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Statement of Chairman Bennie G. Thompson

Combating Border Violence: The Role of Interagency Coordination in Investigations

July 16, 2009 (Washington) – Today, Committee on Homeland Security Chairman Bennie G. Thompson (D-MS) delivered the following prepared remarks for the Border, Maritime, and Global Counterterrorism Subcommittee hearing entitled *Combating Border Violence: The Role of Interagency Coordination in Investigations*:

“The statistics are grim. Drug-related deaths have more than doubled in the last two years. Data on arms seized in Mexico show a growing number of increasingly lethal weapons.

For too long, this important fight has been hampered by turf battles and a lack of cooperation among the federal agencies responsible for keeping drugs and guns from crossing our borders illegally.

Memorandums of Understanding, which were supposed to foster coordination among agencies in such investigations, were not updated for years or even decades.

Agencies were unwilling to depart from the old ways of doing things, so efforts to update the agreements remained in limbo even after the Department of Homeland Security was created.

As a result, there was confusion about roles and responsibilities and personnel that could have assisted in some of these cases were unable to do so because of outdated constraints.

In short, narcotics and weapons investigations were simply not as effective as they could have been.

Recently, however, the Obama Administration has taken significant steps to address these problems.

Just last month, Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) signed new interagency agreements with the Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) and the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms, and Explosives.

These agreements are intended to better coordinate narcotics and weapons investigations and provide additional resources to fight violence along the border.

In particular, the ICE-DEA agreement allows for an unlimited number of ICE agents to be what is referred to as “cross-designated” to investigate drug cases with a nexus to the borders.

This change is long overdue and will put ICE’s 6,000-plus agents and DHS’ sizeable presence at our nation’s borders to better use.

It is important to note that the MOUs are not a panacea for the coordination challenges faced by the agencies.

Years of operational practice cannot be changed overnight with the stroke of a pen.

Instead, it will take real commitment – from the Secretary of Homeland Security and the Attorney General down to the agents in the field – to make these agreements work.

The American people, who continue to be concerned about possible spillover of border violence, expect no less. And certainly Congress expects no less.

I can assure you that this Committee will monitor implementation of the MOUs closely and do everything possible to make certain they are effective.

I hope to hear from the witnesses about their commitment to these agreements and to ensuring a unified federal law enforcement response to drug and weapons trafficking across America's borders.”

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