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CONGRESSWOMAN KAY GRANGER OPENING STATEMENT: STATE AND FOREIGN OPERATIONS APPROPRIATIONS SUBCOMMITTEE HEARING ON UNITED STATES ENGAGEMENT IN CENTRAL AMERICA

The subcommittee on State, Foreign Operations, and Related Programs will come to order.

I want to welcome our witnesses. Thank you for appearing today for this oversight hearing on U.S. Engagement in Central America.

For many years, this Subcommittee has provided funding for our partners throughout Latin America. Without question, we know that what happens in these countries has an impact on the United States. Our economies, our security, and even our health, are closely linked.

The latest example of this is the outbreak of the Zika virus, which is spreading explosively in the Hemisphere, according to the World Health Organization. We want to hear from our witnesses about what the Administration is doing to address the Zika virus in the region.

Our countries are also connected because of migration. This spring will mark two years since the crisis at our southern border reached historic proportions.

Members of this Subcommittee - and a Task Force that I led for the Speaker - took notice. We worked together to address the unprecedented number of unaccompanied children arriving from Central America, but we know more needs to be done.

According to the Department of Homeland Security, more than 68,000 unaccompanied minors were apprehended in 2014. More than three quarters of them were from El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras. Another 40,000 were apprehended last year.

One reason these numbers decreased last year is because Mexico stepped up its efforts to apprehend minors from Central America before they reached the United States. In Fiscal Year 2015, more than 16,000 were detained by Mexico and 13,000 were returned.

Compare that to less than 2,000 removed by U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement over the same period.

Mexico's increased border security, which the United States has long supported through funds in our bill, is making a difference.

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While the total number of unaccompanied children arriving at the Southwest border went down in Fiscal Year 2015, there has been a disturbing spike in the last few months.

Administration officials have pointed to recent enforcement actions that may help reverse this trend, yet the number of children apprehended in January was still significantly higher than the same month last year.

We must do more to address this problem where it starts. I have heard first-hand from leaders of Central American countries that they want their children back. We need to continue to work with these governments to return these children safely and to keep more from making the extremely dangerous journey to the United States.

The Central American countries have already taken a number of steps on their own.

Guatemala passed a law increasing penalties on human smuggling.

Honduras continues to crack down on drug-traffickers and extradite fugitives to the United States.

El Salvador, which is one of the most violent countries in the world, has started to implement a broad security plan in its most dangerous cities.

These are steps in the right direction, but they require follow-through.

The Fiscal Year 2016 State and Foreign Operations bill provided \$750 million for assistance to Central America, and there are tough conditions on this aid. The countries must show they are improving border security; addressing corruption; and countering gangs, drug traffickers, and organized crime.

The Fiscal Year 2017 budget request includes \$750 million in this Subcommittee's jurisdiction for Central America.

Before additional funds will be considered, the Administration must demonstrate how the funds already provided will address the violence and lack of opportunity contributing to the migration problem, and that these countries are meeting the conditions in our bill. Congress and the American people are expecting results.

While the United States has a critical role to play in Central America's success, we should not do this alone.

Other countries in the region have expertise, such as Colombia and Mexico. We should continue to encourage partnerships between these countries and El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras.

We also need to ensure that other countries in the region facing their own security challenges, such as Costa Rica, receive our help.

I look forward to hearing from our witnesses today on these important issues.

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