

ASSISTANCE TO CENTRAL AMERICA

TESTIMONY OF
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U.S. DEPARTMENT OF STATE
BEFORE
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RELATED PROGRAMS
HOUSE COMMITTEE ON APPROPRIATIONS
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Madam Chairman, Ranking Member Lowey, and Members of the Committee:

Thank you for the opportunity to testify on Central America.

The United States is playing a transformative role in the region through the U.S. Strategy for Engagement in Central America. Our efforts build on the continued political will and commitment demonstrated by our partner governments in the region, as described in the Alliance for Prosperity, the development plan of the Northern Triangle governments of El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras. But these efforts are just a start because a real and lasting transformation will require sustained diplomatic engagement and financial investments for all stakeholders in the region.

Recent developments in Central America underscore the importance of the U.S. Strategy for Engagement in the region, which will advance prosperity, governance, and security objectives to address the underlying conditions that continue to motivate migrants to take the dangerous journey to come to the United States. This integrated approach under the Strategy comes at a critical moment and offers the best opportunity to improve the lives of Central American citizens, enabling them to hold their governments accountable while also advancing U.S. interests.

The conditions in Central America remain challenging, particularly in the Northern Triangle, but developments over the last few months underscore the need for continued U.S. support.

The UN's International Commission Against Impunity in Guatemala, also known as CICIG, and the Guatemalan Office of the Attorney General have forged a strong cooperative alliance leading to numerous successful investigative efforts. Together, they uncovered a corruption scandal that led to the resignation and arrest of the former President and Vice President on charges of bribery and fraud. This and other corruption cases mobilized public outrage, expressed in 19 straight weekends of peaceful anti-corruption, pro-reform protests, including the largest national demonstration in Guatemalan history. Amidst the corruption scandals, Guatemala completed a peaceful constitutional transfer of power and held free, fair, and generally peaceful elections.

It is important to understand that U.S. assistance to CICIG's efforts began in 2008, and CICIG's recent work to root out corruption at all levels of government proves that sustained and targeted U.S. assistance can be transformative within the region. Last month, a new government took office in Guatemala, pledging to extend CICIG's mandate, strengthen the Office of the Attorney General's resources, and sustain the anti-corruption momentum. One of its first acts was to strip immunity of military leaders implicated in another high profile human rights case.

The Honduran people have also demanded vigorous and meaningful action against corruption, to include criminal investigations and prosecutions of those who offer or receive illegal inducements. To that end, on January 19, the Honduran government signed an agreement with the Organization of American States (OAS) to establish the Mission Against Corruption and Impunity in Honduras, known by its Spanish acronym of MACCIH. The establishment of MACCIH is a wholly innovative response, as supported by our hemisphere's premier political forum. The agreement with the OAS represents an important step forward in domestic, as well as regional, efforts to combat corruption and improve transparency. For our part, we continue to urge the Honduran government, in collaboration with its partners and other OAS member and observer states, to ensure MACCIH has the resources and independence necessary to achieve its mission. We look forward to seeing effective implementation of MACCIH.

In El Salvador, it is the sharp increase in the murder rate that is deeply troubling, and eliciting demands from the Salvadoran public for its government to respond. El Salvador's homicide rate increased by more than 64 percent from 2014 to 2015. It now has the highest homicide rate in the Western Hemisphere, at 104 homicides per 100,000 inhabitants. This development underscores the need to help the government enhance its capacity to provide security for its own citizens, a

key pillar of the U.S. Strategy. In response to these developments, the government of El Salvador is not standing idle. In 2015, the government launched Plan El Salvador Seguro, a national approach to reducing crime and violence. We are directing our own assistance to align with this plan. Our partners in the Bureau of International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs and the U.S. Agency for International Development have seen significant declines in crime and violence in areas where we have targeted our assistance.

These regional developments underscore why we designed our Strategy to be flexible and adaptable, allowing us to respond to changing situations in the region. After the peak levels of migration in summer 2014, the levels of unaccompanied alien children (UACs) and family units arriving at the U.S. southwest border decreased in late 2014 and for much of 2015. In FY 2015, UAC and family arrivals to the United States dropped by 42 percent compared to FY 2014. However, we are concerned about recent migration trends. During the first four months of FY 2016, DHS apprehended more than half the number of UACs and families from El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras it apprehended in all of FY 2015. DHS data shows that this upward trend did not continue in January 2016. Based on our experience, after a temporary drop in migration around the holidays, migration flows usually increase again in the spring. With this in mind, we are redoubling efforts to curb migration flows from the region and to provide migrants at risk of harm with safe and legal alternatives to making the dangerous journey north.

There is no panacea that will significantly curtail undocumented migration from the region. Accordingly, our Strategy is designed for long-term success, and recognizes that we must assist these governments as they make the systemic reforms required to address the underlying conditions driving the undocumented migration. We are pressing the Northern Triangle governments to improve their border controls, combat human smuggling and trafficking, inform their citizens of the dangers of the journey, and to receive and assist their repatriated citizens. Their level of cooperation with U.S. partners in these areas is significant and noteworthy. We also continue to provide robust assistance to the Government of Mexico to enhance its ability to secure its southern border, deepen efforts related to transparency and accountability, and screen vulnerable migrants for humanitarian protection.

The Department continues to believe the essential condition for success has not changed. That essential condition is the political will of these regional governments to take the politically difficult actions that can lead to systemic

change. The Northern Triangle governments have answered our call to invest their own resources and advance reforms to produce better outcomes in Central America. The Northern Triangle governments have committed \$2.6 billion in 2016 in support of projects to tackle the challenges in their own countries and to address the underlying conditions driving migration. We continue to work together. Complemented by the assistance included by Congress in the FY 2016 appropriation, we are working in partnership to leverage all of our efforts and seize this transformational moment to effect lasting change in the region.

Undertaking the reforms necessary to achieve an economically integrated Central America that provides economic opportunities to all its people; enjoys more accountable, transparent, and effective public institutions; and ensures a safe environment for its citizens will take time, but we must build on the progress we have made thus far and sustain the momentum we have built. If we do not seize this opportunity for change in Central America, millions will remain mired in violence, poverty, and insecurity, a situation with direct implications for U.S. national interests. There is no longer time for the status quo, but fortunately, the tools for success are present. That is why, despite the challenges, I remain optimistic that Central America, with U.S. support, can and will be the next success story in the Western Hemisphere.

I look forward to your questions.