

House Foreign Affairs Committee
Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission

Hearing
on
Human Rights Challenges in Mexico

June 23, 2022 - 3:00 p.m.
Virtual via Zoom

STATEMENT SUBMITTED FOR THE RECORD

Submitted by:
Representative Jesús “Chuy” García

I’d first like to extend my thanks to Chairman McGovern for convening a hearing on the many human rights challenges that Mexico is currently facing.

I particularly appreciate the opportunity to submit this statement for the record on a subject that has personal meaning for me and so many of my constituents, a majority of whom are of Mexican ancestry.

When I was nine years old, I immigrated from Durango, Mexico to the United States with my mom and siblings. Like many of my constituents, I keep in close touch with friends and family on the other side of the border, who share the individual contexts through which they view—and sometimes experience—persecution and impunity. But those experiences do not exist in a vacuum, and as I engaged with the U.S.-Mexico relationship, first as a community organizer and now as a Congressman, it became clear that individual instances of violence are intertwined, the trickle-down results of decisions made both in Washington and Mexico City.

As my colleagues have noted, Mexico reached several grim milestones this year related to violence and impunity. In May, the official count of forced disappearances in Mexico reached 100,000. Just days ago, two Jesuit priests and a tour guide were murdered, sparking widespread outcry. And since the beginning of 2022, 12 journalists have been killed, including several who conduct investigative oversight on politics, justice, and security. And these particularly well-documented killings are taking place within a larger context of violence: Mexico’s homicide rate tripled in the dozen years leading up to President López Obrador’s election, and have remained high under his leadership.

These horrifying statistics strongly suggest that existing violence and crime reduction programs have failed. Even worse, current strategies bilaterally pursued by the U.S. and Mexico have coincided with rises in violence: for example, the U.S.-funded Mérida Initiative has pumped over \$3 billion into anti-drug trafficking initiatives, including substantial military and surveillance technology funding. However, during the 14 years that the program has existed, Mexican homicide rates and U.S. drug overdoses have several times reached record highs.

In June, President López Obrador finally shut down the “Sensitive Investigation Unit”, an elite Mexican police unit funded and trained by the U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration, after years of corruption and several attacks on innocent civilians. But despite the failure of that and similar “tough on crime” policies in the U.S. and across the Latin American region, President López Obrador is reportedly abandoning his “Hugs, not bullets” approach in favor of increasing anti-narcotics operations. The upcoming meeting between Presidents Biden and López Obrador provides an opportunity to frankly assess past strategies, and I urge them to consider violence reduction that focuses on protecting the rights of civilians, rather than recycling the failed strategy of increasing militarism.

To that end, I recently joined my colleagues, Representatives Joaquin Castro and Raúl Grijalva, in sending two letters urging the Departments of State and Justice and the U.S. Agency for International Development, in which we identified specific alternatives that the United States can support to address violence and impunity in Mexico. In one letter, we identify three Mexican government programs that the United States should support to search for people who have been forcibly disappeared and help their families seek justice. In the other letter, we recommended that relevant U.S. agencies work with their Mexican counterparts to evaluate outcomes of Mexico’s Federal Mechanism for the Protection of Human Rights Defenders and Journalists, and amidst the current surge in journalist killing, encourage Mexican legislators to address identified challenges in future revisions of the mechanism.

As our two countries collaborate on specific programs to reduce violence and protect human rights in Mexico, we cannot ignore a broader U.S. policy context that Congress and federal agencies have the power to address unilaterally. For example, a U.S. Government Accountability Office report from 2021 found that 70 percent of guns recovered in Mexico from 2014 and 2018 and submitted for tracing were U.S.-sourced. Therefore, we must explore options for holding gun manufacturers accountable in the courts while strengthening federal gun control laws to prevent a single buyer from amassing a sellable arsenal of weapons.

For another example, cartels, which are estimated to perpetuate around half the violent crime in Mexico, derive their power from moving drugs from Mexico and elsewhere in Latin America to American buyers. The cartels derive their power from illegal, lucrative markets—so reforming U.S. drug policy and legalizing cannabis could go a long way toward weakening their control.

The War on Drugs created cycles of violence that profoundly disrupted countries around the world, especially drug-producing countries in Latin America. I strongly believe we must act as a Congress to change our approach, and in doing so, decrease violence in countries destabilized by illicit trade.

Finally, in order to stem the tide of migrants and create safer environments in which potential migrants can stay home, we must commit to partnering with civil society on both sides of the border, to address the root causes of migration and call out detained migrant conditions in Mexico.

While the U.S. and Mexico enjoy an important and close partnership, our government must help hold Mexico accountable for its failure to address this violence, while working to ensure that U.S. funding and policies strengthen human rights instead of propping up failed strategies.