THE BROOKINGS INSTITUTION

THE MERIDA INITIATIVE AND CENTRAL AMERICA

Washington, D.C.

Tuesday, May 26, 2009

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P R O C E E D I N G S

MR. CASAS-ZAMORA: Well, thank you all for being here today. I Kevin Casas-Zamora, Senior Fellow at the Latin America Initiative, and Foreign Policy program at the Brookings Institution. I'm truly happy that we're having this event on the Merida Initiative and Central America. Even though the foreign policy agenda of the U.S. is as crowded as it has been for some time, I do think that it is timely and necessary for the U.S. to pay a little bit of attention to what's going on in Central America. Central America is a tiny strip of land that, if anything, historically has attracted a disproportionate share of attention here in Washington, D.C.

As you know, in 2007, the United States and Mexico launched the Merida Initiative, a multiyear plan for U.S. assistance to Mexico and Central America aimed at helping those governments combat drug trafficking and other criminal organizations.

In 2008, $465 million were allocated by the U.S. Congress for this purpose; $400 million for Mexico and $65 million for Central America.

In 2009, the level of funding allocated similar, but a distribution is slightly more favorable for Central America. The administration requested $450 million for Mexico and $100 million for Central America. As you would expect, the Mexican component of the Initiative has attracted a lot of attention in the past few months for rather

obvious reasons. We have all, you know, witnessed through the images and chronicles that we see in the media the horrific violence that is taking place in Northern Mexico which, no doubt, has caught the eye of the highest authorities of the new U.S. administration.

Yet, little attention has been given to Central America throughout this discussion. There are many -- one would think there are many reasons for this, and Central America does not share a border with the U.S., number one.

Number two, the Central American component of the Merida Initiative is relatively marginal, and I suspect also that -- and this is sad to say -- that the world has just grown used to the terrible levels of violence that are endemic in Central America. You know, more people are dying now in Central America as result of crime, much of it related to drug trafficking and other forms of organized crime, than at the height of the civil wars. But somehow, that doesn't seem to register and doesn't seem to make it to the news anymore.

The Central American portion of the Initiative scheme that both aims to strengthen the capacity of governments to inspect and interdict unauthorized drugs, goods, arms, and people, also supports the implementation of the U.S. strategy for combating criminal gangs from Central America and Mexico announced in 2007 at a summit between the U.S. and the Central American Integration System, SICA.

The fact that the allocation of funds in the Merida Initiative in 2009 have improved for Central America is probably good news, but leaves open a number of important questions, and I'm just going to mention a few:

Is the allocation of funds adequate to make a difference in the very complex security landscape of Central America?

Are the definition and approach of the Central American component of the Merida Initiative correct? For instance, is the anti-gang strategy effective so that it deserves to get more funding?

How effective has been the disbursement of the funds allocated to Central America so far?

When it comes to Central America, should the focus of the Initiative be in the building of regional programs as a way of circumventing the inevitable coordination problems that arise when seven different countries are involved?

These are only a few of the questions that deserve some attention. That's why, as a Central American, I am very happy that we are having this event that would shed light, I'm sure, on a set of issues that have been under analyzed here in Washington. But there are other reasons that increase my joy of being here. Brookings is very happy to be co-hosting this event with the Washington Office on Latin America, WOLA, which you all know, and you will know it because WOLA has been at the forefront of the debates on U.S.-Latin America relations for a long time. And this is

particularly true when it comes to Central America.

I really hope that this will be the first of many events that the Latin America Initiative at Brookings and WOLA put together. And I would like to say also that I personally regret that WOLA's log was not on the program, but it's in other places. It's -- well, it should be there. It's here, and it's here. And, truly, this event would not have been possible without the cooperation of the colleagues at WOLA -- Lainie, Lilia, Ashley, and Geoff, and on our side my long-suffering assistant, Diana Padilla.

But the main reason for my satisfaction is that we have today an outstanding group of speakers both from Central America and from Washington, from governments as well as civil society and academia. And I would just say a few words about each of our speakers. I will go in the same order that they will speak.

On the extreme right, or -- well, or left, depending on your vantage point -- we have Geoff Thale. Geoff Thale is the Program Director of the Washington Office on Latin America, WOLA. For the last 10 years he has coordinated WOLA's program on Central America and Cuba, and he currently directs WOLA's project on youth gangs, policy, security, and human rights, a project which monitors the gang situation on the ground in Central America. But before that, Geoff has worked on Central American human rights and policy issues since the mid-'80s and has traveled extensively in the region. So, truly Geoff is as good a Central American

expert as you are likely to find in Washington, D.C. So thanks for being here, Geoff.

Then we have Ambassador Roberto Flores, who is currently the Ambassador of Honduras to the United States. Ambassador Flores is a career diplomat and has a truly and long diplomatic career in this country and Honduras, which includes stints as ambassador in London, in Berlin, and twice in Washington, D.C., and between 1999 and 2002 he was the Minister of Foreign Affairs of his country, and, truly, I mean I have very little to add other than to say that it's a joy having you here, Ambassador.

Then we have Ms. Roberta Jacobson, who is the Deputy Assistant Secretary of the Bureau of Western Hemisphere Affairs at the U.S. Department of State, and has been at that position since 2007. But before that she held a number of positions within the Department of State dealing with different Latin American countries. She was the Director of the Office of Mexican Affairs, the Deputy Chief of Mission at the U.S. Embassy in Peru, the Coordinator for Cuban Affairs within the Bureau of Western Hemisphere Affairs. Ms. Jacobson holds a Masters in Law and Diplomacy from the Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy. Thank you for being here.

Then we have, of course, Jose Miguel Cruz, who is currently at Vanderbilt University. He's also an old friend. We met at Oxford a number of years ago, and he had to endure my classes in Latin American politics for a short time, mercifully. And since then he's had a truly

outstanding academic career, and I can say that Jose Miguel is the author and coauthor of some of the very best works available on citizen security in Central America, and particularly on youth gangs in Central America.

As I said, he's currently at Vanderbilt University in the Latin America Public Opinion project, and before that he was for a number of years at the Central American University in San Salvador. And he's finishing his doctoral studies at Vanderbilt University and that's just, I'm sure, the beginning of a truly outstanding academic career that awaits for him. So it great to see you again, José Miguel and great to have you here.

And, finally, we have Mr. Mario Pozas. Mario Pozas is an expert on juridical issues and migration at SICA, the Central American Integration System. Mr. Pozas has 15 years of experience working on things of security, justice, belief in human rights. He has been a delegate for his home country, El Salvador, before the Security Commission, SICA, the Commission on Hemispheric Security, the Committee of Experts Against the Corruption of the OAS, and the Human Rights Committee of the United Nations, among many others.

He has also been an advisor in the Ministry of Public Security in El Salvador, the Ministry of the Presidency, of the Supreme Court of Justice, and the Attorney General’s Office for the Defense of Human Rights in his country, El Salvador. He is also Professor at the University of Central America and in the School of Judicial Training. So, we truly have an

outstanding panel here, and I won't steal more time from them, so I'll give the floor to Geoff. Thank you.

MR. THALE: I want to begin -- I'm Geoff Thale from the Washington Office on Latin America. I wanted to begin by thanking Brookings for organizing this event and working with us on it. For me, it's a great opportunity to talk to a large and diverse group of people about Central America, and a number of us were talking before about how little discussion there is and how little opportunity there is to talk about the issues that confront Central America as a region. So I'm really glad to be able here to do that.

As Kevin noted, WOLA has a program. WOLA has followed Central America issues including police reform issues in Central America for more than a decade. We've had a program on gang violence and human rights issues in Central America for five or six years. We work closely with partners in Central America on the issues, and we're in the process of bringing these programs together into a regionally-focused program on citizen security and human rights. It looks at youth gang violence and prevents some issues; that looks at police reform, and that looks at human rights issues and due process issues related to all of that. So what I say here sort of informs by that perspective that tries to see citizen security, rule of law, police reform issues, all as part of kind of a broad understanding of human rights.

I'm going to try, hopefully in about 10 minutes, to touch on three points. One is to talk a little bit about the security, the situation of citizen security in the region today. The second, talk a little bit about the history of the Merida Initiative and its development and its relationship both to political dynamics here and to the issues in the region.

And then, finally, to talk about where we see the Merida Initiative going from here and kind of some quick comments from WOLA on the issue.

So let me start. I think you all know that citizen security is a huge issue in Central America itself. If you look at all of the polls, security, citizen security along with the economy and employment are the two top priorities. They're repeated over and over again.

If you look at victimization surveys, the percentage of citizens in Central America who've experienced crime whether it's gang violence, whether it's street crime, whether it's organized crime, is extremely high and a matter of serious concern for people throughout the region.

Homicide levels in Central America, in the best countries in Central America, who are Costa Rica and Nicaragua, homicide rates are about 12 or 13 per 100,000, which is about twice the U.S. rate. In the more troubled countries of the region, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, it ranges from about 35 to about 55 or 60 per 100,000. And those are among the highest rates in the world, and they're rates that put fear into people as

they walk the streets and live their daily lives.

And, obviously, recently, though drug trafficking has been a long-term problem in Central America, particularly transit -- Central America is a transit zone – that's a bigger and more visible problem in recent years, and the increasing penetration in Mexican cartels into Central America and their displacement of Central American groups is a serious issue. So citizen security is a huge and a growing problem in the region, a challenge for political stability, a challenge for political leaders in the region, and a challenge for the international community as well.

There's a lot of attention. For many years, the attention that was given to the problem of violence and insecurity in Central America was very focused on gangs, and we all saw the pictures of tattooed gang members, and the accounts of guys who've gone from L.A. back to San Salvador and vice versa, and that was much of the focus of the discussion. In the last year or two, much of the focus of the discussion has been about the growing problem of drug trafficking and the growing visibility of drug traffickers, and (inaudible) in the Petan, and all of that sort of thing.

Both are all real and extremely serious problems. I think it's important, though, to emphasize that the problem of crime and violence in Central America is not only gangs and not only drugs, but it's a much broader social phenomenon, and particularly if you look at victimization surveys and what citizens say, street crime in all its forms and all its

complexities is the part of crime people experience the most. So we're talking not just about gangs and not just about drugs but about other forms of organized crime, car theft, kidnapping, assault, muggings on the street, the whole spectrum of crime and violence.

And looking at the problem of citizen insecurity and the responses to citizen insecurity in Central America requires understanding that whole spectrum and looking at how you need to address that whole spectrum of insecurity and help guarantee security for citizens as they live their daily lives.

So I think that requires the complexity of the problem and the breadth of the problem requires a comprehensive response. It requires a response that includes a part of both primary and secondary prevention; it requires a response that includes strengthening and reform of police forces in the region. That's an issue that has to do with human rights concerns; it has to do with allegations of extrajudicial executions; it also has to do with the simple confidence of the police forces themselves.

Homicide closure rates in Central America and in El Salvador and Guatemala are under five percent. That is from the commission of the crime to conviction the rates are under five percent. For police closure of a case, that is police identify who they think has committed the crime and recommends prosecution, the rates are under 50 percent. Both of those are extremely serious problems, and so there are human rights concerns.

There are also simple efficiency and effectiveness concerns about Central American police forces, and that's true not just about the specialized units that deal with gangs or deal with drugs, but it's about crime and responding to crime across the board.

So our response requires looking at prevention, it requires looking at the police, it obviously requires looking at the -- fiscally as the Attorney General and the judicial systems, and it requires a look at prison and rehabilitation systems as well.

Since 2000-2001, much of the response in the region focused less on the complexity of the problem and the need for institutional strengthening, and much more on kind of short-term zero-tolerance model, do-whatever responses.

What I think is interesting today is that we're beginning to see a shift away in the region, and we're beginning to see a new interest in the international community looking at the problems of crime and violence in a broader and more comprehensive way.

If you look at the Merida Initiative, if you look at support from the European community, if you look at support from the Spanish government, if you look at IDB funding, there's a lot of new funding, a lot of new interest in the issues of crime and violence in the region, and looking at how the broader community can be engaged. And while some of that is driven by a European concern about drug trafficking and U.S. concern

about drug trafficking, much of it is also driven by concerns about political stability on the one side, and consolidating the rule of law in the other.

And I think we see new developments in the region that offer new opportunities both with changes in government and changes in approach, and the growth of regional interests on the part of groups like SICA, which I hope Dr. Pozas will talk about more.

So that said, let me just say a word about -- a little bit about the background kind of from our point of view of the Merida Initiative itself and how it developed, because I think people often see Merida as a single initiative led by U.S.-Mexican relations and with the Central America part sort of following on. In some sense, the U.S. developed a Central American anti-gang strategy completely separately from the discussions about security in Mexico. And that Central America anti-gang strategy, after a lot of back and forth in the U.S. government had five pillars that included increased law enforcement and international cooperation, and included as well a real focus on violence prevention.

When the Merida Initiative was announced, that Central America anti-gang initiative got folded into and accompanied the Mexico program with its focus on primarily on drug and border issues. And so the Merida Initiative have got announced, and U.S. officials began to meet with SICA and with government officials in Central America to define that would be in the program and what areas the U.S. would begin to fund.

In October of 2007, the Merida Initiative was presented to the Congress as a program based on the series of discussions between the U.S. government, SICA and Central American governments. Congress over the next six months revised the program, particularly the Central America piece of it, substantially. They added a greater emphasis on prevention-funding both through the foreign operations process that appropriated money and when the House Foreign Affairs Committee drafted an authorizing bill on Merida itself.

They also set a few rights conditions. They called for the submission of the spending plans on Merida that sought to provide more detail and, subsequently, Congressional Committee asked to take a look at the reasons planned and how Merida fits into the region's plans for violence prevention.

And so in a certain sense, the Merida Initiative started off bringing together two fairly different pieces: a Mexico piece focused on drugs; a Central America piece focused on gangs and in certain ways, the situation in the region, as well as thinking of government, has evolved. And I think we're actually at a moment today to take a look again at what ought to be the priorities of the Merida Initiative and where it should go from here.

And so, first I'd say, as WOLA looks at the region and the challenges of crime and insecurity, and then at the Merida Initiative itself, it's

clear to us that there's a range of problems: There's gang violenceand extortion, there's street crime, there is killings for hire, which is a huge problem in the region. There's drug trafficking and other forms of organized crime and what these require is not a short-term response but a long-term thoughts on comprehensive ones. It's got to include prevention; it's got to include police reform; it's got to include reform and strengthening of fiscal years, the Attorney General's office, and judicial systems.

SICA and the Central American governments have begun to look again at the development of the kind of national and regional comprehensive plans that are being needed to address those kind of problems. And I think one of the challenges is to look at the Merida Initiative on the part of the United States and see how is it articulated? How does it support the deepening of national and regional plans for citizen security, and how is it articulated with those plans. And I think that's one of the major challenges we see and that we'll be seeing in the years to come.

Congress -- I think we have a paper here that takes a quick look at the requests in the appropriations for Merida, the related funds in FY-'08, FY-'09, FY-'10. As we look at the '09 spending plan, the FY-'10 appropriation, and the thinking about future years, just to summarize, we're going to try and look at I think six specific things.

One is we're going to try and look at the balance between funding for prevention programs and funding for law enforcement programs.

Congress has been fairly clear that it would like to see over time something like 30 percent of the funding appropriated for prevention-related programs, and we'd like to see that happens. So we're going to look at prevention versus law enforcement balance.

We're going to try and look at the conditions Congress imposed. Congress imposed a set of human rights conditions on about 15 percent of the assistance, and while we think those conditions might be revised and updated, we think, in general, the notion that there ought to be some human rights conditionality linked to a piece of the assistance is crucial.

Third, we're going to look at the rates of disbursement of the funding. I think Central American governments and SICA felt that funding ought to move more quickly, and we're going to look at that process.

Fourth, we're going to look at the balance between training and equipment. I think there's a real temptation, just as for Central American governments, a temptation to look at quick monodurocytal responses, there's often the temptation to think the solution is to send equipment. and we're going to try and look at the balance between equipment and technical assistance and training which in the long term is, I think, more important.

We're going to look at the police and institutional strengthening side and the breadth of that, and, finally, we're going to try

and take a look at the extent to which Merida is articulated with broader regional plans, national regional plans for citizen security.

So I'll wrap up there. I'm actually fairly well on the time. I would say for WOLA this is a really important issue. Central America has been a long-term priority of ours. Central America is key to U.S. interests in the region, and strengthening citizen security and strengthening the rule of the law is something we ought to be committed to on a long-term kind of way.

We will continue to monitor the Merida Initiative. We'll actually be doing several very specific reports, one on that we think will contribute to that monitoring. One which we'll do shortly, we'll look at the INL and AID-funded Villanueva community policing project. Our partners in the Central American Coalition for the Prevention of Violence have taken look into that and will be circulating their report.

And second, we'll take a look at, based on statistics and partners in the region, the impact of U.S. deportation programs and what happens to deportees.

And finally, late June we'll be taking a look at the status of police reform as a regional issue, and doing a report here done with consultants and partners in the region on that.

So I hope all of that will contribute to a Merida Initiative that helps to genuinely strengthen human rights and citizen security in the

region. And I'll stop there.

AMBASSADOR FLORES: Well, thank you, Mr. Casas-Zamora, for your kind words, and I wish to thank the Brookings Institution and the Washington Office on Latin America for inviting me to participate in this discussion and to be among members of the panel with so much expertise on social and security developments in Latin America. It's a privilege.

Mr. Thale has advanced many concepts that makes it easier for me to dedicate a little bit more time on certain aspects of this Merida Initiative. I will not go into the issue of the process in the origins of the violence in Central America and organized crime, and I will deal basically with the efforts that have taken place at a regional level in Central America to deal with this issue. And then the Merida Initiative offers the components, the balancing components of prevent, and so dedicated to law enforcement, the balancing or not of those components.

First of all, I would like to mention that the enhancement of drug trafficking in the Central American region has a very relatively simple cause: It has been the success of the interdiction procedures in the Caribbean countries in the late '80s, and there's generated a transfer towards Mexico of dealing with the drugs and being there in alliance with the Colombian cartels, and therefore allowing the Mexican traffickers to become more involved and therefore spilling over into Central America as

well.

This would tend to point to the fact that the issue of drug trafficking is not related only to one area, one geographical area, but it involves all of the Central American and the Caribbean region. It involves the demand side on the United States; it also involves the supply side in the producing countries, and these elements mean that this is an issue that has to be dealt with in a highly comprehensive way.

But besides these external conditions that deal with the increment of drug trafficking in the region, there are domestic situations that allow for the security threats to have more of a stay in our countries, and this has to do with the levels of corruption in Central American countries with poorly-funded judiciary system, with a lack of public trusts, and weak law enforcement. But it also has to do with poverty. It has to do with a negative social environment that, unfortunately, is expressant and with the lack of opportunities and of prospects for the young to live a productive and satisfactory life.

We also have an explosive growth of a young population; 45 percent of those in Honduras are under 15 years old, so that says a lot of the need to be able to cater for the future. Honduras does have an institutional framework that would improve coordination, could be meaningful on youth gang membership prevention and on the consumption of drugs. We have a legal framework in place that involves with the

prevention of rehabilitation, social reinsertion of persons relying to the gangs for models. This was created back in 2001, and an institute, The National Institute of Youth, was set up to deal with this.

We also have within the Ministry of Security special national police prevention units that have a community engagement component. There's an outreach program on behalf of security police that goes beyond pure law enforcement, but it also has to go, then, with this prevention part.

Now, the creation of opportunities in vulnerable areas of gang involvement and the outreach of youths at risk are a key element in prevention initiatives. Honduras has currently over 40 programs that vary in size and scope throughout the country that deal with this, and for that we have not only small projects and initiatives addressing issues of education, health, housing, vocational training, employment opportunity, fostering and developing a culture of peace, but we also have this institutional framework that deals with this program that has the Presidential National Program for Prevention, Rehabilitation and Social Reinsertion of the Young; The National Institutes of Youth, The Honduran Institute of Childhood; and finally, the Office of First Lady. There's a long list of institutions that deal with this issue, but that presently need to work together in a closer coordinated way to be able to engage with the general outlook that we have on the prevention side.

The definition of a plan, then, where all of these efforts come

together as a whole with adequate funding would make the prevention of violence a more realistic objective within Honduras itself. But beyond the national commitments to deal with this issue, we also have a regional solution, regional strategies that have been put in place. Some of them were mentioned by Mr. Thale. I would like to go into them just a little bit more, because there is a richness in the institutional framework of Central America dealing with the issue of violence in our region.

Back in 1995, it was for the first time Central America took a big step towards passing from what was a Security Commission dealing basically with inventories, of stocks, of arms in the region as a confidence-building measure among the Central American countries to go into a Security Commission that would be dealing with the way to fight organized crime, the violence of the youth gangs, and the trafficking of drugs. And this commission began to work very intensely on a plan that was finally adopted together with Mexico after discussions with Mexico back in June of 2007. It is because of this strategic plan on security in Central America that Central America does engage with the United States to be able to discuss what the components on the Merida Initiative could look like.

And let's recall in a simultaneous way, United States and Mexico were also taking, they're holding their discussions to be able to come up with their own way of cooperating amongst themselves to deal with this issue. May that deep down what it does is it puts together the Central

American initiative, the Central American plan to deal with organized crime and drug trafficking in the region together with the Mexico-U.S. plan to really mesh it into the Merida Initiative.

I would like to also mention that Central America has wide-ranging framework of institutions that deal also with social development and prevention. One of them is the Central America Committee on Social Development. This committee which was established also in 1995, engaged with Mexico in the period 2005-2007 to carry out a project for determining the consumption of alcohol, tobacco, and drugs in the region, and it included gathering information on the response of the member countries to those additions. Unfortunately, this commission did not take its work a step further. There is grounds, there is an enormous capacity in Central America to be able to have all of these institutions come together and be dealt and deal together with a plan on the issue of narco-trafficking, organized crime in the region. This is one of the elements that can really improve a capacity of the region to deal with the threats that we have at this point.

Now, the Merida Initiative itself, we have to address the issue of a balance. The question that was asked previously: Does the Merida Initiative keep a balance between law enforcement projects and initiatives with prevention needs?

The inception of the Merida Initiative really tends to be more

loaded on the law enforcement side, but there have been efforts to be able to have the preventive side enhanced. If we recall from the outset, the members of Congress when they were presented with the Initiative, they were concerned with the balance between prevention and enforcement. And one of the aspects that was mentioned in the hearings was the need for funding support programs would help reintegrate deportees, for example, back into society and their homes. This is an element that's missing in the Merida Initiative. Another observation was the lack of witness and victim protection programs for the Central American side. Mexico does have that, but our side doesn't. This is another area in which work has to be done.

The case of Honduras we presented to the Central American countries an initiative to have a treaty, a Central American treaty, on the witness protection program for the region. It has been approved at the SICA level and is pending ratification. With this instrument at hand, I'm sure we can be able to present our case, to be able to have access to additional resources for its funding.

Now, if you take a look at the fiscal year 2008 appropriations for Merida, we do find that 25 percent of the $65 million are dedicated to counternarcotics, counterterrorism, and border security; 20.4 percent for crime prevention itself; 44.6 percent for institutional-building and the rule of law involving improving in the justice sector institutions and economic and social development. And the last 9.2 percent was dedicated basically for

programs in Haiti and the Dominican Republic, and the CICG.

Now, there is ground for improvements, but the ground for improvement comes from projects, from the presentation of specific programs that can fully help engage on the prevention side. We have from the Honduran side established many programs that are in place to deal with the Merida Initiative, and on the prevention side I would like to say that when we composed the Honduran side of the task force that works together with the United States on the implementation of Merida, we came up with a strategic plan of Honduras that's specific to the Merida Initiative with four components. It has to do with information systems, investigation and justice administration, drug interdiction and prevention.

And on the prevention side, we have three programs: One is called [Spanish] where young people discuss the risk and consequences of drug consumption. We have a second one on the *fortalecimiento del programa de prevención de drogas* which is implemented by the Ministry of Security through its community outreach projects.

And there's a third one, The Project for Municipal Centers of Conciliation which tends to play a role at the local government level to try to engage with the community on problems solutions that they face. This is just the beginning. There are other programs that are already in place, but this is just a beginning on the capacity of Honduras and of Central America to be able to present projects.

I would just like to mention that on the side of how Central America organizes to be able to engage further in the coordinating role it has to play in this sphere, there's a special unit that is being set up presently in Central America that will be a special of secretariat on an advisory and coordinating role for the Security Commission of Central America, and it is this unit that will engage on the presentation of additional projects concerning prevention. It will be able to tap on all of the sources of the Central American countries and of the institutional framework of Central America to be able to present additional initiatives.

So having said that and having received a yellow paper here, I will just mention that it is evident from the circumstances that prevail in Central America and in the United States and in the source countries that this is an issue that has to be dealt with in a holistic approach. It has to deal not only with Central America as the trafficking corridor but also with the demand side of the United States, as has been acknowledged, and with the source countries. It has to take care of both law enforcement and prevention. One cannot work without the other if we're looking for long-term solutions.

We have to coordinate the regional framework in a better way, and also the national efforts to deal with law enforcement and prevention, and catering -- and we also have to cater for the recession effects in the region. It is affecting our economic performance, our social stability, and

the lack of opportunity that it is generating is part of the problems that have to be addressed.

And, finally, when we talk about these plans, we have to know that they have to be intense, they have to be relentless, and they have to be continuous. That is the only way that our country, including the United States, source countries of the drug in Central America, will be able to overcome this tremendous challenge that we face.

Thank you very much.

MS. JACOBSON: Good morning. Well, I'm delighted to see that everyone is speaking from the podium since I can't do my presentation without notes. I was telling people that I do dozens of presentations a month in Mexico, and we spend all our time focusing Mexico. And so in preparing for discussing Central America, I actually had to study. So I needed my paperwork.

I'd like to start off by thanking both WOLA and The Brookings Institution for the meeting. We do need to be talking about this subject. I think the interest here today shows that there is a great deal of attention that we should be paying to the Central American component of the Merida Initiative and to other things going on in that part of the world.

I think also to some extent one of the good things about having gotten the name of Merida coordinator, in my job I am the Deputy Assistant Secretary for North America, so I cover Mexico and Canada, and

don't necessarily cover Central America on other issues. But part of the way we ensure the integration of the Central American and Mexican components in the Merida Initiative is to sort of put that together in the narrative coordinator in me and bring together those folks who are working on both sides f the equation.

I'll just talk a little bit about the origins of the Merida Initiative. It did actually begin to come into existence when President Bush traveled to the region, throughout the region in March of 2007, but ended his trip first in Guatemala and then in Merida in Mexico. And in both of those conversations with then Guatemalan President Berger and with President Calderon in Mexico, the president and the folks on the trip were very, very struck by the sense of governments being overwhelmed and being challenged by criminality in various forms. I think Geoff is also right when he talks about not focusing solely on gangs, not focusing solely on narcotics trafficking in Mexico, but the broader problem of organized crime throughout the hemisphere.

We also knew as we began to look at what should come next, how can we help, that we needed, if we were successful at all in the Andes, and we believe we have been over the last 10 years, and if we were to be successful working with Mexico, President Calderon had raised that assistance earlier in his tenure, if we were to be successful in Mexico, under no circumstances could be stop looking at a map and not see that the

isthmus would be a crucial part of that equation. We could not leave out Central America.

And before I go on, I also want to talk just briefly about the fact that we have also recognized this, all of us who have worked on these problems in the hemisphere know, that we can't ignore the Caribbean in this equation. Congress sort of pointed that out to us in the first budget for Merida, and we're working now with new funds, working with the Caribbean on a strategy there because we know that this will have a huge impact on the Caribbean.

But we also know, as others have discussed that the impact of the organized crime phenomena throughout that hemisphere is not just on individual and citizen security, although clearly that tops many of the polling that we see. But we also know that it affects democratic development and democratic institutions writ large, and if we want to continue to see the growth of democratic governance, its expansion is deepening, we have to focus on the threat that organized crime poses to democratic institutions.

We also know and we've seen, I think, so recent statements by senior government officials, by the president, by Secretary Clinton and others, that the effect of all of these problems, the creation and the sort of symbiotic relationship, is between the United States and the region. We know that the United States also confronts gang violence, crime and higher

rates of trafficking in persons and illegal drugs.

We also know that there are critical factors in the United States that affect these problems in Central America and Mexico. The president and Secretary Clinton talked about that most directly when they visited Mexico over the last couple of months. The fact that this is a result of an insatiable need for drugs in the United States and an insatiable desire for drugs in the United States, and that there are three areas in which we have had conversations with our allies in the hemisphere for quite awhile, but in which we need to be doing more.

And those three areas in particular are demand reduction, guns, and the trafficking, illegal trafficking in guns, and the movement of bulk cash, illicit cash across borders. And those got picked up I think mostly in the U.S.-Mexico border context, but they are hugely important in the Central American context as well and must be taken into account. And so, when addressing a response to those problems, those responses have to be based on shared responsibility for shared problems.

The other thing that I think is particularly interesting about the Central American portion of Merida and its development is the way in which it was not an assistance program designed in Washington and pushed out into the region, but really became a sort of organic program that came from the hemisphere, and from the hemisphere in a regional organization, in SICA, as we'll talk about later. I think that was really unique in some ways

in that it frustrated some folks, both within the executive and in the Congress because it tended to take longer.

It took longer in some respects because there had to be a Central American strategy that was agreed upon, and then that had to be discussed with the United States and funding priorities agreed to. But I think in the end it's a much more durable program and one that will be more resilient to adjustments, changes, and what happens in the hemisphere and in the region as we move forward.

I think the other thing I want to stress, because a couple of the speakers have mentioned this already, is the balance that we're trying to get right in the Merida Initiative Central America portion. It's critical that we focus on security institutions, but civilian security institutions, building capacity and capability, so that governments can fight against organized crime. But that means supporting the institutional reform necessary to have institutions that everyone is playing on a level playing field, that use strengths in the rule of law, that use strengths in civil society and communities in fighting these problems so that they can outlive what is likely to be even over a number of years a relatively short-term assistance program. These have to be programs that can live on beyond budget cycles in the United States.

You've already heard, I think, about the amount of funding for the Merida Initiative, what we have for both '08 in the supplemental funding

and in '09. I think the important thing to know there, and once the '09 budget was out it was a much more helpful talking point, because when we first unveiled the Merida Initiative, and people looked at $500 million requested for Mexico and $50 million requested for Central America, they were a lot of questions about whether that was the right mix of funding in the region. And I think that it probably was in that first year as we continued to discuss things with our Central American partners, but it was always intended to increase rather dramatically and quickly vis-à-vis Central America and to either level off or begin to declining vis-à-vis Mexico. So they are different programs in terms of their pace and the capacity for absorption in the recipients, and that's why the Central America program, for example, nearly doubled from '08 to '09.

The other thing that I wanted to mention because it was raised in the questions that Kevin posed to us is I think it's also important to know that as much as you have individual line items in the Merida Initiative, especially focused on countries like Guatemala, El Salvador, and Honduras, although all seven countries will be receiving funding, there are major programs within the initiative to strengthen and coordinate policies and programs from the regional institutions. And those include obviously SICA. They include SICTA at the OAS to look at port and aviation issues, customs issues. They include ILEA, the International Law Enforcement Academy, and I think that's very important as we move forward that we strengthen

regional organizations and the coordination among Central American countries and with Mexico, as well as the individual institutions in each country.

We have talked a little bit about what the Central American governments are facing. Some of those really have to be understood, I think, in the historical context of conflicts that are in some respects long over and in other respects very much still with the populations in dealing with the effects of the results of those conflicts and people who've been demobilized effect of the conflict and of the worldwide recession that makes it even more difficult to retrain and work with folks with youth to be, to choose a life that is not based in organized crime.

But there are a number of areas in which we're working that I think are the essential focus of the Merida Initiative, areas that I think I'm just going to sort of run through the list because it's the highlights of the program, the main areas that we're going to be focusing on that are all designed to both treat the symptom of the problem, the results in criminality, and to treat some of the underlying causes of that criminality so that we can have a longer lasting impact.

Obviously, I would say sort of the top two of those are to focus both on narcotics trafficking and gang membership. And you've heard a fair amount already today about both of those. Unfortunately, the isthmus has seen an increase in transhipment and transit of narcotics across territories,

and seen a certain amount in Guatemala in particular, of the pressure that the Mexican government is putting on narcotics cartels there, pushing those, some of those actors further south into Guatemala and elsewhere.

But we also think that it's very important that we focus on some of the areas in which we're going to be focusing on the U.S. side of the border with our Central American counterparts and those include, arms trafficking where there will be regional advisors where we're trying to deploy E-trace, which is a tracing program for seized weapons as well as bulk cash smuggling. There will be a fair amount of attention focused on border issues, customs and border issues, border security matters, assessments done and support provided to increase the ability of countries to interdict, and that means all forms of contraband, everything from narcotics and weapons and bulk cash to human beings.

And I think the other areas that we're focusing on are a little bit more institutional, and those are areas such as judicial reform and judicial systems, ways in which we can strengthen judiciaries. Ambassador Flores talked about under-resourced judiciaries which are particularly susceptible then to corruption, and ways that we can strengthen judiciaries to be more resilient against that threat.

Prison systems where we certainly have seen the results of weak prison systems that are unable to actually keep folks incarcerated or to keep them from continuing to do their business while inside prison walls,

as well as of a very large percentage of the funds will be going to community efforts whether those community efforts are to focus on at-risk youth, whether they're to focus on prevention from gang activities, on greater community policing, and on consensus-building within communities on what they should be doing to try and fight back against organized crime gangs or other forms of criminality in the hemisphere.

So we're comfortable that we've created a program that is comprehensive and balanced and is timely, but there's no doubt that the whole process that we've been through and the process that U.S. assistance goes through in its dispersal is never quite fast enough as all of us would like, but we will be working very hard with our partners continuing to dialogue with SICA and all of its members over the coming years to see that money gets where it's supposed to go as quickly as possible; that we're in a position to monitor those funds and ensure they're being used for what they were intended for; and that we make those adjustments to the program when we have to, to respond to the realities on the ground.

Thank you.

MR. CRUZ: Let me start by thanking Kevin and Brookings for the invitation, as well as WOLA for having me here. I want to approach this program about the Merida Initiative in Central America from a quite different perspective, and this will be a perspective of research, academic research. And basically, I will be talking based on my experience of doing research

on gangs entrance to America and what these can teach us of our initiatives to control violence in Central America.

Let me start by saying that first of all I think discussion this Initiative, Merida, are important for Central America. We've been hearing about Mexico these days, but if you compare, actually, what the situation is in Central America, Central America is quite serious compared to any region of the world. So if we think of Central America basically on what Guatemala or Honduras, we're thinking about really huge levels of violence.

Having said this, I will talk basically on two points. First, the situation of security in Central America based, as I said on my research on gangs and what they can

-- what this research can teach us about the situation, and then what needs to be done in Central America and how the Merida Initiative fits into that.

I started research in violence in Central America almost 15 years ago, first doing polls, doing (inaudible) surveys when we realized that, you know, the Peace Corps in Central America and particularly in the suburbs didn't bring the peace or the so-called social peace. We still have huge levels of violence we see years ago.

But the most I was concerned, the most illuminated and informative research has been that regarding gangs, youth gangs in Central America, not because I think that youth gangs, or maras, as they are called, are the main responsible of violence in Central America. Actually, they are

not. I mean they indeed participate in the bulk of violence that we see in Central America, and they -- we cannot also understand much of the violence in Central America without gangs, but the gangs and maras are not the main responsible or the only responsible of violence in Central America.

Just studying or thinking about maras and how they evolved to these days to become these kind of more like cells of organized crime in some country or another, help us to understand what had happened in Central America and,. where is the main problem of security or the main challenge of security in Central America?

As you know -- and I won't repeat that -- that there are striking differences in violence in Central America if we compare the North of Central America with the maras of El Salvador and Honduras in the South. I mean this doesn't mean that the South is very peaceful, that there are no problems of violence in Nicaragua, or Costa Rica, and Panama, but the extent of the problem is very, very different.

And also the extent of the problem of gangs is very difficult, right? I mean, you know, the maras are basically based in the northern part of Central America where the maras, in El Salvador or Honduras, but you don't find maras, as they are called in Nicaragua nor in Costa Rica. So why we don't find these kind of gangs in southern Central America, particularly if we think on how these gangs in the northern part of Central America have become, you know, so tied with a story shown with some organized crime

ring, in some kind, in some cases even with drug trafficking at the local level or what they call "narcomenudeo"? So why we don't have these kind of guns and this kind of violence in southern Central America?

And I think one of the things that help us to think about that is not only thinking about one of the things that help us to respond to this question is trying to think outside the box of why the usual explanations that are given to the problems of gangs in Central America. Well, the usual explanation given to the problem of guns in Central America were, they are, for example, poverty, all right? The protection on migration, also we find things like the situation of what is called cultural violence. But when we start thinking more deeply, we also find, for example, that Nicaragua, maybe not Costa Rica, but Nicaragua is as poor as northern Central America is, right? I mean and in some cases Nicaragua was even poorer.

When we think about cultural violence in particularly when this is linked to the legacies of war, we also think that -- I mean we also find that Nicaragua went through a war, and so they have what one can call some kind of cultural violence, in the new (inaudible) migration, and most of the explanations to gangs, for example, have focused on migration and have focused on the flotation and this might be true for the case of Nicaragua. But then, when we think of another country in a region that also has migration, and a long story, a long history, sorry, of circular migration and doesn't have gangs and doesn't have maras as we know it in Central America, we cannot help asking why, and this country is Mexico.

I mean, Mexico has had migration and deportation for a long time. But the deportation and migration, you know, hasn't produced or haven't maras as we know it in Mexico.

I mean, if we think, for example, even that one of the gangs that are based in El Salvador, in Guatemala, El Salvador, and Honduras, the 18th Street Gang that was formed by Chicanos and Mexican immigrants in Southern California in the early '70s or the late '60s. I mean, they haven't taken roots in Mexico.

So the Spanish (inaudible) migration still falls short in trying to explain, well, why do we have gangs and why do we have violence in Central America.

And the explanation, rather, I will say lies in another factor, in another area factor. This doesn't mean that migration, poverty, cultural violence, or even legacies of war haven't played a role in the violence we are experiencing in the northern part of Central America.

But yet, they don't help -- they don't explain. They are not quite convincing.

And as I have studied gangs more and more, I have come to the conclusion that the key factor in explaining violence is the state in Central America -- the way the states and institutions have played a role in facing violence, in facing the problems of crime.

And this is to say that in some way the main challenge for security in Central America -- yes, we have narcotrafficking; we have gangs, and we have social violence that Geoff also mentioned.

But the main challenge of security in Central America is in the

state. It's in the institutions of a state that not only are weak; nor only have problems of weakness, but also, for a long time, have been corrupted by the crime itself. And this is -- and this is -- and what I'm saying here is very different to say, okay, we have states in Central America that have some problems of corruption, some problems of institutional weakness.

What I'm saying is rather, that these states, I mean, are really, really invaded by these problems of corruption and impunity and institutional weakness.

And we can trace these problems even from the way the states emerge from the -- sorry -- from the political transitions in the early ‘90s.

There is an interesting report from WOLA actually called Hidden Powers that I think illustrates very well how this took place.

But this has been usually -- this problem usually has been -- usually overlooked. But as we go researching of gangs, as I have been researching of gangs, I have seen and I have come to the conclusion that the problem of gangs, I mean, the way gangs transform themselves to become this major actor of violence is in a large extent because of the way the state has dealt with the same gangs.

And here what I'm saying also is that sometimes the state and state agents have used gangs to their own purposes, increasing violence even in these countries.

And here what I want to stress is that the key problem are state institutions; that are institutions that are fundamentally flawed with impunity, a lack of accountability and oversight, and corruption; and also

penetrated by crime rings.

I mean, obviously, this is not to say that the whole state is penetrated, but those key elements that deal with security -- the police, the courts, the judicial systems, the prison systems -- every time you deal -- you research of gangs you find state agents playing a role there. I can explain this later.

But let me just put the best example of this. The best example of this took place with the Mano Dura plans -- those countries that implemented the Mano Dura plans in the early 2000s -- El Salvador, Honduras -- a kind of Mano Dura -- and Guatemala, which actually was the first country that implemented a sort of Mano Dura with the Plan Escoba, Brume Plan, are basically those that are more puzzled by the problem of violence.

But you can say, yeah, but they did this because they had the problem of gangs. Yeah, to some extent.

But if you look at the statistics, particularly in the case of Guatemala and El Salvador before the Mano Dura Plans were carried out, you will see that in those countries actually the crime rates were going down before the implementation of Mano Dura Plans.

And in both countries, in Guatemala and El Salvador, and in a different way in Honduras, and so in both countries Mano Dura Plans were carried out as part of electoral strategies to boost some of the positions of the parties in the government.

What you see is the Mano Dura basically, open to the spaces for some agents linked to the state, tied to the state to start this all-out war

on gangs. And gangs were, I mean, basically leveled as the main enemy, as the main responsible of violence.

I repeat. I mean, I'm not saying that gangs are not responsible for violence. They are. But every study -- every serious statistics that you see in Central America regarding gangs you see that they are not the only ones and not the main ones.

And this would particularly be true before the Mano Dura.

Mano Dura what it did was basically open the space for the participation of these agents linked to the state to participate in this war on gangs. It also opened the space for the gangs to organize more in a very weak prison systems.

You know, in the -- in just two years, for you just to have an idea, in just two years, for example, El Salvador -- Salvadorian police captured more than 30,000 gang members in just two years and put them, some of them, not all of them, in jail.

I have to say also that these 30,000 gang members in prison were basically where the same people being imprisoned, freed, and imprisoned again.

But some of them went to the gang, went to these prison systems, where they were basically put there and forgotten there, and they have all the opportunity to organize and to strengthen in the prison systems.

As one gang member once told me, I mean, “this was like heaven, because all the homeboys were there. I mean, we met all the homeys coming from different parts of the country, and even from Guatemala and Honduras -- everybody was there.”

And since we have this system to put -- you know, to have a prison -- and this was true for El Salvador and Honduras and later for Guatemala -- this system of putting MS13 gang members just in one prison and 18th Street gang in another prison basically what we have is, you know, a node for MS13, a node for 18th Street gang.

And they had all the time to organize, to make a permanent meeting, as they call it, a permanent assembly to organize themselves. And also it was in the prison system where they got in touch with drug trafficking lords, with some other people that use their service as hit men or as, you know, basically messengers of drug trafficking.

So what we find -- okay, I'll be -- what we found is that the state played a huge role in strengthening gangs; right? And this is something that usually is overlooked when we study the problems of violence.

So how the Merida Initiative fits into this?

I think if we see the Merida Initiative and what is behind that, I mean, this is really a good initiative as long as it tries to address the problem of violence in a comprehensive way, as long as also it tries to see the problem of violence as a regional plan with some feature of national characteristics.

But the problem is that it still overlooks one of the main points of the problem of violence in Central America, and this is basically that institutions need to be reformed and need to be -- and need to have really, really serious mechanisms of control.

As long as we don't have this, basically, we will be giving -- we

will be given technical assistance, we'll given every kind of training; we will give -- we will be giving every kind of technical dispositives to people that some of them are still linked with crime.

And we will be doing -- we'll be in some way strengthening this organized crime.

Just think of all these cases of -- of these scandals that pop up in Guatemala, now in El Salvador with this investigation from the media pointing out that some congressmen and some police are linked to the drug trafficking cartel in El Salvador, and this also in Honduras.

If we don't strengthen institutions in Central America, if we don't focus on strengthening all these mechanisms of control, we'll basically be giving more fuel to the fire. I will stop here.

Thank you.

MR. POZAS: Good morning. Felix Arole, and I have to say that I learned my English at the school, so I'm not sure if it's enough or it's too good for a speech.

So I will read a paper that I wrote specifically for this event. And please forgive some or a lot of mispronunciation this morning. Thank you.

I want to thank WOLA and Brookings Institution for the invitation to participate in this important event in order to attend to Kevin's indications about the question to respond.

I will focus on the strategies needed to meet the challenges of to regional security. In this sense, this presentation is entitled "From the Framework Treaty on Democratic Security to the Regional Strategy" to

indicate that this is a continuous process from the time of internal conflicts to the present.

In this way, I will share with you the main regional actions developed in Central America in matters of security and justice. Then I will make some final consideration and specific comments on the Merida Initiative.

The evolution of the democratic security concept in Central America begins from the time of Contadora and the Esquipulas agreementwith the purpose of seeking a negotiated solution to conflicts in the region, particularly the civil wars in El Salvador, Nicaragua, and Guatemala, and create a firm and permanent peace.

In the same way, the consolidation of Central America through the Tegucigalpa Protocol in 1991 became a truly refoundation of one of the oldest process integration of the hemisphere and gave a new inputs that has allowed, for example, the negotiation, approval, and adoption of the Framework Treaty on Democratic Security in 1995, which is an important instrument and sometimes barely known.

To the growing threat to security in Central America, characterized as a transit area between the illicit markets of production and consumption of drugs, the human smuggling and trafficking, the illegal arms traffic, as well as an endogenous reality regarding the increase of homicides, the actions of gangs among others, motivate the presidents of the region to celebrate the next ordinary summit in Boca de Sambrano, Honduras in 2006, which addressed issues such as, the integral treatment of minors in conflict with law or in social risk, the Central American Observatory on

Violence, the celebration of a convention for the protection of witness, and the implementation of policies and actions for the prevention and combat of crime, among others.

All these efforts culminated in the Security Strategy for Central America and Mexico approved in Guatemala in December 2007, which we will discuss in detail later.

The foundations of this new concept on democratic security established in the Article I of the treaty are the following: democracy and supremacy of law; unconditional respect for human rights; creating the conditions for personal, family, and social life -- live in peace, freedom, and democracy; a strengthening of civil society; political pluralism; economic freedom; overcoming poverty and extreme poverty; promotion of sustainable development; protection of the consumer, the environment, and the cultural heritage; the eradication of violence, corruption, impunity, terrorism, drug trafficking and arms trafficking; establishing a reasonable balance of forces between the countries.

As you can see, it's a comprehensive concept that highlights the safety of people before the safety of the states, as it was during the armed conflicts.

To explain what the security strategy is, I would like to point out its purpose is to establish the components and activities to strengthen regional security and achieve human development goals.

Meanwhile, it intends to integrate the various regional efforts, to harmonize them and offer better results; to facilitate coordination, exchange of information and experiences among institutions and operating

bodies; and identify and manage the funding needs, resources, and training.

It means that the strategies raises priorities for the region in security matters; recognize and takes the action already being executed while providing a coordinated work between states and moreover, it's a platform to allow the multi-participation of the international cooperation according to its expectations and priorities.

The strategy has a huge added value which consists in its all-in-one approach allowing to address the problems of insecurity from its causes and generating factors to its effects.

That's the reason that it has a component for the violence prevention, rehabilitation, and reintegration, as well as another for fighting crime.

None of these areas will be complete if the institutional strengthening will not be pointed out to support this process of changes and face these challenges to come.

In the case of violence prevention, rehabilitation, and reintegration, the strategy proposes to address the principal factors leading to the situation of violence in the region through the empowerment of Central America Secure Plan, which includes an agenda for the rescue of communities at risk, building spaces for citizen participation, neighborhood organization and leadership; attend the phenomenon of young people dropping out of school; and a program for handling a (inaudible) for gang members.

It includes the strengthening of public policies and the

exchange of good practices in this area.

It is important to pay attention of the current situation of the prisons, which are focused an additional threat to security as a result of the overcrowding and the lack of effective and massive programs of reintegration.

With respect to the execution of the law, the strategy includes 11 components that go from regional plans to fight organized crime, executed by the heads of police commissions in Central America, to mechanisms for the interdiction and interception of drug trafficking in maritime, air, and land spaces of Central America or the distribution of funds and seized property.

It includes also attend the situation of deportees with criminal records or ex-convicts; the analysis and research of the criminal activities of gangs; a frontal attack on the pandemic of homicides in the region, as well as an effort to combat illicit weapons trafficking, terrorism, and corruption.

This will not be possible if the agencies inherited of enforcing the law are not strengthened and the regional communication between them is not improved.

There is also a requirement of new legal instruments to protect victims and witnesses in Central America; facilitate the arrest and extradition of fugitives; or the harmonization of criminal law and criminal procedures.

All these must be accompanied by adequate modern training, particularly in the police investigation and intelligence to ensure the

effectiveness of the actions of police, prosecutors, and judges.

Another component of great importance in this strategy has to do with Central America institutions in matters of security.

In this sense, also we have the Security Commission established by the Framework Treaty and integrated by the vice ministers of foreign affairs, defense, and public security or the interior.

The fact is that it was required a permanent instance fully integrated in the SICA and allowing the strategy monitoring and execution, as well its periodical evaluation.

In this regard, since March of this year, the unit of Democratic Security has been established within the General Secretariat of SICA.

With the purpose to proceed with the implementation of the strategy, it was realized an exercise to establish its global cost.

The outcome of this exercise reaches $953 million, which can be recognized as a very high amount, but it's minimal if you compare to the illegal drug market or the illicit human or weapons trafficking in the region, for example.

Ultimately, this amount should be seen as an investment on human development in the region and an investment on hemispheric security.

I must mention the different mechanisms, agreements, or strategies that are currently being executed in Central America.

As you can see, there are many of them and the challenge is to maintain between each of them a consistent, integral, and systematic link. This is a proper mission of the Democratic Security unit of SICA.

First, we must emphasize on the security strategy in Central America and Mexico, which we have been talking about it in this presentation. We also need to consider the importance of the Merida Initiative, which I'm going to develop later on.

Also Central America has one of the few Interpol regional offices in the world, which facilitates communication, research, and coordination between different countries' police.

Moreover, in addition to the Central America Security Commission, to which I referred earlier, a committee of ministerial rank has been established to prevent youth violence and care for youths at risk or in conflict with the law.

Another important experience is the regular dialogues that Central America keeps with the United States and Mexico in matters of security.

For conclude this presentation, I want to quickly mention the Central American program for the Control of Small And Light Weapons, the Central America Observatory on Violence, OCAVI; and two additional bodies -- the Permanent Central Committee for the Eradication of the Production, Trafficking, Consumption and Illicit Use of Narcotic Drugs and Psychotropic Substances; and the Central America Institute of Higher Education for Police.

Ultimately, in addition to these traditional challenges and threats to democratic security, Central America is not just facing a sophisticated and increasing aggressiveness and violence used by criminal organizations, but also economic and even health risks arising from the

same global crisis that threatens to increase poverty, unemployment, and migration.

While the relationship between these factors and security isn't clear, the maintenance or aggravation of these factors makes it is difficult to ensure that there will be a substantial improvement in the reduction in violence and crime not really because this -- there are factors considered conducive to crime, but rather by the decreasing of institutional response capability of the states by (inaudible) a reallocation of resources to address the crisis.

Otherwise, any effort to reduce violence in Central America should consider the relationship between regional and national, insuring complementary relations and synergies between these levels.

In conclusion, the Merida Initiative is, without a doubt, very important. However, three aspects must be considered: first, to maintain the integral approach on the phenomenon of violence and insecurity, which means attacking its causes, including the reduction of the demand for drugs; second, strengthening regional actions because we're talking about transnational organized crime; and third, demonstrate in the action plan with (inaudible) of the regional security strategy is an imperative to increase funds and resources.

Thank you very much for your time, and I am at your disposal for any questions you have. Thank you.

MR. ZAMORA: If I could have a mike, I'm going to go back there. Very quickly.

I'm guess I'm going to use very briefly my privilege as

moderator to pose a couple of questions to the speakers, which, by the way, were terrifically disciplined when it comes to the use of the time. So I thank them for that.

I have a question for -- it's really for Geoff.

Much has been made of the similarity, particularly by critics of the Merida Initiative, of the similarities between the Merida Initiative and Plan Colombia.

Actually, when you look at the Merida Initiative closely, it seems to me that, in many respects, the differences are much more significant than the similarities with Plan Colombia.

So I would like you to elaborate a little bit on that.

And actually one of the differences that is very obvious and very striking is precisely the fact that the Merida Initiative involves several different countries.

And that leads to my second question, which is, you know, it's all very well that the conception and the overall design of the Merida Initiative is sound and coherent and probably adequate.

But the proof of the pie is in the eating. And in that sense, I would like to ask both Ambassador Flores and Ms. Jacobson about the Merida Initiative in practice.

In the case of Ambassador Flores, from the standpoint of Honduras, how effective has the disbursement of the funds been so far?

And from the standpoint of the U.S., I would like you, Ms. Jacobson, to talk a little bit about the coordination problems involved in dealing with seven Central American countries, and how do you go about

this?

I mean, how do you use, for instance, regional instances to circumvent some of the coordination problems involved? Is that a way out?

So those are my points and I would very much like to involve the audience and to stimulate a dialogue with the speakers.

I guess the way to go about this is we're going to take a few questions and let the speakers answer, and then we'll do another round.

So, Diana Negroponte is raising her hand. And, by the way, I'm going to use -- I mean, now that Diana -- and before she speaks -- well, I would like to congratulate Diana, because well, she has a publication precisely on the Merida Initiative in Central America which is finally out.

It's been a long time coming, and the publication is out in the lobby, and I very much encourage you -- as I understand it, it is free, isn't it?

So good. I mean, so you can have a very good publication on the Merida Initiative in Central America by Diana Negroponte, and it's free. So and congratulations, Diana, seriously.

So now your question.

MRS. NEGROPONTE: Thank you, Kevin, and thank you for bringing such a special group of speakers to us in Washington, speakers who normally we do not hear, and I really want to congratulate you on reaching into the hemisphere and drawing the best.

My question is for Deputy Assistant Secretary Jacobson and also for Jose Miguel Cruz, and it regards the International Law Academy outside San Salvador.

And, Roberto, I do recognize that ILEA, as it's called in

shorthand, is not an integral part of the Merida Initiative.

My concern and my question is regarding where the curriculum developed at this Law and Justice Academy has been adapted to the problems of Central America or whether -- and particularly El Salvador, where it's placed -- or whether it is a replica of Law and Justice Academies that we, the U.S. government, have in Africa and other parts of the world?

MR. ZAMORA: There in the third row.

MR. SCHNEIDER: Mark Schneider, International Crisis Group.

Again, thank you very much for bringing together the group. I guess I have a series of questions.

Virtually none of you have mentioned the military. Yet, in fact, the military has been called out in Guatemala and in several countries; and, to some degree, represents the failure of these civilian law-enforcement institutions to respond to the problems of drug trafficking, et cetera. So I'd be interested in your comments.

The other -- I didn't hear very much about either benchmarks, timelines, or accountability -- that is, monitoring of actions in any of the programs. I'd be interested whether they exist, and, if not, who's proposing them.

And finally, it seems to me that the two issues that are crucial given many of your comments about the -- let's say the existence of organized crime within the judicial institutions, within the police forces in many other countries.

Is there any agreement on how you carry out standards-setting vetting of the judiciaries and the police forces to, in fact, try and get to a situation in which you attack the presence of organized crime and drug trafficking within those institutions?

Thank you.

MR. ZAMORA: Second row here.

MS. HAYES: Hi, I'm Margaret Hayes, and I teach some of this at Georgetown University. I was struck in the presentations -- and I think both Geoff and Ambassador Flores commented on the need for a holistic approach.

And yet, nobody really focused on the issue of jobs, employment, creation of alternative occupation for people who might potentially be drawn to gangs.

And I'm struck in this by research, I think, that was done by the Central Bank of El Salvador in which young people surveyed were expected only to, you know, get to the age they could apply for a visa and go to the United States -- no commitment to their home -- expectations at home.

Does a holistic approach not have to include economic development, jobs, and so forth? And where does that fit in the planning for the Merida Initiative?

And a second and briefer question, Jose Miguel, you are very passionate about the need to reform institutions. We talk a lot about this, but what does that mean? What concretely needs to be begun that's feasible in order to institutionalize change in institutions? Thank you.

MR. ZAMORA: I'm going to take one more for this first round.

The fourth -- Bob.

By the way, I mean, you guys on the right hand side of the auditorium can ask questions -- I mean, are allowed to ask questions.

MS. OLSON: Hi, I'm Joy Olson from WOLA. Jose Miguel, my question is for you.

You talked about how state policies have contributed to the violence. Do you see those policies changing? Are the governments changing strategies or, for example, the incarceration strategy of putting all the gang members in one prison? Are things like that changing or the same?

MR. ZAMORA: So we're going to leave it at that for the first round, and I'll give the floor to the speakers. I guess I will start with -- yeah.

MR. THALE: I'll try and be very brief, because I know some people don't have a lot of time.

To Kevin's question about Plan Colombia, and I think actually that relates to Mark's question, WOLA, as many people here may know, has been quite a critic of Plan Colombia overall.

And our criticisms come in two parts. One is that Plan Colombia, from our point of view, has failed as a counter-drug strategy, while it's probably succeeded as a counterinsurgency strategy, although, from our point of view, at a very high price in terms of human rights.

I think one of the positive things about at least the Merida -- the Central America side of Merida is that it's very much focused, although we'd say it's not as focused as it ought to be on prevention and on some of the institutional strengthening issues Jose Miguel talked about; it's much

more focused on civilian institutions and the civilian side of crime and insecurity; and that there's relatively little funding for -- in fact, I think the only military funding is for the Costa Rican Navy at this point.

And from that point -- although I -- back to Mark's point, I think that the deployment of Central American militaries in crime-fighting does underscore the weakness and the inability of governments and police to address the problems of crime or the important challenges to strengthen police over time and make them capable of both being effective and respecting of human rights.

And I think, as Jose Miguel says, that's a really long-term challenge.

Just related to my last point would be to say that I think the question Mark raises about how you actually do genuine vetting processes, I don't think there is. I suddenly don't have an -- you know, an answer to that question.

But I think it's one of the challenges that confronts everybody as you look towards reforming institutions in the region.

MR. BERMUDEZ: Well, thank you. I would like to add my two cents to three of the questions. The first one concerning disbursement of the Merida Initiative.

In the case of Honduras, we the first country to actually sign the letter of agreement with the United States back on the 9th of February, and disbursement has taken place.

Out of the less than $10 million assigned to my country three (million) has been disbursed.

The way they have been allocated I cannot give you any details, because I'm not familiar with that. But it is underway.

The issue of the vetting, especially of the judicial, is a very complicated one, because it's politically charged. Well, it is also in many countries.

So -- but we have advanced in the case of Honduras, first of all separating the period in which the judges serve is no longer linked to the period of the administration. And that allows for a separation in some way or another of the way they are elected.

The holistic approach. Yes, this is really a must, to be able to deal with this problem. Now how do -- how do we -- how can we fit the jobs, the employment, the poverty, the development issues within the Merida Initiative.

I think this is a matter for coordination. It leads us to the initial subject of how do we integrate our societies in our countries? How to relate to each other and Central American countries? And how do we relate as neighbors with the United States to deal with this?

It's a coordinated effort that has to be undertaken, and I would just like to add on this note that there is a need for all actors to get involved.

And this would mean a further enhancement of participation of civil society within our own countries to be able to define, to be able to take part in the decision-making process of the policies that have to be enacted.

Thank you.

MR. ZAMORA: Secretary Jacobson.

MS. JACOBSON: I'm going to choose to answer a couple of these, I guess.

I think the question that Kevin raised -- and he raised with us beforehand on the issue of coordination -- is a tough one, and I tried to address this a little bit in my remarks.

You have seven countries in Central America. You want to also make sure that those countries are not only working with each other, but working with Mexico and Colombia.

And we see a process that's under way and actually I think very vibrant now among the countries of Central America with both Colombia and Mexico -- attorneys general meeting very often -- other practitioners, which I think is all to the good.

I think there's a couple of different ways to do that. One is obviously people who train together tend to have a higher degree of confidence among each other, and so the more training that you can do regionally, if that's appropriate, if you do it at ILEA or other places, the better off you're going to be for future relationships of confidence among those institutions.

We've also done some of the programs regionally, whether that's the ATF advisor, the arms trafficking advisor, who I think will be based in El Salvador, but the regional and sort of ride the circuit, or whether it's ensuring that FICA meets often enough with practitioners who are implementing Merida programs and ourselves to talk about lessons learned and talk about implementation in ways that are beneficial to all of the participants.

On the ILEA, I think, you know, I don't have their curriculum sitting in front of me, but I think ILEA is a combination. There are clearly courses being taught there that are taught everywhere in U.S. academies. There are standard courses on criminal investigation or forensics training that try and raise standards to sort of state-of-the-art was able to be sustained in the region that would be standard.

But there are quite a few things that they implement that are very specific to the region and the region's needs and are designed by folks in the region, by experts, to address their needs. And some of those, for example, anti-gang programs that cover advanced techniques for working forensics, witness judicial security, prevention, rehabilitation.

I don’t know that the anti-gang programs are replicated everywhere in U.S. academies around the world, whether it's chemical precursors -- courses on chemical precursors for drug manufacture. Those are things that were developed specifically for the region and its concerns.

I think on the issue of judicial reform, judicial corruption, this is among the hardest issues to get out, I think, because, in general, remember we're talking about an executive branch working with executive branches in most of these countries. And that's the way we operate.

So what you're doing is you're looking at another branch of government and how you can implement programs with that other branch of government and begin to have a dialogue with the judiciary about what's needed, how much reform, but even in the countries with whom we're working, those executive branches are a little bit wary sometimes about obviously imposing things on another branch of government, the branch of

government which we have often talked about as the goal being for independence.

So I think that you start -- frankly, you end up starting small on the judicial reform issue or working with judiciaries, and you build on that, whether it's beginning with exchanges and conferences and coordination and talking about the issue more openly to then get into sort of training and technical assistance.

And finally, just to Margaret's question about sort of jobs programs or economic assistance, my answer on that frankly would be sort of been there, done that. I don't think a major economic development program is actually what's needed from the United States right now.

I think what's needed is thorough implementation of the Free Trade Agreements, along with the technical assistance that is supposed to be provided as part of that, which is in capacity building to take advantage of the Free Trade Agreement, which will produce a more sustainable economic development process over time.

Now obviously a lot of this has been undermined or stopped by the economic -- the global economic situation and is not going to pick up for the Central America region or for Mexico until the U.S. economy and globally things improve.

But I would hope that we keep our focus on capacity building, technical assistance, and training towards exploiting free trade, if you will, to the greatest are possible.

MR. ZAMORA: Jose Miguel?

MR. CRUZ: Yeah. Regarding ILEA, I'm not familiar to what

ILEA is teaching. But if (inaudible) based what I've seen on the crackdowns, police crackdowns in Central America and those that you could read in the academic papers here in the U.S., basically when you see what the police has been doing, the police have been doing in Central America, the crackdowns -- the Mano Dura crackdowns -- the way they proceed with the gangs, it's basically the same mechanism they have transplanted what, for example, the LAPD did in LA during the '80s regarding gangs; right?

And from a researcher point of view, I mean, I find it very difficult to understand why they are replicating that, when in the case of L.A., for example, some of the strategies regarding gangs have failed; right?

And they keep doing that in the case of Central America, replicating these kinds of things.

So this is one of the big questions: I mean, why they basically replicate these kind of things without taking into account the specifics of the countries.

And about the role of the military certainly, I didn't mention because in my feeling that the military institutions as institutions are no longer a problem in Central America. This doesn't mean that some military -- some people in the military are involved in crime; right? But as military, as we saw in the past -- I mean, during the '80s and the early '90s, as the military institutions, I mean, not sure about the will, you know, they will follow, you know, institutional settings, I would say that it's no longer a problem as in the past.

So that's why I didn't mention the military as a problem. Again, it doesn't mean that some militaries are involved in these.

But since the burden of the fight against crime has been on the polices on the civilian polices, you see most of the problems of corruption, of crime involvement in the police themselves.

For example, I forgot to mention this, but in our last survey, American (inaudible) Survey in Vanderbilt University, we asked, for example, the people whether in different countries in or Latin America where they think that the police in their community are involved in crime or they fight against crime.

And the results were striking. I mean, in the case of Guatemala, 65 percent of the population think that the police and their community are involved in crime; huh -- their police -- compared to just 20 percent in the case of Nicaragua.

In El Salvador, 45 percent of the people think that the police are involved in crime; and in Honduras, 48 percent.

So these are huge numbers. If you think that half of the people think that the police that covers their community are involved in crime, I mean, this is a serious problem; right?

And this takes me to the next -- to the next. What does it mean to reform institutions? I mean, what I think it's definitely -- it doesn't mean what has been done so far. When we hear about reform -- reforming institutions in the past, for example, the judiciary in the past have been basically providing technical assistance, basically saying well, we have the follow these guidelines.

But it hasn’t meant actually cleaning those institutions are strengthening those mechanisms within institutions to clean these

institutions for all the people involved in crime; right?

For example, USAID has spent millions and millions of dollars on judicial reform in Central America. And I'm still -- I mean, these haven't meant basically that all these people involved in crime, all these corrupt judges, all the police members are involved in crime or out of -- this don't -- having mean -- having meant -- sorry -- that they are (inaudible) institutions. They're still in institutions.

So I think we have to strengthen in all these mechanisms so internal control, internal affairs and these kind of things.

Another policies regarding gangs changing or not, I think the discourse has changed a lot since the Mano Dura approaches failed so obviously; right? I think the discourse has changed, but, in practice, at the streets, I see -- actually, I see little change. I mean, most of the policies regarding gangs are still based on suppression.

I mean, and that's okay. I mean, to suppress gangs it's okay as long as it's complemented with prevention and also with oversight in the institution itself.

But I don't see these kinds of things happening in Central America. I don't see either the discourse of Mano Dura, because it's no longer successful. But still, you see that in the streets the police still doing all these crackdowns on the gangs in the same way as in the past.

MR. ZAMORA: Thank you. We can take a couple more questions, and then we have to -- then we have to go.

So. Well, this one over there, and another question?

MR. MODESTE: My name is Danette Modeste from the OAS.

I was really impressed by the presentation of Mr. Cruz, because quite often the experts come in and say the causes of the problems are poverty, and, as you mentioned, a culture of violence. I spent a number of years working in Haiti, representing the OAS.

And I got to understand the problem from the political perspective -- the corrupt politicians, the corrupt state institutions, and their contribution to the problem.

We had a situation in which, as we all know, the Haitian military was notorious for overthrowing governments. And the politicians on the left of the political spectrum decided to solve that problem they needed to create their own people's militia.

And so they turned the small neighborhood gangs into organized fighting forces that they used as the first line of defense of the regime.

And it was an elaborate scheme. The police who were supposed to be involved in solving the problem were part of the problem.

The judges were involved in collaboration with the politicians to protect those guys from the slums that were involved in that elaborate scheme.

We could not solve the problem unless we tackled it from the political perspective, which was the cause of it.

Now let me give you a brief example. In 2005, our organization was involved in registering the population for the elections that were coming up. Three of our workers -- I think two were from Guatemala -- were kidnapped and taken to the slums.

The U.N. came in and created a crisis center within our offices to try to resolve that problem.

After three days, I decided our people will not be released unless I go to the politicians. I called a gentleman who had direct contact with one of Haiti's leading politicians, and I sent that gentleman to him with one message: I said these are the workers that are registering the population for the elections. You are a politician. Registration translates into votes.

If these people are able to register a lot of the people from the slums to vote in the elections, you stand to benefit. I said but these are the people that you have kidnapped.

Is this the way you are rewarding them? You know what happened? The gentleman came back to me to say expect a call at 2:00 p.m. tomorrow.

MR. ZAMORA: Excuse me, sir. I mean, can you push your question to the speakers, please?

MR. MODESTE: No, I was just making a comment in support of his presentation. Two o'clock the following day --

MR. ZAMORA: But we'd appreciate to let other people --

MR. MODESTE: -- yes.

MR. ZAMORA: -- participate.

MR. MODESTE: Two o'clock the following day, the phone call came from the gang leaders. They said, sent to collect the people. The point I am making we would not solve the problem unless we went directly to the politicians that were causing the problem.

So the implication of the state in the criminal activities is critical, and we will not make progress unless we tackle it from that perspective.

MR. ZAMORA: Thank you. One final question, if there's any? I don't know if you have any reaction to the comment, Jose Miguel?

MR. CRUZ: No. No.

MR. ZAMORA: Well, thank you very much for coming today, and, by all means, I think the discussion has been extremely enlightening, and I hope it will be the first of many that we have both on the Merida Initiative and on Central America.

And please give our speakers a warm round of applause. They're certainly earn it.

Thank you.

(Applause)

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