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Committee on Foreign Affairs
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“Democratic Values in the Indo-Pacific in an era of strategic competition”

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Chairman Bera, Ranking Member Chabot, and Distinguished Members of the Subcommittee: Thank you for inviting me to testify on the vital role of the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) in the Indo-Pacific in defending and promoting democratic norms and institutions—which President Biden holds as central to U.S. foreign policy. It is an honor to testify before this Subcommittee, and a pleasure to be here alongside my colleagues from the U.S. Department of State, Acting Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary Scott Busby, Acting Assistant Secretary Dean Thompson, and Senior Advisor Francisco Bencosme.

The United States Government’s Interim National Security Strategic Guidance conveys President Biden’s vision for how America will engage with the world. Front and center to this engagement is working with like-minded allies and partners to defend and promote democratic norms and institutions—to combat threats to free societies, and to lead and sustain a stable and open international system.

Alongside diplomacy and defense, USAID’s development and humanitarian work is integral to achieving this vision. Democratic governance and human rights are critical components of sustainable development and lasting peace. Human rights and fundamental freedoms of citizens are the bedrock for managing and mitigating conflict, spurring economic growth, and protecting human dignity. Countries with democratic processes and institutions are more just, peaceful, and stable, enabling citizens to pursue and fulfill their potential. USAID is committed to integrating democracy programming throughout our core development work, focusing across all sectors to strengthen and promote human rights, increase access to justice, foster accountable and transparent governance, and enable an independent and active civil society.

Across the Indo-Pacific, the development environment has been dramatically altered by the impacts of COVID-19 and other factors, which has created significant challenges for democracy assistance. These include the resurgence of authoritarianism, an increase in democratic backsliding, the spread of digital authoritarianism, rampant disinformation, growing inequality, and strategic competition by other actors like the People’s Republic of China (PRC). We are seeing an increase in trafficking of persons and gender-based violence (GBV), which affect the most vulnerable in society. During a time when democracy was already under threat, the COVID-19 pandemic has, in many countries, accelerated democratic backsliding and allowed autocrats to further consolidate power. Some governments have exploited pandemic-related health and safety restrictions to violate human rights and curtail fundamental freedoms. Threats to freedom of expression and independent media have worsened. Authoritarian regimes are using technology to stifle dissent. Misinformation, disinformation, online harassment, surveillance

systems, and simply shutting down the internet are becoming common. In authoritarian environments, governments are using the pandemic to further limit political space, consolidate power, and deepen existing backsliding trends. In fragile democracies, the response to COVID-19 is straining weak institutions and democratic principles and practices, and impeding political competition. A poor pandemic response in many countries further erodes trust between citizens and their governments and increases opportunity for corruption.

While we shift significant resources to support much-needed medical, humanitarian, and economic responses to COVID-19, we must not lose sight of the need for significant support for democracy, human rights, and governance so we can retain years of U.S. investments and gains. In support of the Biden Administration's stated priority in the Interim National Security Strategic Guidance to "revitalize democracy the world over," USAID is deepening and expanding efforts to address today's threats to free societies. I'll next briefly highlight some of our work applicable to today's hearing topic.

Counter authoritarianism, address strategic competitors, and strengthen core democratic institutions and processes

In advancing U.S. interests and our development objectives in the Indo-Pacific, USAID faces increasing challenges from authoritarian leaders and strategic competitors whose aims run counter to our own. In collaboration with like-minded allies and partners, we are focused on countering aggressive efforts by authoritarian leaders to undermine democratic institutions and processes and democratization globally. USAID is focused on implementing its long-term sustainable development approach—steeped in a strong understanding of the local context—to directly counter the internal factors that are driving autocratization and polarization in partner countries. USAID is well positioned through its programs to shore up institutions of accountability and justice to resist creeping authoritarianism.

In the Kyrgyz Republic, members of Parliament introduced a bill which was largely copied from a well-known Russian law that establishes *de facto* censorship across independent media. The bill was immediately declared unconstitutional by Kyrgyzstani civil society, lawyers, and journalists. USAID supported media experts to engage the government on the dire consequences of such a bill. Bolstered by USAID's support for independent media, the resulting public outcry—online, in the press, and through peaceful protests in the capital—prompted the President to refuse to sign the bill into law.

To counter disinformation and divisive hate speech after the Easter 2019 attacks in Sri Lanka, USAID trained more than 100 youth from disparate ethnicities across the country. These youth learned to network and create content that promoted pluralism and peace building. For several months, the positive messages countered misleading and divisive content, reaching more than two million people and engaging more than one million social media users. A select group of youth trainees now serve as "Cyber Guardians" to continue countering hate speech and fake news.

Within the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), USAID supports the ASEAN Intergovernmental Commission on Human Rights design recommendations for the

implementation of ASEAN commitments under Article 23 of the ASEAN Human Rights Declaration on freedom of opinion and expression. USAID is developing a comprehensive training-of-trainers program on media literacy to address disinformation, fake news, and misinformation in the region. As a result of USAID training programs implemented in partnership with ASEAN, over 50 young leaders from across ASEAN are better able to draw upon media and technology to raise awareness and develop social campaigns on topics of interest and import, including those that promote inclusion and tolerance and address governance challenges in their communities.

In a similar manner, we supported the Women's Media Centre in Cambodia to develop and launch CrossCheck, Cambodia's first fact-checking website that has since increased the national conversation about fake news. These are two of the many growing efforts that we are undertaking to address disinformation, much of it purported by strategic competitors seeking to destabilize democratic institutions and erode civil discourse.

USAID is fulfilling its congressional directive in support of Tibetans in the Tibet Autonomous Region and adjacent provinces with significant Tibetan populations including cultural preservation, environmental conservation, and livelihoods development on the Tibetan Plateau. USAID support has strengthened the capacity of over 30,000 Tibetans to restore grassland in their communities upon which their livestock depend, and helped more than 12,000 Tibetans secure new or better employment in livelihoods that help them sustain their culture. USAID's support for Tibetans extends also to India and Nepal, enabling the exiled communities there to achieve their economic and cultural self-reliance so that they are able to counter cultural assimilation pressures both within and outside the Tibetan plateau.

Combat corruption and strengthen accountability

USAID is prioritizing its institutional development work—including public administration, public financial management, and oversight, transparency, and accountability mechanisms at all levels of government. This includes promoting citizen-responsive and democratic approaches, and building the capacity of countries to prevent, detect, and prosecute corruption while addressing the underlying drivers that allow corruption to flourish. Key to this effort is our support for civil society, investigative journalists, independent and credible election observers, and private sector stakeholders to provide oversight and ensure government accountability. At the same time, we strive to strengthen institutions such as judiciaries, parliaments, and local governments while supporting civil society to make those institutions accountable to their people.

In the Philippines, USAID helped improve government accountability in procurement. To prevent unnecessary delays in procuring essential commodities for the country's COVID-19 response, the Philippine Government passed a law making its emergency procurement rules more streamlined and flexible. In support, USAID worked closely with the government to develop and launch its official online portal for the government's procurement of essential items during crises or emergencies. The portal promotes procurement transparency and accountability and reduces costs for both the government and vendors. Between April 2020 and May 2021, more than 2,200 procuring entities registered and secured more than 20,000 contracts for goods and services valued at more than \$1.2 billion. USAID is now working to integrate the emergency

procurement portal into the government's electronic procurement system, and to enable electronic bidding for goods, services, and infrastructure projects.

In Nepal, we are helping to foster greater accountability and transparency in planning and management of public funds. Nepal is in the midst of a historic devolution of powers as it transitions to a federal structure. The devolution of authorities to the subnational level is a new practice in Nepal that requires local governments to implement new systems and business processes in order to effectively fulfill their mandates. This includes local-level adoption of the country's federal level public financial management (PFM) system, which enables local governments to execute public funds effectively, efficiently, transparently, and accountably, and provides a safeguard against public corruption and misuse of funds. In support of this, USAID trained officials representing every local and provincial government to use the PFM software to improve budget planning, accounting, and reporting. As a result of USAID's assistance, 99 percent of local governments use the PFM software.

In response to unscheduled courtroom closures and other disruptions to the delivery of justice in 2020 caused by COVID-19, with USAID support, Indonesia made online criminal court proceedings legal, ensuring continuity of justice during the pandemic. With the ability to facilitate remote participation in court proceedings, Indonesia has maintained a functioning justice system during the pandemic. This new openness is expected to stay in place even after the pandemic subsides. Since 2016, USAID has trained over 10,500 government officials, judges, and judicial assistants in anti-corruption, transparency, and accountability practices while upgrading the digital tools of the Indonesian Supreme Court and the special anti-corruption court to make case adjudication more efficient.

In Burma, the military junta attempted to justify its coup by pointing to myths about a flawed election. USAID's support to the Asian Network of Free Elections (ANFREL), and other credible election observers, provided additional evidence that, while flaws existed, Burma's 2020 election was credible and largely reflected the will of the people. ANFREL recently produced a report fact-checking the junta's claims and finding mostly "false truths, misrepresented facts, and inaccuracies." USAID's confidence in the quality of the election is further bolstered by the depth of our support in the years prior to the coup to political parties, civil society organizations (CSOs) supporting voter election information, and the Union Elections Commission.

USAID is working with the election commissions of Pacific Island countries like Fiji, Papua New Guinea, and the Solomon Islands as they seek to conduct safe elections in the midst of a pandemic. For example, we helped safely mobilize local observers (in the absence of international observers due to travel restrictions) for elections last August in Papua New Guinea, providing a model for other Pacific Island countries to emulate.

Broaden support for human rights, rule of law, and citizen empowerment

With the Administration's priority to defend and protect human rights, USAID is positioning to broaden its support for human rights, rule of law, and citizen empowerment, with an emphasis on addressing discrimination, inequity, and marginalization in all its forms.

The PRC continues to commit egregious human rights abuses, including crimes against humanity and genocide against Uyghurs and members of other religious and ethnic minority groups in Xinjiang, which Secretary Blinken has determined constitute genocide and crimes against humanity. USAID takes these atrocities very seriously and is responding to them by supporting the documentation of genocide and crimes against humanity. We will soon launch a new religious freedom activity that will in part address the Uyghur crisis. USAID welcomes Congress's bipartisan support on this issue.

We are expanding support for civil society, human rights defenders, and independent media to promote accountability for those in power. In Burma, following the February 1 military coup, USAID immediately redirected \$42 million of assistance away from work that could have benefited the junta-controlled government, and directed the assistance to civil society, independent media, and life-saving activities that directly benefit the people of Burma. Amid the deteriorating human rights situation and expansion of violence in ethnic areas, pro-democracy support is USAID's primary objective for the foreseeable future. USAID provides critical emergency assistance to protect civil society activists, sustain independent media, and maintain democratic voices.

In Nepal, USAID is elevating the voices of the 40 percent of the country's population that is marginalized by ethnicity, caste, or religion and generally disregarded in government planning and policy development. To help close this gap in representation, USAID trained approximately 400 human rights defenders and 1,800 students to strengthen their leadership capacity. As a result, these trainees advocated for the rights of marginalized populations, especially Dalits, women, and lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, and intersex (LGBTQI+) people, and were able to bring their issues to local government planning levels. Also, USAID informed Nepal's Universal Periodic Review of human rights and shadow reporting by supporting 39 consultations nationwide that included input from more than 600 CSOs and a high-level technical review of the development of five laws which were critical to the implementation of constitutionally-guaranteed fundamental rights.

In Sri Lanka, USAID helped expand CSOs' work in the human rights space, lead inclusion activities for LGBTQI+ individuals, and address GBV as a human rights issue through engagement with state officials and policymakers. CSOs advocated before state institutions to address land rights violations; to push for reparations and justice for victims and families of the disappeared; to raise awareness and seek redress for victims of torture, and arbitrary arrests and detentions; and to document and raise awareness of religiously motivated violence. USAID supported a national land rights network that helped more than 70 CSOs, which organized into five regional networks in five provinces, to more effectively advocate for land rights. USAID support also contributed to the fight against torture in Sri Lanka by supporting networking for a journalists' collective, through which journalists can improve their capacity to report on allegations of torture, galvanize action, and raise public awareness.

In Cambodia, USAID helps civil society organizations operate in the country's increasingly restrictive environment, helping them promote and protect people's rights under the Cambodian constitution. Additionally, USAID works with human rights organizations to provide legal support and counseling to those on trial, and to advocate against repressive legislation. Our

citizen empowerment efforts in Cambodia have yielded tangible successes. For example, citizen journalists raised awareness about deficiencies in the delivery of essential public services, with USAID support. Citizens then engaged local authorities on the insufficient release of irrigation water and problems with solid waste collection around a popular market, which prompted government actions to address them.

In partnership with ASEAN, USAID launched a series of national-level policy dialogues on migrant worker rights, which is the first step toward implementing the ASEAN Consensus on the Protection and Promotion of the Rights of Migrant Workers.

To promote human rights, USAID helped draft standardized guidelines on the treatment of trafficking victims for national-level implementation in accordance with the 2015 ASEAN Convention Against Trafficking in Persons, Especially Women and Children. USAID also partnered with the International Labour Organization to support ASEAN's revision and renewed commitment to the ASEAN Roadmap for the Elimination of the Worst Forms of Child Labor by 2025.

USAID is also seeking to stand up its first regional project to promote freedom of religion or belief and freedom of conscience. We realize that much of the conflict in our region is both religiously and ethnically linked and we hope to use this activity to improve conditions for religious minorities, promote religious pluralism in places where believers face restrictions to practicing their faith, and increase the role of religious leaders as conflict mediators and advocates for human rights and fundamental freedoms. This project will also seek to work with members of religious minority groups, including Uyghurs who have been displaced from China, enabling them to tell their stories to the world.

We cannot help build resilient democracies without also combating inequality and discrimination. An unjust and unequal society will never achieve its full potential. USAID places particular emphasis on inclusive development, expanding rights and opportunities for women and girls; persons with disabilities; displaced persons; LGBTQI+ persons; indigenous peoples; and other historically marginalized populations, including ethnic and religious minorities.

USAID helped develop ASEAN's first Gender Mainstreaming Strategic Framework and led the research to support the launch of ASEAN's Regional Study on Women, Peace and Security. Both landmark efforts provide ASEAN with a base of knowledge and a pathway toward enhancing women's civic participation and leadership as well as advancing gender equality across the entire ASEAN community.

Over the past six years, USAID has helped reduce the violence, discrimination, and stigma faced by LGBTQI+ people across Asia through regional and country-specific programs that supported local civil society organizations and provided emergency response grants. USAID formed a support coalition of 1,357 governmental and non-governmental organizations; built momentum for LGBTQI+ inclusion in business, education, and media sectors across ASEAN; and supported the development of 23 inclusive laws and policies across Asia.

In countries such as Indonesia and Laos, USAID is advancing the rule of law by enhancing equal access to justice for all. In Indonesia, USAID has helped increase access to justice for underprivileged and marginalized populations. Since 2017, USAID has worked directly with 10 legal aid partners, increasing the number of people they serve by more than 1,000 percent. In Laos, USAID supported the Government of Laos to expand legal aid services to reach vulnerable populations. By the end of this year, USAID will have helped the government to more than triple the number of legal aid offices in Laos from 54 to 165.

Conclusion

Mr. Chairman: President Biden is committed to a foreign policy that unites our democratic norms and institutions with our leadership on the world stage—one that is centered on promoting democracy and advancing human rights. We know that societies that respect and defend human rights and protect fundamental freedoms are more stable, prosperous, and secure, make strong trade partners, and are better equipped to confront global challenges. Yet in the Indo-Pacific, significant deficits in citizen-responsive governance and respect for human rights, fundamental freedoms, and democratic norms and institutions compromise stability and prosperity in a region of the world home to the majority of humanity. While USAID and its partners have been adapting to meet these challenges, we also recognize that much more needs to be done, and we are looking forward to doing so in alignment with this Administration’s priorities and in consultation with the U.S. Congress. Thank you.

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