

Congress of the United States
House of Representatives

COMMITTEE ON OVERSIGHT AND ACCOUNTABILITY

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June 5, 2024

The Honorable Merrick Garland
Attorney General
Department of Justice
950 Pennsylvania Avenue, NW
Washington, DC 20530

The Honorable Steven Dettelbach
Director
Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and
Explosives
99 New York Avenue, NE
Washington, DC 20226

Ms. Katrina W. Berger
Executive Associate Director, Homeland Security Investigations
Department of Homeland Security
12200 Sunrise Valley Drive
Reston, VA 20191

Dear Attorney General Garland, Director Dettelbach, and Ms. Berger:

We are deeply troubled by reports that firearms originating in the United States being trafficked abroad are significantly fueling catastrophic gang violence in Haiti.¹ Recent reports suggest that the vast majority of firearms used by Haitian gangs were obtained by straw purchasers at gun stores and gun shows in the United States, particularly in Florida.² We are writing to request a briefing on federal efforts to combat the illicit flow of American firearms to criminal organizations and gangs abroad and to understand how congressional action can help address this pressing problem.

Haitian gangs have overrun the capital and neighboring areas of Haiti—seizing control of 80 to 90% of the Haitian capital Port-au-Prince and rapidly escalating a humanitarian crisis since February 29, 2024.³ Violence in Haiti has reached levels “not seen in decades,” and Haitian

¹ *DHS Attempts to Stop a Steady Stream of Guns from America to Haiti*, NBC News (Apr. 2, 2024) (online at <https://nbcnews.com/news/world/dhs-stop-guns-america-haiti-rcna145522>); United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, *Haiti's Criminal Markets: Mapping Trends in Firearms and Drug Trafficking* (Mar. 2, 2023) (online at https://unodc.org/documents/data-and-analysis/toc/Haiti_assessment_UNODC.pdf); *U.S. Guns Flow into Haiti as Gangs Push to Take Control*, Wall Street Journal (Apr. 1, 2024) (online at <https://wsj.com/world/americas/u-s-guns-flow-into-haiti-as-gangs-push-to-take-control-41a53822>).

² *U.S. Guns Flow into Haiti as Gangs Push to Take Control*, Wall Street Journal (Apr. 1, 2024) (online at <https://wsj.com/world/americas/u-s-guns-flow-into-haiti-as-gangs-push-to-take-control-41a53822>).

³ *Getting Children Back to School in Deadly Gang-Ravaged Haiti*, United Nations News (Apr. 7, 2024) (online at <https://news.un.org/en/story/2024/04/1148306>). See e.g., U.S. Embassy in Haiti, *Security Alert: U.S.*

gangs reportedly “could not do what they’re doing now in terms of seizing control, effectively seizing and controlling territory, challenging control and terrorizing the population if they did not have access to these illegal weapons.”⁴ Since 2019, more than 11,000 homicides were recorded in Haiti, and the number of recorded homicides increased 119% in 2023 alone.⁵ The United Nations also reported that, between January and March 2024, “more than 2,500 Haitians have been killed or injured, a more than 50% increase compared with the same period last year.”⁶ The illicit influx of American firearms has enabled Haitian gangs to amass weapon arsenals larger than those of local police, making efforts to curb the violence in the nation exponentially more difficult.⁷

Multiple reports indicate that trafficked firearms manufactured by American companies comprise the bulk of Haitian crime gangs’ rapidly expanding arsenal of handguns and assault weapons, intensifying already unprecedented levels of lawlessness and violence in the country.⁸ These firearms are most often obtained in the United States through a practice called straw purchasing, and thereafter trafficked to Haiti and other nations through what experts call an “iron river.”⁹ Individuals with the ability to legally purchase firearms, most often American citizens, target gun dealers located in states with historically lax gun laws, such as Georgia and Florida, to purchase firearms and subsequently transfer them to smugglers.¹⁰ These firearms are then most

Embassy Port-au-Prince, Haiti (Feb. 29, 2024) (online at <https://ht.usembassy.gov/security-alert-u-s-embassy-port-au-prince-haiti-february-29-2024/>).

⁴ *DHS Attempts to Stop a Steady Stream of Guns from America to Haiti*, NBC News (Apr. 2, 2024) (online at <https://nbcnews.com/news/world/dhs-stop-guns-america-haiti-rcna145522>); United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, *Haiti’s Criminal Markets: Mapping Trends in Firearms and Drug Trafficking* (Mar. 2, 2023) (online at https://unodc.org/documents/data-and-analysis/toc/Haiti_assessment_UNODC.pdf).

⁵ *U.S. Guns Flow Into Haiti As Gangs Push to Take Control*, Wall Street Journal (Apr. 1, 2024) (online at <https://wsj.com/world/americas/u-s-guns-flow-into-haiti-as-gangs-push-to-take-control-41a53822>).

⁶ *Gangs in Haiti Launch Fresh Attacks, Days After A New Prime Minister is Announced*, Associated Press (May 2, 2024) (online at <https://apnews.com/article/haiti-gang-attack-delmas-5abb3cb1276f71bf2328ea3cba3166b4>).

⁷ *Haiti: Gangs Have “More Firepower than the Police”*, United Nations News (Apr. 4, 2024) (online at <https://news.un.org/en/story/2024/04/1148231>).

⁸ *Id.*

⁹ *Haiti’s Criminal Markets: Mapping Trends in Firearms and Drug Trafficking*, United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (Mar. 2, 2023) (online at https://unodc.org/documents/data-and-analysis/toc/Haiti_assessment_UNODC.pdf). Straw purchases are described as “Purchasing a gun for someone who is prohibited by law from possessing one, or for someone who does not want his or her name associated with the transaction[.]” Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives, *Postcard: Don’t Lie for the Other Guy* (online at www.atf.gov/resource-center/docs/dontlie-postcard-enpdf/download) (accessed May 8, 2024); *U.S. Must Stem “Iron River” of Guns Flowing to Latin America, Activists Say*, Reuters (Apr. 18, 2023) (online at www.reuters.com/world/americas/us-must-stem-iron-river-guns-flowing-latin-america-activists-say-2023-04-18/),

¹⁰ *Haiti’s Criminal Markets: Mapping Trends in Firearms and Drug Trafficking*, United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (Mar. 2, 2023) (online at https://unodc.org/documents/data-and-analysis/toc/Haiti_assessment_UNODC.pdf); Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives, *National Firearms Commerce and Trafficking Assessment (NFCTA): Firearms Trafficking Investigations—Volume Three*,

often smuggled “from major hubs such as Miami-Dade and Port Everglade [Florida] in the US and routed to Haiti via neighboring ports such in Freeport (Bahamas), Kingston (Jamaica), Manzanillo (Panama) and Colon (Panama).”¹¹ Once they reach Haitian soil, the firearms originating from the United States are sold at inflated prices to Haitian gang members to facilitate the ongoing violence and humanitarian crisis among Haiti’s civilian population.¹²

Throughout the Caribbean and Central America, illegal guns from the United States are being used by gangs and criminal organizations to fuel deadly violence—a key factor in driving migration from the region to the United States.¹³ In 2022, the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives reported that an alarming number of recovered firearms from Caribbean nations were manufactured in and sourced from the United States.¹⁴ Officials estimate that 90% of the Caribbean’s murder weapons are purchased by straw buyers in the United States and then smuggled overseas.¹⁵ Moreover, the Government Accountability Office issued a report in 2022, finding that more than 10,000 firearms recovered in Central America between 2015 and 2019 were sourced from the United States. This figure accounted for nearly half of the total illicit firearms recovered during that time.¹⁶

In Mexico, criminal cartels armed with firearms originating in the United States smuggled from gun dealers have exerted control over large swathes of Mexican territory,

Part XI: Summary and Conclusions (Apr. 4, 2024) (online at www.atf.gov/firearms/docs/report/nfcta-volume-iii-part-xi/download).

¹¹ United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, *Haiti’s Criminal Markets: Mapping Trends in Firearms and Drug Trafficking* (Mar. 2, 2023) (online at https://unodc.org/documents/data-and-analysis/toc/Haiti_assessment_UNODC.pdf).

¹² *Id.*; *U.S. Guns Flow into Haiti as Gangs Push to Take Control*, Wall Street Journal (Apr. 1, 2024) (online at <https://wsj.com/world/americas/u-s-guns-flow-into-haiti-as-gangs-push-to-take-control-41a53822>).

¹³ Committee on Oversight and Accountability, Democratic Staff, *Memorandum on Transcribed Interviews of U.S. Border Patrol Chief Patrol Agents* (July 14, 2023) (online at [https://oversightdemocrats.house.gov/sites/evo-subsites/democrats-oversight.house.gov/files/2023-07-](https://oversightdemocrats.house.gov/sites/evo-subsites/democrats-oversight.house.gov/files/2023-07-14.Democratic%20Member%20Memorandum%20re%20US%20Border%20Patrol%20Transcribed%20Interivews.pdf)

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¹⁴ Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives, *Firearms Trace Data: The Caribbean—2022* (Jan. 1, 2022, to Dec. 31, 2022) (online at www.atf.gov/resource-center/firearms-trace-data-caribbean-2022). See also *Murder Weapons in Caribbean Come Mostly from America, Officials Say*, Bloomberg (Jan. 17, 2024) (online at <https://bloomberg.com/graphics/2024-us-made-gun-exports-caribbean-violence/>).

¹⁵ *In “War on Guns,” Caribbean Allies Ask Which Side the U.S. Is On*, Bloomberg (Jan. 17, 2024) (online at www.bloomberg.com/graphics/2024-us-made-gun-exports-caribbean-violence/).

¹⁶ Government Accountability Office, *Firearms Trafficking: More Information Is Needed to Inform U.S. Efforts in Central America* (GAO-22-104680) (Jan. 2022) (online at www.gao.gov/assets/gao-22-104680.pdf).

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exacerbating violence and contributing to regional instability along its border with the United States.¹⁷ Reports suggest that 70% of illegal guns in Mexico come from the United States.¹⁸

While these statistics are alarming, we recognize and applaud the numerous steps taken by the Biden-Harris Administration to curtail straw purchases and limit the flow of American firearms trafficked to criminal organizations.¹⁹ On June 25, 2022, President Biden signed into law the Bipartisan Safer Communities Act, which made firearm trafficking a federal crime and created stronger penalties for straw purchases.²⁰ In response to the dramatic rise of American-made weapons illicitly trafficked into the Caribbean, the Department of Homeland Security's Homeland Security Investigations in Miami, Florida, stood up additional efforts in August 2022 to crack down on illegal smuggling efforts through its Border Enforcement Security Taskforce.²¹ However, loose gun laws across the United States—especially in Florida—have continued to enable and embolden international traffickers to obtain firearms at gun stores and gun shows to fuel violence and armed conflict abroad. In light of the ongoing violence and threats to civilian safety, we believe that further action is needed to build on these efforts and ensure that American gun dealers are no longer a preferred focus of criminal international gun traffickers.

We request that you provide a briefing to Committee staff by June 20, 2024, to assist us in better understanding what legislative solutions are necessary to support and further federal efforts to block Haitian gangs, Mexican cartels, and other Central American and Caribbean criminal organizations from arming themselves at American gun stores and gun fairs.

The Committee on Oversight and Accountability is the principal oversight committee of the House of Representatives and has the broad authority to investigate “any matter” at “any time” under House Rule X. If you have any questions regarding this request, please contact committee staff at (202) 225-5051.

¹⁷ Mexican Drug Cartels Pay Americans to Smuggle Weapons Across the Border, *Intelligence Documents Show*, CBS News (Sept. 18, 2023) (online at <https://cbsnews.com/news/mexican-drug-cartels-american-weapons-smuggled-across-border/>).

¹⁸ Government Accountability Office, *Firearms Trafficking: U.S. Efforts to Disrupt Gun Smuggling into Mexico Would Benefit from Additional Data and Analysis* (GAO-21-322) (Feb. 22, 2021) (online at www.gao.gov/products/gao-21-322).

¹⁹ White House, *Fact Sheet: Biden-Harris Administration's Ongoing Efforts to Stem Firearms Trafficking to Mexico* (June 14, 2024) (online at <https://whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2023/06/14/fact-sheet-biden-harris-administrations-ongoing-efforts-to-stem-firearms-trafficking-to-mexico/>).

²⁰ White House, *Fact Sheet: President Biden Announces 13 New Actions to Reduce Gun Violence by Maximizing the Benefits of the Bipartisan Safer Communities Act* (May 14, 2023) (online at <https://whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2023/06/14/fact-sheet-biden-harris-administrations-ongoing-efforts-to-stem-firearms-trafficking-to-mexico/>).

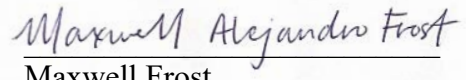
²¹ U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement, *Press Release: HSI Announces Crackdown on Firearms, Ammunition Smuggling to Haiti, the Caribbean* (Aug. 19, 2022) (online at www.ice.gov/news/releases/hsi-announces-crackdown-firearms-ammunition-smuggling-haiti-caribbean).

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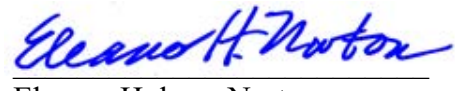
Thank you for your prompt attention to this important matter.

Very truly yours,

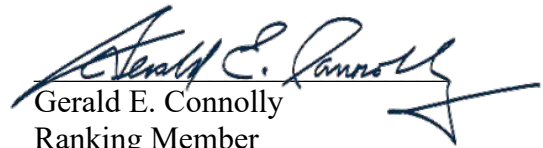

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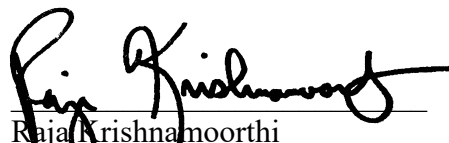

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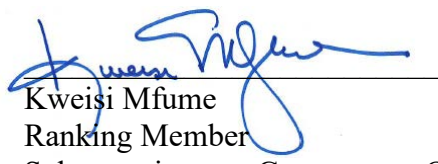

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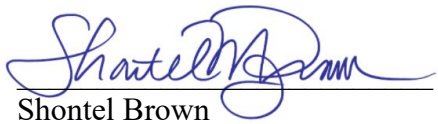

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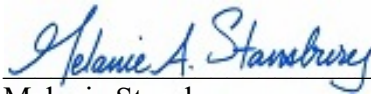
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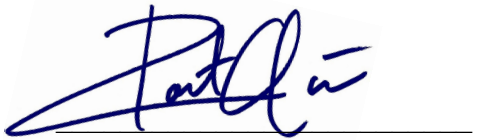
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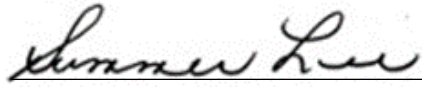
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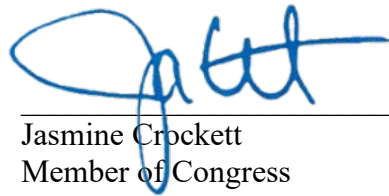
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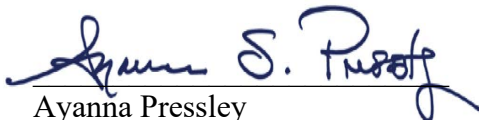
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