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“Combating Transnational Criminal Threats in the Western Hemisphere”

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Chairman Cook, Ranking Member Sires, distinguished Members of the Subcommittee; thank you for the opportunity to appear before you today to discuss the work of the Department of State's Bureau of International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs (INL) to combat transnational crime in the Western Hemisphere. The illicit profits made from moving drugs, people, and money across borders pose significant threats to the security and prosperity of the United States and to our partners throughout Latin America.

Transnational criminal organizations (TCOs) exploit our shared land border with Mexico and the porous borders of Central America and the Caribbean basin to traffic drugs, smuggle migrants and other illicit goods, and generate illicit revenue. TCOs operate with relative impunity in many countries, taking advantage of an absence of the rule of law and corruptible public officials who participate in large networks of international illicit financing and smuggling. Today, rising poppy cultivation and heroin produced and trafficked by TCOs originating in Mexico and often laced with fentanyl fuels our domestic opioid crisis, contributing to over 15,000 heroin overdose-related deaths in the United States in 2016 alone. Record levels of coca cultivated and cocaine produced in Colombia and then trafficked into the United States is responsible for over 10,000 cocaine involved deaths in 2016, the highest since 2006. In Central America, debilitating gang violence, staggering homicide rates, pervasive extortion, and weak state institutions, especially in the "Northern Triangle" of El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras, are key drivers of irregular migration to the United States.

TCO networks are fluid, flexible and successfully dismantling them requires that we apply well-coordinated and comprehensive solutions at the local, national, and international levels. In support of Executive Order 13773, *Enforcing Federal Law with Respect to Transnational Criminal Organizations and Preventing International Trafficking*, INL leads the Department of State's efforts to combat transnational crime overseas by strengthening the capacity of partner nations to prevent and combat crime before it reaches U.S. borders. INL works closely with interagency partners, including the Department of Treasury, to use sanctions and rewards programs to target and bring to justice individuals and entities engaged in narcotics trafficking, money laundering, terrorist financing, and other financial crimes. We also see these as useful tools to deter other criminal behavior in the region. INL programs are designed to disrupt and defeat TCOs by strengthening laws; enhancing investigative, law enforcement, and prosecutorial functions; supporting cross-border law enforcement cooperation; and equipping criminal

justice system actors to reduce impunity. Our programs complement and are closely coordinated with the efforts of our U.S. interagency colleagues, including the Departments of Justice, Homeland Security, Defense, Treasury and the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID). INL collaborates with U.S. state and local partners, multilateral organizations, and non-governmental organizations for a comprehensive approach to regional and bilateral foreign assistance programming to combat transnational crime throughout the hemisphere.

Mexico

The Merida Initiative continues to be the United States' primary vehicle to meet shared U.S.-Mexico security priorities and is an essential component of a whole-of-government response to curtail our domestic opioid crisis. Executive Order 13773 and two Cabinet-level U.S.-Mexico Strategic Dialogues in May and December 2017 elevated our bilateral response to this crisis and we have realigned Merida Initiative priority programming to sustain and advance critical cooperation against transnational crime.

Today, our two countries are making significant investments to improve our ability to disrupt the entire business model of TCOs. **To reduce heroin production, INL is building Mexico's capacity to better analyze and target illicit poppy fields to more effectively eradicate crops. INL trains and equips Mexican authorities to identify, seize, investigate, and dismantle clandestine laboratories that make heroin, fentanyl, methamphetamine, and other synthetic drugs. To disrupt the supply chain of precursor chemicals diverted to make illicit drugs, INL enhances Mexican capacity to electronically track chemical imports and exports and builds the Mexican Navy's ability to interdict illicit goods and exercise port authority.** These efforts, along with enhanced U.S.-Mexico law enforcement information sharing and partnerships, are critical tools to deter the entry of illicit drugs into the United States. Under Mexico's new accusatorial criminal justice system, forensic scientists may, for the first time, be called upon to testify as expert witnesses during a criminal trial. As their testimony is key to successful prosecutions, it is critical forensic scientists and labs are trained and certified to successfully identify illicit chemical substances. To date, INL, in partnership with the U.S. Department of Justice's International Criminal Investigative Training Assistance Program (ICITAP), has helped 34 federal and state-level forensic laboratories and the Mexican Attorney General's Office attain international (ISO) accreditation. The program is actively working to reach all six Mexican states bordering the United States. **INL efforts enhance Mexico's capacity to screen migrants, secure land, air, and sea ports of entry, and conduct interagency operations against TCOs, including**

through biometrics collection and sharing information with U.S. law enforcement. Addressing U.S. demand for illicit drugs must go hand-in-hand with an effective criminal justice response in Mexico to deny criminals the ability to launder and use illicit revenue from drug trafficking. Mexico remains a critically important and valued partner in this effort.

Central America

In support of the U.S. Strategy for Central America, INL's Central America Regional Security Initiative programs address the drivers of irregular migration and illicit trafficking through a three-pronged approach: regional coordination and information sharing through vetted and specialized units; bottom-up community anti-gang efforts; and top-down institutional reform and capacity building.

Working closely with our interagency colleagues, INL combats TCOs by training, advising, and equipping 56 partner nation vetted units and specialized task forces to investigate complex and high threat criminal cases, including gangs, and to serve as reliable, trusted partners of U.S. law enforcement. As a result, these units have significantly increased arrests for serious crimes in the region and, importantly, have led to arrests and convictions in the United States. For example, in 2017 INL worked with the Government of El Salvador to directly confront illegal migration, deploying two Salvadoran intelligence analysts, one from the national police and one from the migration authority, to McAllen, Texas to share Salvadoran arrest and investigative records with a wide array of U.S. federal, state, and local law enforcement agencies. This effort cross-referenced U.S. and Salvadoran records on 12,509 subjects and led to 36 arrests in the United States to date.

At the community level in Central America, INL programs strengthen the capacity of police, make neighborhoods more resilient to gang infiltration, and establish trust between the police and the people they serve. Through Model Police Precincts and Place-Based Strategy sites, we strengthen law enforcement's ability to prevent and respond to gang violence by identifying key high-crime areas and communities at risk, and develop strategically-balanced and integrated criminal justice sector projects. As a result of these strong partnerships, homicide rates declined between 40 to 73 percent since 2015 at INL-supported sites.

Through training, technical assistance, and mentoring, INL and our interagency partners enhance the capacity of the Northern Triangle criminal justice sector institutions to improve laws and enhance internal policies and processes to combat corruption and impunity. We work closely with the Attorneys General of the Northern Triangle countries to introduce legal reforms, mitigate gang violence,

and combat corruption. Important advances, including Operation Regional Shield executed in September 2017, are coordinated by Northern Triangle Attorneys General with U.S. support. Through Operation Regional Shield, INL-supported prosecutors and police in Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador, working with DOJ's Office of Overseas Prosecutorial Development Assistance and Training Program (OPDAT) and the FBI, conducted coordinated regional efforts against gang members in their respective countries, which led to the arrest of 3,800 gang members in the United States and Central America, charges against 284 gang members in Guatemala, and the dismantling of eight MS-13 and Barrio 18 cliques in El Salvador.

With U.S. support, our Northern Triangle partners are collaborating more effectively to combat transnational crime. Attorneys General and Ministers of Security meet regularly to discuss increased opportunities for collaboration. Under their "Regional Plan Against Transnational Organized Crime," the governments of El Salvador, Honduras, and Guatemala are sharing information on organized crime investigations and increasing joint patrols of border zones to curb arms and drug smuggling, as well as the movement of gang members.

Caribbean

INL works with partner nations in the Caribbean, our "third border," to substantially reduce illicit trafficking and increase public safety and security. Under the Caribbean Basin Security Initiative (CBSI), INL programs build partner nation capacity for law enforcement and rule of law institutions bilaterally, while also promoting regional cooperation to effectively detect and combat criminal threats affecting both the Caribbean and the United States.

INL technical assistance through CBSI increased the use of anti-money laundering measures in the Caribbean, including the passage of civil asset recovery legislation and the use of asset seizure orders to target TCOs. Cocaine seizures in all CBSI countries have risen substantially since CBSI's inception, increasing fourfold between 2010 and 2017. INL programs helped the Dominican Republic, the largest Caribbean transit point for cocaine in route to the United States, increase its cocaine seizures from approximately 4.5 metric tons (MT) in 2010 to over 15.7 MT in 2017.

South America

After years of progress in combating coca cultivation and cocaine production, Colombia is once again the world's largest producer of cocaine and is

the origin of approximately 90 percent of the cocaine seized in the United States, according to the DEA Cocaine Signature Program. Between 2013 and 2016, coca cultivation in Colombia increased by more than 130 percent and cocaine production by more than 200 percent. The explosion in Colombian cocaine is driving an increase in cocaine use and overdose deaths in the United States and threatening Colombia's internal security and successful implementation of its peace accord. To tackle this challenge together, INL programs directly support Colombia's whole-of-government approach to counternarcotics, which includes robust land and maritime interdiction, law enforcement operations against high-value targets, and manual eradication components as well as host government and USAID alternative development initiatives. INL supports the expansion of the Colombian National Police to rural areas previously under the influence of the FARC to deny TCOs the space to carry out illicit activities and bring sustainability to coca cultivation reduction efforts.

INL support is keeping several hundred metric tons of illicit narcotics from reaching the United States each year by building the capacity of our partners to stem the flow of narcotics before they leave the continent. **In 2017, our joint efforts eradicated more than 25,000 hectares of coca in Peru and more than 52,000 hectares in Colombia. Peru interdicted 36.7 metric tons (MT) of cocaine in 2017, 31 percent more than it seized in 2016. Colombian police and military forces seized 488 MT of cocaine, reaching a record for interdictions in a single year.**

INL partnerships in the Southern Cone of South America are also critical to combatting transnational trafficking networks, corrupt government officials, and gang activity and violence. **INL supports modest programs to strengthen law enforcement and criminal justice in Argentina, Paraguay, and Brazil, including key border areas with Bolivia, Colombia, and Venezuela.**

Addressing Justice Sector Challenges

TCOs threaten the basic governance and legitimacy of our allies in the Western Hemisphere, undermining the rule of law and allowing corruption to flourish. INL supports holistic criminal justice sector programming, leveraging U.S. interagency and state and local expertise to enhance the capacity of partner nations and improve international cooperation on complex criminal investigations. Our programs give foreign partners the skills to defeat TCOs by strengthening legislative frameworks, enhancing investigative functions, supporting cross border law enforcement cooperation, and developing capabilities to prosecute and adjudicate criminal cases. To complement our law enforcement initiatives, INL

supports and advocates for extensive anti-corruption efforts in the region.

Conclusion

TCOs operating throughout the region are complex, diverse, and constantly evolving in approach and tactics to stay one step ahead of law enforcement in order to turn a profit. The crime, violence, and insecurity they perpetuate along the way threatens U.S. national security and the security of our partner nations. Criminal organizations impact every corner of the hemisphere and successfully combating them requires that we draw upon every diplomatic and foreign assistance tool at our disposal to stop crime at its source. These are long-term challenges. Hemispheric wide security, where citizens are protected under the rule of law and criminal groups do not have the ability to operate depends upon having strong and willing partners that believe in strong and accountable institutions. A sustained commitment to our partners in the region is critical to protecting our homeland and the comprehensive approach INL is advancing throughout the hemisphere is enabling the United States to invest strategically to disrupt and ultimately defeat TCOs.