

TESTIMONY

CONGRESSMAN ADRIANO ESPAILLAT (NY-13)

House Committee on Appropriations

Subcommittee on State, Foreign Operations, and Related Programs

March 16, 2017

Thank you for allowing me to testify during today's subcommittee hearing to lay out my priorities as they relate to State and Foreign Operations. As the first Dominican American to serve in Congress and as a member of the Western Hemisphere Subcommittee of the Foreign Affairs Committee, I have firsthand exposure and insight into the importance of maintaining our foreign aid commitments in the region. This is not only in the interest of helping our brothers and sisters in Latin America and the Caribbean, but is also in our best interest to protect our security and improve our economic relations with these countries.

Emergency Preparedness in the Caribbean

I would like to address the issue of emergency preparedness in the Caribbean. As we have seen in recent years, natural disasters, including earthquakes and hurricanes, have become more common and more severe. The countries of the Caribbean are situated in a dangerous location and face annual threats from these disasters, causing increasing devastation to the communities affected by natural forces. As these events occur, I hope that we continue to send aid and assistance to these countries – providing rescue support, humanitarian relief, and help rebuilding. While our aid has been critical in supporting our neighbors after disaster strikes, we must do more to preempt and prepare for natural disasters.

By increasing our support for emergency preparedness and investing in building local capacity to respond to disasters, we can help to improve their resiliency and effectiveness in managing natural disasters. This aid can greatly improve the lives of those living in these countries, and will also lessen the burden on us when responding to natural crises.

I urge the Committee to increase funding for emergency preparedness and capacity building.

U.S. Strategy for Engagement in Central America

Another pressing issue I would like to address is security assistance to countries in Central America, particularly in the Northern Triangle, which includes El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras. These countries make up a group of countries that constitute the deadliest region in the world. El Salvador had over 100 homicides per 100,000 people in 2015, more than 24 times higher than here in the United States. This sort of extreme violence is at the root of women and children risking everything for the prospect of safety.

These immigrants are refugees. Women and children from the Northern Triangle are coming to the United States for safety. This is a matter of human rights and dignity.

Our continued assistance would support the U.S. Strategy for Engagement in Central America, a program that promotes good governance, economic advancement, and improved regional security. This is essential aid, which would help address the root causes that force too many unaccompanied children to flee their homes to find refuge in the U.S.

I urge the Committee to increase funding to support the U.S. Strategy for Engagement in Central America, to aid the Northern Triangle in addressing the underlying causes of migration from El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras.

Caribbean Basin Security Initiative (CBSI)

The Caribbean is particularly susceptible to drug trade given its location between drug producing countries in South America, and the United States. The Caribbean Basin Security Initiative has been instrumental in providing the funding needed to help combat crime and violence. Per the Congressional Research Service (CRS), crime and violence is on the rise in the Caribbean. CRS reports that “Homicide rates in several Caribbean countries have increased in recent years because of gangs and organized crime, competition between drug trafficking organizations, and the availability of firearms.”

I urge the Committee to provide the same level of funding for CBSI that was included in the FY 2016 omnibus appropriations bill.

Investing in Energy Potential in the Caribbean

According to a study from the World Bank, an average cost of electricity in the Caribbean is four times higher than in rich nations such as the United States. High energy costs are a financial hardship for people in the Caribbean and are also one of the blockages for unleashing economic growth and prosperity in the region.

Another report shows that the cost of generating electricity in the Caribbean is higher than much of the rest of the world, which can impede direct investment. In Jamaica, consumers pay 38 cents per kilowatt hour for electricity. In Puerto Rico, that figure stands at 25 to 30 cents per kilowatt hour. In contrast, the average American household pays 10.13 cents per kilowatt hour, according to the U.S. Energy Information Administration.

Investing in new sources of energy, including renewable energy projects such as wind and solar projects in the Caribbean, would mean more clean energy jobs, updated infrastructure, and a more booming economy.

That is why I urge the Appropriations Committee to increase foreign direct investment in the Caribbean, and to invest in the Caribbean's energy needs.

United States Agency for International Development (USAID)

Finally, I would like to discuss the importance of the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) and the need to continue funding its vital programs. USAID is a premier facet of our foreign diplomacy and its engagement has brought us closer with our neighbors in Central and South America through increasing economic prosperity, promoting good governance, and engaging in clean energy development in the face of climate change. Our assistance to and cooperation with these countries has proven to have positive demonstrable effects. For example, in the last few years Panama has changed from a country receiving development aid to a country that is now providing aid to other Central American countries. Continued investment through USAID will help to make countries become more sustainable and prosperous, which will continue to improve the region in magnitudes beyond our current aid.

That is why I am asking you to support USAID and increase its funding for programs in Central America.

Thank you for the opportunity to offer my concerns and priorities to the Committee.