

News from **Congressman Eliot Engel**

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GAO Report Highlights Slow Pace and Lack of Coordination of Merida Initiative

Chairman of House Western Hemisphere Subcommittee Releases Report on U.S. Security Assistance to Mexico, Central America, Haiti and Dominican Republic

Washington, D.C. – Today, Congressman Eliot Engel, Chairman of the House Foreign Affairs Subcommittee on the Western Hemisphere, is releasing a report he commissioned from the Government Accountability Office (GAO) on the slow pace of Merida Initiative assistance to Mexico, Central America, Haiti and the Dominican Republic. Western Hemisphere Subcommittee Ranking Member Connie Mack joined Chairman Engel's request for the report which notes that only two percent of Merida funds had been spent through September 30.

Chairman Engel said, "As President Calderon confronts his country's brutal drug cartels head on, we must cut through our own government's red tape to get Merida Initiative assistance flowing to Mexico more quickly. Our neighbors in Central America, Haiti and the Dominican Republic have also received a mere fraction of the assistance appropriated to them by Congress. I urge the Obama Administration to redouble its efforts to speed the flow of resources to these important partners."

According to the GAO report, while nearly two-thirds of the appropriated funds for the Merida Initiative had been obligated, only about two percent had been expended as of September 30. This amounted to \$26 million of a total \$1.2 billion appropriated by Congress. Responding to the GAO's report, Roberta Jacobson, Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for Western Hemisphere Affairs, says that Merida spending has increased since the end of September. She explained, "More than \$220 million in Merida programs are now well under way, even though final expenditures have not yet been made on them - and this number is growing every week."

Rep. Engel praised efforts by the Obama Administration to expedite some Merida Initiative assistance. GAO reports that Administration officials have taken measures to expedite the procurement of five Bell helicopters for Mexico, including the intervention of high-level State Department officials with the Department of Defense. Rep. Engel said, "These efforts are precisely what is needed, and must continue until Merida assistance is fully expended."

GAO also highlighted the initial lack of institutional capacity on the part of both the recipient countries and the United States as an obstacle affecting the availability and delivery of Merida Initiative funding.

At a House Foreign Affairs Committee hearing on April 22nd, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton expressed her frustration at the slow pace of the Merida Initiative to Chairman Engel saying that “we have got to get the money flowing.”

In its report, GAO points out that Merida Initiative assistance is difficult to track because each of the three State Department bureaus providing assistance uses a different method for tracking Merida funds. According to the GAO, “Each uses different budgeting terms as well as separate spreadsheets for the Merida funds it administers, and State currently has no consolidated database for these funds.” GAO further notes that in trying to compile data for their report, the State Department could not provide them with a comprehensive document that contained an accurate status of Merida funds across all accounts.

Rep. Engel said, “In this year’s House-passed State Department Authorization bill, I authored a provision creating a Merida Initiative Coordinator to oversee all Merida assistance. GAO’s report makes it crystal clear that a coordinator is urgently needed to oversee all Merida Initiative assistance and put in place a better system to track spending.”

The U.S. Government Accountability Office (GAO) is known as "the investigative arm of Congress" and "the congressional watchdog." It is an independent, nonpartisan agency that works for Congress to examine how the federal government spends taxpayer dollars. The findings released today are the first piece of a more comprehensive report on the Merida Initiative that GAO is preparing for Chairman Engel that will be completed in summer 2010.