



Press Release

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Promoting Human Rights, Democracy, and Social and Economic Justice in Latin America

WOLA Sees Shortcomings and Questions Priorities in Mérida Plan

The U.S. Senate has approved \$400 million to help Mexico fight drug-related violence, sending the bill to President Bush for his signature. Known as the Mérida Initiative, the package includes a further \$65 million in security aid to be divided among seven countries of Central America plus Haiti and the Dominican Republic.

WOLA today applauds the recognition, implicit in the plan, that Mexico and the United States share responsibility for addressing drug trafficking and violence. But WOLA finds serious shortcoming in the plan's specifics.

The plan calls for \$73.5 million to be spent on judicial reform, institution-building and other activities aimed at strengthening the rule of law and combating corruption in Mexico. It also allocates \$3 million to help Mexico create a much-needed national police registry. These are positive steps, but they represent nowhere near enough money for what should be the core of the package – reforming and improving Mexico's deficient police forces, judiciary and other public-security institutions.

Instead the bulk of the funds will go to pay for military equipment that will do little to bring the accountability, transparency and reform that Mexican security forces need to fight criminal groups over the long haul. The emphasis on military funding – \$205 million this year alone – strengthens

the army's hand at a time when the United States should be encouraging Mexico to develop its civilian police forces' capabilities. These imbalances – military over police, hardware over the hard work of reform – are all reflections of fundamentally skewed priorities in the Mérida Initiative.

"The Mérida Initiative is important in terms of bilateral cooperation to address drug trafficking and drug-related violence in Mexico, but effectively tackling these problems will require more emphasis on structural reform," said Maureen Meyer, WOLA's Associate for Mexico and Central America. "Mexico's civilian institutions, not the military, should be receiving support."

Efforts to reduce the flow of drugs into the United States have little chance of success as long as the U.S. government puts so few resources into cutting drug demand. The text makes no mention at all of reducing drug demand in the United States or of curbing firearms traffic into Mexico, two glaring omissions that virtually guarantee it will not succeed in reducing drug availability in the United States or gun violence inside Mexico.

WOLA will be watching closely to ensure that provisions for human rights guarantees embedded in the plan will be strictly respected. "Accountability for human rights abuses is a continuing concern in Mexico. WOLA will be monitoring the implementation of the initiative, and we will bring cases and issues to the attention of the Secretary of State as stipulated in the Initiative," said Meyer.

Finally, \$65 million can be little more than a down-payment for addressing Central America's pressing security needs. (That total includes \$2.5 million each for Haiti and the Dominican Republic.) The United States should encourage Central American governments to carry out comprehensive police reform initiatives and gang prevention and rehabilitation.

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