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**Making the Most out of Mérida**  
**Peter DeShazo and Johanna Mendelson Forman**

On June 30<sup>th</sup> President Bush signed the Mérida Initiative, a multi-year billion dollar program to combat the threat of drug-trafficking and illegal arms transfers in Mexico, Central America, Haiti and the Dominican Republic. The President described Mérida as a “shared responsibility”—a partnership with our neighbors to counter the drug trade, the violence it engenders, and the illicit traffic in firearms that feeds that violence. This issue is becoming increasingly urgent—the murder rate in Mexico is up 47 percent over last year, and the increase in killings has been concentrated in areas along the U.S. border. Murders in the drug cartel battleground of Ciudad Juárez, a key drug smuggling point located across the U.S. border from El Paso, Texas, currently account for a full third of all murders in Mexico.

Though the U.S. is demonstrating with Mérida its dedication to fighting the escalating problem of violence in Mexico and Central America, it has failed to follow through on another integral part of this battle. The international anti-arms trafficking convention known as CIFTA (The Inter-American Convention Against the Illicit Manufacturing of and Trafficking in Firearms, Ammunition, Explosives, and Other Related Materials) entered into force in 1998 and has now been ratified by nearly all OAS members. Remarkably, the United States is not one of them. The agreement was signed by the U.S. in 1997, but has languished in the Senate for ten years without being ratified.

The U.S.’s failure to ratify the convention is both ironic and unfortunate. The U.S.-Mexican border is a central route for illicit weapons destined for Latin America. It is nearly impossible to purchase guns legally in Mexico, and gun stores in U.S. border-states sell twice as many weapons as those in any other U.S. region. In 2005, the year after the U.S. ban on assault weapons expired, Mexican authorities seized over 10,000 smuggled weapons, of which 90 percent came from the U.S. A recent Mexican government study spoke of as many as 2,000 guns per day crossing the border. There is today a parallel and equally alarming flow of guns across the border to the south as there is of drugs to the north.

Clearly, the nations of the Americas need to do a better job in disrupting the illegal flow of firearms. That the U.S. has not ratified CIFTA is unfortunate. The CIFTA convention calls for cooperation among OAS member states to control the illegal manufacture and trafficking of arms and explosives, including exchanging information on these matters, providing training and technical assistance, coordinating mutual legal and law enforcement efforts, and strengthening export controls. It also mandates cooperation in tracing illegally manufactured or trafficked firearms and establishes arms trafficking as an extraditable offense in all bilateral extradition treaties.

The United States must play a key role in this effort but it cannot exhort other member states to comply with an agreement that itself has signed but not ratified. For an administration that has bet its reputation on protecting the homeland there is now no excuse for ignoring the potential that CIFTA offers in improving citizen security. A convention that reflects U.S. laws and regulations and promotes an important U.S. foreign policy objective should not become a casualty of bipartisan disinterest. Our taxpayer’s investment in Mérida should begin by giving it the best shot at being an effective program of action.

The President and Senate leadership should move CIFTA to ratification.

Keeping weapons out of the hands of criminals and narco-insurgents benefits all law-abiding citizens of the Americas. The U.S. must make a greater effort to ensure that firearms are not illegally trafficked from its territory into Mexico or anywhere else. Otherwise, we remain part of the problem.

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