

Statement of Senator Dianne Feinstein
“U.S. – Central America Security Cooperation”

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We are here today to explore ways for the United States to help combat rising violence in Central America.

One of the main reasons for the unprecedented rise of violence in Central America is the arrival of two of Mexico’s most powerful drug trafficking organizations – Los Zetas and the Sinaloa Cartel. Los Zetas is made up of former Mexican military members. The Sinaloa Cartel, headed by Joaquin “El Chapo” Guzmán, is considered the most powerful drug trafficking organization in Mexico.

Central America’s location between the world’s largest producers of illicit drugs in South America and the world’s largest drug consuming nation in the United States makes it particularly vulnerable to drug traffickers. As the Mexican government cracks down on drug trafficking organizations, traffickers are breaking drug shipments into smaller loads that

pass through Central America before making their way to Mexico and up to the United States. According to the *Congressional Research Service*, 95 percent of cocaine entering the United States flows through Mexico or its territorial waters with 60 percent of that cocaine having first transited through Central America.

Central America has become one of the most violent areas of the world. In recent congressional testimony, the Commander of U.S. Southern Command General Douglas Fraser said that “the northern triangle of Guatemala, El Salvador and Honduras is the deadliest zone in the world outside of war zones.”

Contrary to what many people might think, the murder rates in Central America last year were significantly higher than those in Mexico. In 2010, there were 18 homicides per 100,000 people in Mexico. In comparison, there were 50 murders per 100,000 people in Guatemala, 66 in El Salvador and 77 in Honduras.

Unfortunately, violence in Central America is not limited to drug trafficking organizations. Transnational youth gang members in Central America number around 70,000 and are particularly active in El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras. Other illegal criminal networks are active throughout Central America and are sometimes linked closely to elites, including current and former military and government officials.

The United States is supporting our neighbors in Central America as they try to combat crime and violence through the Central America Regional Security Initiative (CARSI). Since 2008, Congress has appropriated \$260 million in security assistance to Central America. This assistance ranges from the transfer and maintenance of boats and helicopters to police and justice training and institution building.

Budgets in Washington are tight these days, and we must make the most of all of the money we spend, particularly our foreign assistance. In Central America, I hope we can continue to expand the creation of Sensitive Investigative Units (SIUs) – which are highly trained vetted units that work

with host country counterparts. This has been a successful model in Mexico and Colombia and must be expanded throughout Central America.

Of course, enforcement alone will not be enough. Countries in Central America suffer from a cycle of impunity that will not end until citizens know that their countries' justice systems will deliver real results. Guatemala – a country with a 98 percent impunity rate – has been working with the United Nations since 2008 when it created the International Commission against Impunity in Guatemala. This United Nations Commission – known as the CICIG [**SEE-SIG**] – has helped to dismantle violent criminal organizations by co-leading investigations with the Guatemalan Attorney General's office. For example, in September 2010, 14 Zetas leaders in Guatemala were convicted as a result of a CICIG investigation. The CICIG is precisely the kind of model that should be replicated in other Central American countries.

I hope that today's hearing is just the beginning of a conversation on how the United States can support Central America in reducing its dangerous levels of violence.

I now turn to my Co-Chairman, Senator Grassley, for his opening statement.

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