, or training. The network allows for real time exchanges of information between countries. In Central America, Interpol focuses on organized crime, money laundering, human trafficking and arms trafficking, according to the special functionary of the Interpol Central America regional office, Luis Guillermo Medina Alfaro.

With respect to human trafficking, Interpol's Central American operations are focused on labor trafficking, sex trafficking, and organ trafficking. To facilitate work on human trafficking, Interpol holds an annual meeting and facilitates regional working groups, which convene in early October. Interpol also plans to publish a manual to train those public officials involved in investigating suspected human trafficking cases. With multiple routes from South and Central America to Mexico and the United States, and with flows from Asia and Europe to North America and from South America to Africa and elsewhere, human trafficking is the third most profitable crime and affects large numbers of people in the region. Some of the factors that promote human trafficking in the region are a lack of jobs and education, the proliferation of gangs, and the corruption of authorities. However, according to Medina, another challenge is that many people do not know what human trafficking is and may participate or facilitate it unwittingly by informally hiring someone as a domestic servant or day laborer.

Medina agreed with García Robles that countries need to place more emphasis on preventing human trafficking, noting that currently most political discussions about trafficking focus on

punishing traffickers. Law enforcement agencies must also be better resourced to keep up with criminal organizations, which have acquired sophisticated technology in order to circumvent immigration security checkpoints.

## **Panel III: Bilateral Cooperation to Address Human Trafficking in the Mesoamerican Region**

### **Antonio Escobedo, Director of Consular and Migratory Affairs, Ministry of Foreign Relations, Guatemala**

Antonio Escobedo began by noting that there are strong links between organized crime and human trafficking in Guatemala. Migrants, particularly minors, adolescents, and women, are at the greatest risk of becoming trafficking victims. Escobedo noted that human trafficking seems to be on the rise in the Americas and said that one positive aspect is that there is greater awareness now than before. In Guatemala, national discussions on the issue have led to the involvement of numerous domestic agencies in addressing human trafficking. Guatemala has established an interagency commission on human trafficking, for example. The executive agencies with responsibility for handling government agencies' response to the issue meet regularly to align policies and programs to fight human trafficking. In February 2009, Guatemala passed a law against sexual violence, sexual exploitation, and human trafficking. According to Escobedo, who directs consular and migratory affairs for Guatemala's Foreign Ministry, this has facilitated the establishment of a new office dedicated to centralizing work in this area and has led to the creation of a shelter for victims of human trafficking.

While it is important to bolster the capacity of domestic agencies to address human trafficking, Escobedo noted that it is also necessary to cooperate with other countries that have experience addressing the challenge of trafficking in persons. Over the years Guatemala has signed agreements with Mexico, El Salvador, and the United States to address trafficking of women and children, but the agreements are no longer in force, and it is time to replace or renew them, he said. The cooperation between Guatemala and Mexico on human trafficking has been the most comprehensive, and the two countries have worked through a binational commission since 1987 to discuss migration issues. According to Escobedo, the relationship with Mexico is particularly important because of the shared cultural backgrounds of the Maya people, whose communities straddle the Mexico-Guatemala border. Many families have ties in both countries and move back and forth across the border on a regular basis.

Escobedo noted that at the regional level, countries have been discussing migration cooperation, and it is important that they move beyond discussion to take binding actions. One development is a network for officials working on human trafficking and migrant crimes. In addition, Costa Rica, El Salvador, Nicaragua, and Guatemala have established an alliance to cooperate to fight against human trafficking and are working to set shared standards to prevent trafficking and to care for trafficking victims.

**Óscar González Mendívil, Fiscalía Especial para los Delitos de Violencia contra las Mujeres y Trata de Personas (FEVIMTRA), Mexico**

The Fiscalía Especial para los Delitos de Violencia contra las Mujeres y Trata de Personas (FEVIMTRA) was launched on February 1, 2008, within the office of Mexico's attorney general, to investigate and prosecute crimes violating the 2007 General Law on Preventing and Sanctioning Human Trafficking. Like other countries in the region, Mexico organizes its work on human trafficking in accordance with the Palermo Protocol and defines human trafficking based on the activities, means, and goals of the person accused of trafficking. In Mexico, trafficking is punishable by between 6 and 12 years in prison, a sentence that can go up to 27 years if a public servant is convicted of human trafficking. Human trafficking is considered a federal crime when it involves an international connection with Mexico or when it involves a public official, according to Óscar González Mendívil, acting director of FEVIMTRA.

In Mexico, 28 of 32 states have enacted legislation making human trafficking a crime. Four states have not yet legally defined it. Between February 1, 2008, and September 15, 2009, FEVIMTRA had initiated 39 cases and had successfully prosecuted 19 of them. When FEVIMTRA discovers that a human trafficking case it is investigating is linked to criminal organizations, it turns the case over to the specialized organized crime unit within the Mexican attorney general's office. FEVIMTRA also operates a shelter for victims of human trafficking and estimates that at least 15 victims have been admitted to the shelter, with another 107 receiving attention at satellite care centers.

González Mendívil offered two case studies to highlight effective bilateral cooperation to address human trafficking issues. The first involved communication between FEVIMTRA, Mexico's specialized organized crime investigation unit (SIEDO), and U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement to stop a ring of Mexico- and Georgia-based traffickers involved in sending women from Mexico to the United States for the purpose of sexual exploitation. In the second case, FEVIMTRA, Mexico's cyber-security police, and Canadian law enforcement agencies collaborated to prosecute a case involving a Canadian citizen engaged in disseminating child pornography over the Internet.

**Pamela Diéguez and Akil Baldwin, Immigration and Customs Enforcement, U.S. Department of Homeland Security**

Pamela Diéguez and Akil Baldwin devoted their presentation to describing the cooperation between U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) and the government of Mexico to counter human trafficking. Since 2005, ICE has supported the government of Mexico in developing an anti-human trafficking investigative program, at a cost of \$2 million. A representative from ICE is assigned to the U.S. embassy in Mexico City to facilitate the planning and execution of training programs, outreach, and logistical assistance with respect to trafficking in persons. Training programs have focused on victim attention and assistance, evidence collection and preservation, crime scene management, and investigative techniques, said Diéguez,

program manager at ICE and Baldwin, ICE special agent. Additional activities have included working with the government of Mexico to promote legislation to strengthen the penalties for trafficking perpetrators and the organization of a program for officials within Mexico's attorney general's office to tour facilities in the United States that serve trafficking victims.

Diéguez and Baldwin referred to several examples of successful binational cooperation on trafficking cases. One, Operation Supersonic, involved collaboration between ICE and the government of Mexico to investigate a Mexico-based family organization engaged in smuggling young Mexican women to the United States, holding them against their will, and forcing them to perform sexual acts. In this case, which unfolded between 2003 and 2008, seven defendants pled guilty in the United States to sex trafficking, forced labor, alien smuggling, and importing aliens for immoral purposes, and Mexican authorities extradited a woman who pled guilty to sex trafficking.

ICE also works through attaché offices within U.S. embassies and with foreign partners to identify and disrupt human trafficking organizations. The collaboration involves assisting foreign governments with identifying targets and witnesses; gathering evidence; working with foreign governments to arrest and prosecute traffickers; and assisting with extradition and expulsion processes. Diéguez and Baldwin noted that ICE also works with domestic and international nongovernmental organizations to raise awareness of human trafficking challenges and to help them identify potential victims.

## Keynote Address

### **David L. Johnson, Assistant Secretary for International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs, U.S. Department of State**

Assistant Secretary David Johnson noted that the United States considers transnational organized crime to be one of the major threats to security in the Americas. A multifaceted challenge, it presents major political, economic, social, and cultural impediments to economic development. Primarily interested in generating income, criminal organizations undermine governments and stability through their illicit activities.

The United States considers the Mérida Initiative to be one of the most innovative foreign policy activities initiated in recent years, said Johnson. A partnership to help make the Americas more secure, it provides help to Mexico and other nations fighting organized crime to assist them in dismantling criminal organizations and reducing the threats they pose.

Johnson provided a brief history of the Mérida Initiative, noting that plans for it emerged following the election of Felipe Calderón as Mexico's president in 2006. Mexico faced increasing violence on the part of the drug cartels, and Calderón argued that to successfully address the trafficking threat Mexico needed to reform its criminal justice sector, a process that would involve amending Mexico's constitution to authorize judicial reform. In 2007, the United States pledged to help Mexico in its effort to confront criminal organizations.

Johnson emphasized that the partnership between the United States and Mexico through the Mérida Initiative is transforming bilateral relations and building trust between the two countries. He stressed that on the Mexican side of the border, U.S. assistance has catalyzed reform in Mexico. The United States is helping transform the Mexican justice program, sending Spanish-speaking police trainers from U.S. federal agencies and other law enforcement agencies to work with Mexican counterparts. U.S. officials have advised Mexican officials regarding prison reform and how to train incoming police recruits to limit the potential for corruption and ensure respect for human rights within law enforcement agencies themselves. At the same time, he said, the United States is working to stem the flow of guns and cash from north to south.

## **Panel IV: The Role of Civil Society Organizations in Fighting Trafficking and Organized Crime**

### **Javier Meléndez Quiñónez, Institute of Strategic Studies and Public Policies, Nicaragua**

Meléndez, who directs the Managua-based Institute of Strategic Studies and Public Policies, stressed the need for more independent research centers to carry out investigations regarding organized crime and security challenges in Central America. In the region, he said, very few research centers are focused on security, and those that do undertake security-related research carry out single projects instead of developing longer-range programs. Meléndez said that it can be difficult to secure reliable information about security issues, insofar as official security statistics are often unavailable or unreliable. In this context, independent research entities can play an important role in comparing policies and programs, promoting dialogue between the private and public sectors, and improving public awareness about security and organized crime.

Since 2007, the Institute of Strategic Studies and Public Policies in Nicaragua, with support from the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) and the Open Society Institute, has carried out work related to drug and human trafficking in Costa Rica, Panama, and Nicaragua. The work is largely carried out in the field and in border areas. The institute's research suggests that in Central America the increasingly visible links among drug cartels, gangs, and other groups are leading to higher levels of violence. Also, indigenous communities are being affected as they are regularly recruited to ship goods.

While information about arms trafficking is particularly sparse, according to Meléndez, it seems clear that human trafficking is linked to intercontinental flows. Thus, the institute produces information to help deepen democratic processes, promote transparency, and generate information for policymakers and civil society organizations to use in understanding security threats and strengthening democratic processes in the region.

### **Marta Prado, Humane Society International (HSI)**

Humane Society International is the international arm of the Humane Society of the United States. Its key areas of focus include protecting wildlife habitats, encouraging sustainable

agricultural practices, and protecting stray animals. HSI also helps countries implement the CITES provisions regarding trade in endangered species. With funds provided through the environment chapter of the free trade agreement among the United States, the Central American countries, and the Dominican Republic (CAFTA-DR), HSI works to build the capacity of wildlife law enforcement agencies in the region. HSI collaborates with government agencies as well as international and local nongovernmental organizations to promote greater political commitment to reducing the challenges associated with illegal wildlife trade.

Central America has a high level of biodiversity, and there is considerable regional and international demand for wildlife as pets (parrots, macaws, spider monkeys) and for meat (reptiles), according to Prado, who serves as HSI's executive director for international trade and development. There is an international market for wildlife products of Central American origin, with key markets in the United States and Europe, as well as in the Caribbean. The links between drug trafficking and wildlife trafficking are particularly clear in vast and unpopulated protected areas, such as the Petén in Guatemala, through which many different kinds of illegal goods are moved with very little oversight on the part of public authorities.

Prado pointed to a number of regional challenges that limit the efficacy of efforts to halt wildlife trafficking. These include the fact that many customs officials are not trained to deal with wildlife trafficking and do not know how to handle rescued animals. In addition, law enforcement officials often do not know what to do with wildlife after they seize illegal shipments, and the number of rescue centers in the region is inadequate for the volume of animals seized.

HSI seeks to address these challenges by training government officials to implement CITES provisions. Prado said HSI also teaches officials how to handle wild animals and helps local organizations build and maintain wildlife rescue centers. In addition, HSI offers public education campaigns regarding wildlife trafficking and promotes ecotourism as an alternative source of income for communities that have relied on capturing and selling wildlife as a means of survival.

# Recommendations

## **Fully Implement Regional and International Agreements and Update Bilateral Agreements**

- Countries that have not ratified the key international and regional agreements relating to organized crime and trafficking—such as CITES, CIFTA, the Palermo Protocol, and the Conventions against Transnational Organized Crime and Illicit Traffic in Narcotic Drugs and Psychotropic Substances—should take the necessary steps toward ratification.
- Countries should ensure that national legislation is in compliance with international treaty obligations on organized crime and the trafficking of arms, drugs, humans, and wildlife.
- Countries should work bilaterally and through regional mechanisms to encourage the compliance of other countries with international treaty obligations.
- Where countries have established bilateral agreements to structure discussion regarding organized crime and trafficking issues, they should regularly review, revise, and update those agreements to ensure they are engaged on the most relevant themes related to the anti-trafficking agenda.

## **Strengthen the Capacity of National Law Enforcement Agencies to Address Trafficking Challenges**

- As governments in Mexico and Central America consolidate judicial and security reform, they should ensure that trafficking issues—including the trafficking of arms, drugs, humans, and wildlife—are included as a major focus of policy planning, program development, and resource allocation activities.
- Governments should strengthen investments in human resources for law enforcement agencies and enhance agencies' access to new equipment and monitoring technology, particularly in border areas, to strengthen agents' capacity to carry out anti-trafficking operations.
- Governments, research centers, and nongovernmental organizations should share best practices with respect to recruiting, professionalizing, controlling, and monitoring security institutions.
- Governments and international organizations should strive to increase the awareness of peacekeeping, law enforcement, and consular officials regarding human trafficking.
- To effectively address the challenges posed by drug, arms, human, and wildlife trafficking, it is important to clarify the roles and responsibilities of government agencies with respect to trafficking.
- Joint workshops and bilateral activities will help to improve international cooperation between countries on anti-trafficking enforcement issues.

- Greater action should be taken to sensitize judiciary and customs officials with respect to the significance of wildlife crimes.
- It is essential to build the capacity of police and law enforcement officials to investigate and prosecute crimes, create specialized government units to deal with human trafficking, and improve inter-institutional cooperation.
- Civil society organizations oriented toward improved law enforcement and good governance must be sensitized to the threats posed by trafficking.

### **Reduce Demand for Narcotics, Sexual Services, and Wildlife Products**

- Governments can help prevent human trafficking by enacting policies to protect all migrants, working to reduce the demand for cheap labor, controlling the markets for informal and unregulated labor, and ensuring the safety of migrants.
- Improving the quality of civil registry processes and migration documents would significantly enhance the ability of states in the region to protect migrants and prevent human trafficking.
- Governments should work with international and nongovernmental organizations to reduce the demand for illegal sexual services, which contributes to human trafficking in the region, by instigating public education campaigns and by sensitizing law enforcement officials regarding the political, social, and economic challenges posed by human trafficking.
- Governments should work with international and nongovernmental organizations to enhance protective services for victims of human trafficking.
- Increased public resources should be devoted to public health and education campaigns focused on reducing demand for illegal drugs. Public health services should be made available for those suffering from drug addiction.
- Governments should work with the media and with international and nongovernmental organizations to strengthen campaigns to reduce demand for illegally trafficked wildlife, including information campaigns to educate the public about the scope and severity of the problem.
- Alternative development programs, such as ecotourism, should be strengthened to undermine communities' dependence on wildlife trafficking.

### **Improve Research and Intelligence Capacities with Respect to Trafficking**

- Research centers focused on gathering and verifying information regarding organized crime and trafficking activities should be created and funded to support evidence-based approaches to program development and policy planning.
- Analytical methods related to trafficking and organized crime should be strengthened and tested.

- The capacity of intelligence agencies to gather and share information regarding cross-border trafficking threats and undertake cooperative operations related to the trafficking of arms, drugs, humans, and wildlife should be fortified.

**Strengthen the Capacity of Civil Society Organizations to Monitor, Evaluate, and Educate Regarding the Social, Political, and Economic Effects of Trafficking**

- Civil society organizations and research centers should demand government transparency with respect to information about trafficking and security operations in order to improve research and analysis regarding security concerns and to hold public agencies accountable for their actions.
- Civil society organizations should facilitate dialogue with authorities regarding organized crime, trafficking, and security concerns.
- Civil society organizations should work with local communications media to raise public awareness of the threats posed by trafficking, including wildlife trafficking. Schools should be viewed as key venues for outreach regarding wildlife and drug issues.
- Coalitions between research centers, the media, and civil society organizations should be strengthened to enhance public awareness of and discussion about security challenges and government actions.

## Appendix. Conference Agenda

### 8:00–8:30 a.m. Registration

### 8:30–9:45 a.m. Panel I: Political, Social, and Economic Implications of Trafficking in Mesoamerican Corridor

Raúl Benítez Manaut, *Professor, Centro de Investigaciones sobre América del Norte Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México (UNAM), Mexico and President, Colectivo de Análisis de la Seguridad con Democracia (CASEDE), Mexico*

Ana Hidalgo, *Coordinator, Regional Anti-Trafficking in Persons Unit, International Organization for Migration (IOM), Costa Rica*

Adrian Reuter, *Country Representative, TRAFFIC, Mexico*

Moderator: Katherine Bliss, *Deputy Director and Senior Fellow, Americas Program, CSIS, Washington, D.C.*

### 9:45–11:00 a.m. Panel II: International Organizations and Treaties Relating to Trafficking and Organized Crime

Fernando García-Robles, *Coordinator, Anti-Trafficking in Persons, Department of Public Security, Organization of American States, Washington, D.C.*

José Manuel Martínez Morales, *Regional Representative for the UN Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), Panama*

Luis Guillermo Medina Alfaro, *First Secretary of the Mexican Embassy in El Salvador, Special Functionary of the INTERPOL Central American Regional Office, El Salvador*

Juan Carlos Vásquez, *Senior Office for Resource Mobilization, Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES), Switzerland*

Moderator: Duncan Wood, *Professor, Instituto Tecnológico Autónomo de México, Mexico, and Senior Associate, CSIS, Washington, D.C.*

### 11:15–12:30 p.m. Panel III: Bilateral Cooperation to Address Human Trafficking in the Mesoamerican Region

Akil Baldwin, *Special Agent, Immigrations and Customs Enforcement, U.S. Department of Homeland Security, Washington, D.C.*

Pamela Diéguez, *Program Manager, Immigration and Customs Enforcement, U.S. Department of Homeland Security, Washington, D.C.*

Antonio Escobedo, *Director for Consular and Migratory Affairs, Ministerio de Relaciones Exteriores, Guatemala*

Óscar González Mendívil, *Director (Acting), Fiscalía Especial para los Delitos de Violencia contra las Mujeres y Trata de Personas (FEVIMTRA), Procuraduría General de la República, Mexico*

Moderator: David Shirk, *Associate Professor of Political Science, University of San Diego, and Fellow, Woodrow Wilson Center for International Scholars, Washington, D.C.*

**12:30–1:45 p.m. Luncheon and Keynote Address**

David T. Johnson, *Assistant Secretary for International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs, U.S. Department of State, Washington, D.C.*

Moderator: Peter DeShazo, *Director, Americas Program, CSIS, Washington, D.C.*

**1:45–3:00 p.m. Panel IV: The Role of Civil Society Organizations in Fighting Trafficking and Organized Crime**

Javier Meléndez Quiñónez, *Executive Director, Instituto de Estudios Estratégicos y Políticas Públicas, Nicaragua*

Marta Prado, *Executive Director for International Trade and Development, Humane Society International, Washington, D.C.*

Moderator: David Holiday, *Program Officer, Latin America Program, Open Society Institute, Washington, D.C.*

## About the Author

**Katherine E. Bliss** is deputy director and senior fellow within the Americas Program at the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) in Washington D.C. She is also a senior fellow with the CSIS Global Health Policy Center. Before joining CSIS, she was a foreign affairs officer at the U.S. Department of State, where she served in the Bureau of Oceans, Environment, and Science and received the Superior Honor Award for her work on environmental health in 2006. As a 2003–2004 Council on Foreign Relations International Affairs fellow she served as a member of the State Department’s Policy Planning Staff, covering issues related to global health, women, Mexico, and the Summit of the Americas. Previously, she served on the faculty at the University of Massachusetts at Amherst, where she was associate professor; she is currently an adjunct associate professor at Georgetown University and teaches courses in the School of Foreign Service’s Center for Latin American Studies. Bliss is the author or coeditor of books, reviews, and articles on criminality, public health, gender issues, and reform politics in Latin America, including *Compromised Positions: Prostitution, Public Health, and Gender Politics in Revolutionary Mexico City* (Penn State University Press, 2001).

Bliss received her Ph.D. from the University of Chicago and was a David E. Bell fellow at the Harvard School of Public Health’s Center for Population and Development Studies in 2000–2001. She received her A.B. magna cum laude and her A.M. from Harvard University and studied at the Colegio de México in Mexico City.