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Hearing Statement of Chairman Bennie G. Thompson (D-MS)

Examining the Department of Defense's Deployment to the U.S.-Mexico Border

June 20, 2019

Using DoD resources for border security purposes is not new, but I support Congressional oversight of the evolving use of these resources by the Trump Administration for what appears to be an immigration-based agenda. I don't think it's any secret that I disagree with many of the Trump Administration's policies affecting the border. Some of these policies directly contradict the shared goal of addressing the ongoing humanitarian crisis on the southern border. For example, last summer the Administration moved to drastically limit or meter the number of asylum seekers processed through land ports of entry along the southern border at the same time the DHS Secretary asserted that going through ports was the only legal pathway to claim asylum.

Then-Secretary Nielsen and the Department call this effort "queuing" or "queue management." I call metering a violation of U.S. asylum law; our laws do not place a limit on the number of people who can apply for asylum. A DHS Request for Assistance to the DoD from December 2018 confirms that DHS was seeking to deter people by stating that: "The successful deterrence at the POEs has resulted in attempted entry between the POEs." This is stated as a reason why DHS would need DoD's support on our southern border.

This begs the following questions – why has the Trump Administration actively aggravated the challenges on our southern border? Are military resources truly necessary to handle these challenges? I specifically would like to hear from our DHS witness on that matter. In early March of this year, then-Commissioner McAleenan stated that the Border Patrol is on track to apprehend more than a million people this year. This is not a new feat, as Border Patrol has accomplished this 19 times over the last 40 years and with less agents, technology, and other tools than what Congress has provided over the past decade.

However, the committee acknowledges that the demographics of people presenting at our border – namely families and unaccompanied children – presents a unique and difficult set of challenges for the Border Patrol. We need to reach a mutually agreeable solution to these immediate challenges in short order to truly begin addressing the crisis. But despite seeing this growing trend over the past five years, the only solutions the Trump Administration continues to implement are ones that prevent people from reaching the United States instead of solutions to manage the reality at hand.

The most wasteful of all is the President's continued obsession with building a "big, beautiful" border wall. The President has resorted to testing the bounds of his authority by diverting money from the Department of Defense in order to build his wall "faster," as he phrased it in February of this year. His efforts to claim a national emergency and use previously appropriated defense funds to build the wall have encountered multiple lawsuits. These machinations continue at the same time DoD manpower and other resources are being deployed to the U.S.-Mexico border.

I am eager to hear from today's witnesses about the work and coordinated efforts being undertaken by the National Guard and DoD with DHS at the border. I would also like to learn more about the costs – both literally and figuratively – of having an extended presence of military personnel in our border communities.

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Media contact: Adam Comis at (202) 225-9978