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Statement of Chairman Bennie G. Thompson

Examining Preparedness and Coordination Efforts of First Responders along the Southwest Border

March 31, 2009 (Washington) – Today, Committee on Homeland Security Chairman Bennie G. Thompson (D-MS) delivered the following prepared remarks for the Emergency Communication, Preparedness, and Response Subcommittee hearing entitled “Examining Preparedness and Coordination Efforts of First Responders along the Southwest Border”:

“For the past several weeks, news analysts and government officials have talked a great deal about drug cartel-enabled violence in Mexico and its effect on American cities -- especially our border communities.

We’ve heard some jarring facts too.

President Calderon has had to deploy 45,000 Mexican troops to secure cities around his country in the absence of consistent and credible police forces.

Here at home, the National Drug Intelligence Center at the Justice Department estimates that Mexican drug cartels have networks in at least 230 American cities.

While the media’s attention has been focused on the drug-cartel related violence in Mexico that is creeping toward 2,000 miles of the southwest border, today’s hearing is meant to focus on the sheriff, police officers, tribal law enforcement officials and the many first responders who are responsible for 98,480 square miles along the border.

Everyday, the first responders along our southwest border are addressing drugs, human and weapons trafficking and other related crimes.

On *Face the Nation* this Sunday, President Obama surmised that the violence spilling over from Mexico’s fight against drug cartels has gotten “out of hand” and is a serious threat to U.S. border communities.

In response to the threat, last Tuesday, the President and Secretary Napolitano unveiled a Southwest Border Security Initiative, redirecting Federal agents and assets to bolster our efforts both in Mexico and along the border.

At the strategic policy level, the goal behind this initiative is clear --- to ensure our security by strengthening law enforcement’s capacity to affect the flow of money and guns southward into Mexico, and to protect our communities from crime and those who perpetrate it.

At the operational and tactical level, where these policies are translated into action, we must pay special attention to the importance of shared responsibility and coordination among all elements of national power.

This is especially true in our border communities where Federal responsibilities for the nation’s security and border protection overlap with the public safety efforts of State and local partners.

I look forward to hearing assessments from our panel as to what coordination mechanisms and operations do and do not produce fruitful results, as well as their views as to how the Federal government should support, coordinate with, and when appropriate lead community security initiatives along the border.

Both the Secretaries of Homeland Security and State have noted that demand for drugs in the U.S. helps to fuel the drug-cartel violence in Mexico.

But we are not a Nation that will let intimidating and gruesome acts by the cartels disrupt our border communities or compromise their safety.

When I assumed the helm of this Committee, I made it a point to advance homeland security policy that charts the course towards freedom from fear.

To that end, I am happy to see that our government's response is not to stir fear or hatred, but rather to encourage dialogue with Mexican officials and ensure that necessary resources are available to calm the explosion in violence.

And there must be a unified effort throughout our government to ensure that our message is delivered consistently to our intergovernmental and international partners.

Last week, Secretary Clinton visited Mexico to communicate our shared commitment.

Later this week, I will travel with Secretary Napolitano to visit our border communities and examine DHS efforts to enhance coordination with State, local, and Tribal law enforcement officials on the front lines.

Next week, the President will visit Mexico to reinforce the message of support and resources as well.

In short, we know that our Nation's security and resilience is tied to the stability of our neighbors, and the whole of government must continue to do all it can to ensure unity and utility of effort.

I am confident that strong coordination and preparedness capabilities among our Federal, State, local, and Tribal governments will help us to achieve this goal."

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