

GAO Report Finds Merida Initiative Needs Better Performance Measures

Pace of Delivery Slow But Improving

By Eric L. Olson and Christopher E. Wilson

On July 21st, the investigative arm of the U.S. Congress, the Government Accountability Office (GAO), released a report assessing the Merida Initiative—a security cooperation program that guides U.S.-Mexico collaboration to confront organized crime and drug trafficking organizations.¹

In testimony before the House Foreign Affairs Subcommittee on the Western Hemisphere, the GAO’s director for international affairs and trade, Jess Ford, highlighted two problems with Merida Initiative implementation: the slow pace of disbursement of congressionally approved funds and the lack of effective measures of success to evaluate the program.

On Measures of Success

The GAO report found that the Department of State, the government agency responsible for the overall coordination of the program, has not developed the necessary “performance measures” to properly assess whether the Initiative’s “strategic goals” are being met.² That is, the State Department is unable to “determine if [the Merida Initiative] is meeting expectations.”³

In the absence of well-designed criteria for success, a variety of statistics can be employed to demonstrate that work is being done, but the efficacy of this work is less clear. To illustrate, the GAO report found that the Department of State has been tracking the number of Mexican Law Enforcement Officials trained with Merida Initiative money, but it cannot determine whether the training has translated into more effective law enforcement efforts to combat organized crime.⁴

In another example, the GAO found that the State Department had failed to develop any measures of success for the two new strategic initiatives formulated by the Obama

¹ Government Accountability Office, Report to Congressional Requesters, “Merida Initiative: The United States Has Provided Counternarcotics and Anticrime Support but Needs Better Performance Measures, July 2010.

² Ibid, inside cover.

³ Ibid, 23.

⁴ Ibid, 23.

Administration as part of its security dialogue with Mexico. In March, Secretary of State Clinton and several other U.S. cabinet members travelled to Mexico to work with their counterparts on the formulation of a new strategic direction for U.S.-Mexico security cooperation. They developed a four-pillared approach which refined some of the previous strategy and moved away from hardware and equipment transfers while emphasizing efforts to strengthen law enforcement and judicial institutions, and improve social conditions in areas deeply affected by organized crime and violence. The two new elements of the strategy involve increasing support for efforts to build “a 21st century border” and support for building “strong and resilient communities.” (For more information on the reformulation of the Merida Initiative, see, “[Beyond Merida: The Evolving Approach to Security Cooperation.](#)”)

On the Slow Pace of Delivery

The GAO found that out of the nearly \$1.6 billion of Merida funds that were appropriated by the Congress between 2008-2010, only 46% have been obligated and just 9% have actually been disbursed.⁵ The slow pace of disbursement is very disconcerting especially to the Members of Congress representing border districts and states closest to the crime and violence occurring in Mexico.

The reasons for the slow pace of delivery are multiple. The GAO notes problems in several areas including an “insufficient number of staff to administer the program,” delays in negotiations of interagency and bilateral agreements, slow and cumbersome procurement processes, and turnover among government officials.⁶ On a positive note, the GAO reports “the pace of delivery of Mérida support has increased” since the previous report was issued in December 2009.⁷

The Department of State responded to the GAO’s findings by acknowledging the numerous delays that have occurred but also stating “that expenditure levels alone are not an accurate measure of progress on program delivery” because the Treasury’s payment of an item can be delayed up to several months for various reasons.⁸

Conclusions

The absence of clearly formulated goals and indicators of success have plagued U.S. drug policy for decades, and the Merida Initiative is no exception. The Merida Initiative represents an important advance in creating a collaborative framework for both nations to confront a serious and growing problem. But collaboration, while essential, cannot solve the problems afflicting both countries. A clear formulation of criteria for success and an evaluation matrix are urgently needed to ensure that money is not wasted and lives are not lost. Fortunately, the State Department has concurred with the GAO’s finding and has agreed to improve on its abilities to deliver and measure the impact of the Merida Initiative.

⁵ Ibid, inside cover, 4.

⁶ Ibid, 7.

⁷ Ibid, 11; previous report was GAO-10-253R.

⁸ Ibid, 12, 14.