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Opening Statement of the Honorable **Ed Royce (R-CA), Chairman**
Committee on Foreign Affairs Hearing:
“Advancing U.S. Interests in the Western Hemisphere “
July 11, 2018

(As prepared for delivery)

“Today we look at U.S. policy toward Latin America and the Caribbean. Our relationships in the Western Hemisphere are forged by deep cultural and economic ties. We export a lot of goods to the Caribbean, supporting U.S. jobs. Across Latin America, our trade ties are just as strong. But today, as the region faces urgent challenges and transitions, the United States must be more engaged than ever.

As always, the safety of Americans serving abroad is a top priority for this committee. The still unexplained attacks on embassy personnel in Havana, and now in China, are very disturbing. Twenty-six Americans have been medically evacuated from Havana with serious symptoms including sharp ear pain, headaches, vertigo and other conditions consistent with brain injury or concussion. Canadians have been impacted as well. We need to know what happened, who is responsible and how to respond.

The administration is actively addressing the Western Hemisphere’s major crises – starting with Venezuela. The United States has repeatedly condemned the illegitimate election of President Maduro, as well as the human rights abuses and economic meltdown unfolding there. The administration has rightly deployed targeted sanctions. Hitting Venezuelan officials responsible for this catastrophe, not the suffering Venezuelan people, is the way to go. The Vice President has traveled to the region three times to urge regional leaders to do more for the Venezuelan people.

In Nicaragua, the administration has rightly designated three top officials for human rights abuses and corruption. But we should do more to support the Nicaraguan people. The repressive Ortega regime has killed more than 200 advocates for free and fair elections since April. One of the civilians murdered on a village street was a former neighbor of an Orange County friend of mine. Subcommittee Chairman Paul Cook will convene a hearing to further examine this matter tomorrow.

Across the hemisphere, transnational criminal organizations continue to pose a major threat. These violent gangs are fueling the drug and migration crisis the U.S. struggles with today. As we fight the deadly impacts of opioids in our communities, we must continue working closely with our regional neighbors to increase counter-narcotics cooperation. The recent increase in cocaine production in Columbia is unacceptable, and I am hopeful that the election of President Ivan Duque is a sign that the country will redouble efforts to confront gangs and cartels.

This committee continues to support U.S. efforts to work with the countries of Central America's Northern Triangle – El Salvador, Honduras and Guatemala – to help shore up institutions, combat crime and corruption, and create conditions that will keep people from migrating north. I agree with the administration that combatting corruption in the region must be a key part of the strategy to create opportunity and stability. The committee will continue to support assistance to the region.

Finally, the recent presidential election in Mexico raises questions about the future of the U.S.-Mexico security relationship under the Merida Initiative. I hope that President-Elect Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador's campaign promise to root out corruption is a sign that our two countries can continue to cooperate on matters of security. The U.S. and Mexico share a 2,000 mile border, and must continue to work together to enhance both security and trade that benefits both our countries. NAFTA should be updated for the 21st century, not scrapped."