



COMMITTEE ON HOMELAND SECURITY

Ranking Member Bennie G. Thompson

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Hearing Statement of Counterterrorism, Law Enforcement & Intelligence Subcommittee Ranking Member Seth Magaziner (D-RI)

Transnational Criminal Organizations: The Menacing Threat to the U.S. Homeland

June 7, 2023

I am glad to be holding this hearing to examine threats posed by transnational criminal organizations to the U.S. homeland. TCOs are broad-ranging, originate all over the globe and engage in many forms of criminal activity, from drug and arms trafficking to human smuggling to cybercrime and illegal fishing and mining. And in carrying out criminal activity, TCOs are often violent – degrading the security and stability of the countries they have a presence in, harming and even killing citizens of those countries, and threatening the national security of the United States.

In our neighboring country of Mexico, and in Central America, violent crime has steadily been on the rise at the hands of drug trafficking organizations. It has been estimated that between 40 and 65 percent of all homicides in Mexico are organized crime-related, and it is possible that the percentage is much higher - as it is well known that the cartels have threatened journalists and Mexican government officials in attempts to cover up the numbers and identities of homicide victims.

Mexican citizens are unfortunately not alone in living in fear of extreme violence under TCOs. Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador have some of the highest homicide rates in the world, and women and girls are disproportionately affected by TCO violence. In response, Central Americans and Mexicans flee their homes, to avoid the threat of violence, and travel to the U.S. border. More than two million people are estimated to have left El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras from 2014-2022. Many – hoping to escape violence in their home countries – end up facing danger and extortion from TCOs on their journey. TCOs are connected to migrant smugglers and will charge a fee before allowing the smugglers and migrants to pass through territories under their control.

Streamlining asylum processing and allowing migrants to apply for legal protection before they get to our border is smart policy that is good for our national security because it undermines the financial model of human traffickers and creates more order at our border and points of entry. I am encouraged that the Biden administration is exploring these policies in the interest of American security.

So far, I have also been pleased with the Biden Administration's handling of Title 42's expiration, as recent numbers indicate encounters are down significantly since the week of its expiration, and even lower than the average daily encounters in March. This is further evidence that expanding legal pathways for migrants and a more humane approach to our immigration system is better for our country and better for migrants. By creating further opportunities, we can undercut the cartels' ability to exploit, traffic, and profit from vulnerable people.

It is also critical that the United States collaborate with our partners in Mexico and Central America to stop the primary harm from TCOs to the U.S. homeland – illicit drug trafficking. Mexican drug traffickers

are the primary wholesalers of U.S.-bound cocaine from the major supply countries of Colombia, Peru, and Bolivia. We also know that the Mexican cartels are largely responsible for the procurement of fentanyl precursors from China and control the cross-border trafficking of fentanyl — a drug DEA Administrator Anne Milgram has declared “the single deadliest drug threat our nation has ever encountered.”

As we hold today’s hearing we also need to focus on another source of the cartel’s strength: the illegal export of guns from the United States across our Southern border. ATF estimates that as many as 597,000 firearms are trafficked from the United States into Mexico each year.

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It is shameful and it is fueling the cartels’ violence, which only exacerbates the problems we face here at home. We cannot call ourselves fully committed to the fight against threats posed by transnational crime groups — particularly those operating in Mexico and Central America — until we act on illegal gun trafficking.

My hope for today’s hearing — in addition to objectively examining the TCO threat landscape — is that we begin a discussion on how we in Congress can support the U.S. government’s efforts to stifle cartel activity. It is also critical that we examine the efforts of the Department of Homeland Security, which through several components, including Homeland Security Investigations and the Office of Intelligence & Analysis, develop intelligence, interdict illicit money and goods, and investigate various TCOs. We must ensure that DHS has the resources and the authorities it needs to protect Americans from TCO violence.

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