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To: Spencer, Lashawna
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Holder Announces Internal Probe Of Gun-Walking Allegations. AFP (3/10) reports that Attorney General Holder "announced an internal investigation Wednesday of a controversial US operation that allowed hundreds of weapons to enter Mexico, which is being roiled by deadly drug-related crime." Holder "said his agency's inspector general would examine reports that the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms allowed more than 1,000 firearms to enter Mexico in theory to be used to help fight drug cartels. 'The aim of ATF is to stop the flow of guns; they're doing a good job, (but) questions have been raised by ATF agents about how some of these investigations have been conducted.'"

The Washington Post (3/10, Grimaldi, 605K) reports that Sen. Chuck Grassley (R-IA), the top Republican on the Senate Judiciary Committee, "has charged that ATF agents allowed hundreds of firearms to flow from gun stores in the United States to criminals in Mexico and elsewhere in order to build cases against more prominent gun traffickers." The Justice Department "has denied that the case unfolded the way Grassley asserts, but ATF agents have acknowledged using aggressive tactics in an attempt to break up high-level rings connected to Mexican drug cartels." The Post adds, "The controversy highlights the difficulty ATF agents face in complex cases against increasingly sophisticated gunrunning rings, said former and current government officials."

Grassley Seeks Removal Of DOJ IG From ATF Probe. Fox News (3/10) reports that Grassley "is seeking to remove the Justice Department's internal watchdog from an investigation into allegations that the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms, and Explosives (ATF) allowed thousands of illicit weapons to flow to Mexico, possibly leading to the death of a Border Patrol agent." Grassley "said Wednesday he lacked confidence in the Justice Department inspector general's office to produce a report that the public would view as 'frank and unbiased.'"

Main Justice (3/10, Baumann) reports, "In a letter to Kevin Perkins, the head of the Integrity Committee of the Council of Inspectors General on Integrity and Efficiency, Grassley said he is not confident that DOJ's IG can be impartial in its probe of Operation Fast and Furious. Grassley said that whistleblowers have alleged that ATF intentionally allowed thousands of weapons to be transported to Mexico as part of its investigation into gun smuggling. Grassley said that while Attorney General Eric Holder has requested an IG probe of the program, he believes the probe should not be conducted by the IG," and "said that the position of department Inspector General remains vacant and that often, acting inspectors general are mere caretakers and are not necessarily equipped to conduct thorough investigations."

NRA Urges Swift Gun-Walking Hearings. The Hill (3/10, Lillis, 21K) reports that the National Rifle Association (NRA) "is urging Congress to hold 'expedited' hearings on federal efforts to stem gun trafficking to Mexico. The powerful lobby group is hoping the public discussion will help kill a request from federal regulators for more authority to track gun purchases in the southern border states."

Napolitano "Not Aware" Of Possible ICE Role In ATF Gun Tracking Program. CBS News (3/9) reported on its website that DHS Secretary Janet Napolitano, fielding questions from a Senate Judiciary Committee panel yesterday, "said she knew nothing of her agency's possible involvement in a controversial ATF operation called 'Fast and Furious.'" Under the program, ATF agents would allegedly allow firearms to be purchased by straw buyers in hopes of eventually linking them to larger criminal operations – a policy called letting the guns "walk." CBS reported that two of the assault rifles found at the scene of a December shootout in Arizona, which left Border Patrol agent Brian Terry dead, were being tracked by the program. Asked by Sen. Charles Grassley whether she was aware of reports that an ICE agent had been tasked to the ATF program, she said she was "not aware of that particular agent." Asked whether

she personally approved the ATF operation, she replied that she had not, noting that it is "within the Justice Department."

Grassley said the "risky" program "did not occur in a vacuum," the Brownsville Herald (3/10, Martinez) reports. He added that "there are serious questions being asked about the role played by the justice department and agencies within the Department of Homeland Security." Napolitano "said she received no concerns that the ATF program had allowed gun traffickers to purchase through straw buyers. She also said she did not discuss, with anyone, the strategy described by the whistleblowers, who brought the issue to the forefront."

US Charges Ten In Border Gang With Mexican Triple-Homicide. The AP (3/10, Yost) reports, "Ten members and associates of a Southwest border gang have been charged in the United States in the murders a year ago of a US consulate employee, her husband and another man in Juarez, Mexico." A grand jury indictment "unsealed Wednesday in El Paso, Texas, revealed federal charges against 35 people in all, allegedly linked to the Barrio Azteca gang, including the 10 charged in the murders. The indictment details a criminal enterprise that began in the late 1980s as a violent prison gang, which then expanded into a group of murderers and drug traffickers who operate on both sides of US-Mexico border."

The New York Times (3/10, A8, Cave, 1.01M) reports that Attorney General Holder "described the gang as a transnational criminal organization with a 'militaristic command structure' and revenues linked to extortion and drug sales in the United States. At a news conference in Washington, he said the charges, stemming from arrests in Texas, New Mexico and Mexico, 'reaffirm the fact that this Justice Department, and this administration, will not tolerate acts of violence against those who serve and protect American citizens.'"

The Los Angeles Times (3/10, Serrano, 681K) reports, "A break in the investigation came when US officials said they learned of a telephone call made by one of the gang members, Ricardo Valles de la Rosa. Shortly after the ambush in Ciudad Juarez, Mexico, authorities said he called an individual in west Texas and 'received verification of the description of an intended target for murder.'" Holder "said the consulate victims -- Leslie Ann Enriquez Catton, her husband, Arthur Redelfs, and Jorge Albert Salcido Cenicerros, the husband of another US Consulate employee -- were, 'like so many other innocent victims of the Mexican drug wars, caught in the crosshairs of a violent criminal enterprise.'"

The San Antonio Express-News (3/10, 165K) reports, "Curiously, an alleged Barrio Azteca gang member who Mexican officials had said was a mastermind in the killings, Jesus Ernesto Chavez-Castillo, aka 'El Camello,' isn't among those charged despite being quietly extradited last September from Mexico to San Antonio in connection with the case. Chavez-Castillo had a closed, secret hearing in San Antonio before being shipped out of the city to an undisclosed location."

Bloomberg News (3/10, Blum) reports that the motive for the shootings "isn't clear, said Lanny Breuer, the assistant attorney general in charge of the Justice Department's criminal division. 'It could be as simple as mistaken identity,' Breuer said at a news conference in Washington. 'Whatever the motivation is, the alleged brutality of the murders was really quite extraordinary.'"

The El Paso Times (3/10, Durazo, 72K) reports, "The slayings had become a high-profile case in the current drug war between the Juárez and Sinaloa drug cartels, which has claimed more than 7,800 since January 2008. Barrio Azteca is closely linked to Los Aztecas, another gang that operates in Juárez and has been connected to many killings there. Both are said to be aligned with the Juárez drug cartel."

CNN (3/10) reports, "Justice officials say Barrio Azteca, which began in the late 1980s as a violent prison gang and expanded into a transnational criminal organization, is a highly organized and brutal gang. 'Barrio Azteca gang members are cold blooded criminals who show no respect for the law or justice, murdering innocent victims, trafficking drugs and inciting violence,' said DEA Administrator Michele Leonhart." Holder "said the Justice Department is working on extradition proceedings for the seven charged in the consulate killings and already in custody."

AFP (3/10) reports, "In addition to the consulate murders, the indictment lists a range of crimes including kidnapping, murder, money laundering and drug offenses dating back to 2003. In August, gang members also allegedly kidnapped the wife and parents of a member they believed was cooperating with US law enforcement and also killed the

member's step-daughter. 'The indictment unsealed today offers a chilling picture of a highly organized, and extremely brutal gang,'" Breuer said. The Washington Times (3/10, Seper, 77K), Voice of America (3/10), ABC News (3/10, Cloherty, Ryan, Thomas), KTSM-TV El Paso, TX (3/10), the Wall Street Journal (3/10, A5, Barrett, 2.09M) and Reuters (3/10, Pelofsky, Vicini) also report on the charges.

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