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**Before the**  
**Subcommittee on the Western Hemisphere, Civilian Security, and Trade**  
**of the Committee on Foreign Affairs**  
**of the U.S. House of Representatives**  
**“The Trump Administration’s Response to COVID-19 in Latin America and the**  
**Caribbean”**  
**Wednesday, July 1, 2020**

Chairman Sires, Ranking Member Rooney, and members of the Subcommittee, thank you for the invitation to testify today about the Trump Administration’s response to COVID-19 in Latin America and the Caribbean. I am grateful for the Committee's support for the work of the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), particularly as we address the effects of COVID-19 across the region.

As you are fully aware, the COVID-19 pandemic is unique, in that it is causing widespread health *and* economic devastation across the world, in developed and developing countries alike. The challenges that COVID-19 brings forward have the ability, if unchecked, to magnify underlying and ongoing development challenges in Latin America and the Caribbean, which potentially undermines the significant investments made through the generosity of the American people. USAID recognizes that, to protect development efforts in the region adequately, we must begin to look to the future, adapt our processes and structures accordingly, and act. Of course, this is all in addition to the immediate priority of helping our hemispheric neighbors protect themselves from and combat COVID-19.

I want to acknowledge the leadership of President Trump, Vice President Pence, Secretary Pompeo, Acting Administrator John Barsa, and our talented teams around the world as we work together to defeat COVID-19, both at home and globally. I would also like to thank Dr. Steven Olive particularly, who has used his decades of experience as a USAID Senior Foreign Service Officer to help lead USAID’s Bureau for Latin America and the Caribbean for the past two years, and whose help the past eight weeks has been a continual and large part of the successful functioning during these challenging times. Lastly, I want to thank Congress and the American people for the critical resources provided to respond to this global crisis.

Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, the White House had demonstrated through unprecedented outreach, engagement, and commitment to our partners its dedication to Latin America and the Caribbean. Twelve regional Heads of State have met with President Trump to date, and the region hosted multiple high-level visitors from the U.S. Government; former USAID Administrator Mark Green alone visited a dozen countries in the region, and current Acting Administrator John Barsa has made several trips. This focus on the region has positioned USAID to help manage a robust and growing response to the current threat of COVID-19.

In support of the Administration’s priorities, USAID seeks to maintain the positive steps of the United States’ partnerships with the people of Latin America and the Caribbean by working to increase self-reliance, strengthen mutual economic prosperity, further democracy, and find ways

in the current environment to promote regional security and contribute to efforts to strengthen our regional supply chain infrastructure.

The United States continues to lead the global response to COVID-19, and the American people have continued to support our neighbors around the world, allocating more than \$12.4 billion to benefit the United States Government's global COVID-19 response, including more than \$100 million since March in COVID-19-related response in Latin America and the Caribbean. However, the nature of the COVID pandemic is compounding ongoing challenges that stem from the threat of Chinese exploitation and a region over-burdened by the Venezuela humanitarian crisis.

### **Context**

As you know, the countries of Latin America and the Caribbean have quickly become a new epicenter of the pandemic. Despite early action taken in key countries, such as the Republics of Colombia, Honduras, Perú, and Bolivia, to flatten the curve, by June 22, 2020, the region had more than two million confirmed cases of COVID-19, and tens of thousands more recorded every day. The pandemic has hit the Federative Republic of Brazil particularly hard, with more than one million confirmed cases, but no nation has gone without feeling the effects of the virus.

We are in an unprecedented time, when the region faces the most profound economic crisis in history because of COVID-19. The United States, as the world's largest economy and undisputed leader in foreign assistance, will continue to demonstrate our commitment to the Western Hemisphere. We believe that, through the effective use of investment, development, and coordination, we can help secure a mutually prosperous and fully free Western Hemisphere.

This pandemic is affecting a region that is already facing several other ongoing challenges. For example, lack of economic opportunity and high levels of crime and violence, including by transnational criminal organizations and gangs, have contributed to regional insecurity and driven people to migrate. Anti-democratic and repressive forces in some countries, such as Venezuela, Cuba, and Nicaragua have consolidated power into the hands of the few, which makes many vulnerable and further limits access to food, medicine, and employment. The inept policies of the illegitimate regime of Nicolás Maduro have caused the near-total collapse of Venezuela and driven more than five million people to flee their homeland. Neighboring countries have welcomed these Venezuelans generously, but struggle to provide basic necessities for their own citizens and the Venezuelans who are living within their borders now.

Thanks in part to the previous work of USAID, the region has relatively strong health care; however, there are significant inequities in access to care, particularly among indigenous, migrant, mobile, and other poor and vulnerable populations. Additionally, with more than 70 percent of its population living in cities, Latin America and the Caribbean is among the most urbanized regions in the world, which is undoubtedly accelerating transmission of the virus. Globally, the region has the third-highest level of deaths from non-communicable diseases, such as cardiovascular diseases, cancer, diabetes, and chronic respiratory diseases; these underlying conditions could have linkages to higher levels of mortality from COVID-19.

These challenges add to the complexity of the COVID-19 pandemic and the response to it. The pandemic brings its own non-health challenges, as well. USAID is deeply concerned about shortages of food and water, estimated to increase as a result of COVID-19. Already, we have seen an uptick in violence against women and minorities, particularly as governments enact stay-at-home and quarantine orders. At the same time, malign external actors such as the Communist Party of China are using others' suffering as an excuse to extend "assistance" that comes with unsustainable debt and other strings that only pull countries further away from the goal of self-reliance.

As the region suffers an unprecedented economic slowdown, forecasts suggest it will suffer the world's worst increase in joblessness. USAID is providing support to our international partners, and Acting Administrator Barsa is actively seeking ways to work collaboratively to address these rising concerns.

### **USAID's Response**

USAID is continuing our long-term development programs that address these and other challenges, while also working with the U.S. Department of State, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention within the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, the U.S. Department of Defense, and others as part of an All-of-America response to COVID-19. We recognize that diseases do not respect national borders, which is why funding efforts against COVID-19 overseas is a national security action and helps to protect American lives here at home.

USAID has stood up a COVID-19 Task Force to oversee the Agency's worldwide response to the pandemic. Within this framework, we as a Regional Bureau coordinate closely with the Task Force and USAID's Bureaus for Global Health and Humanitarian Assistance to ensure a comprehensive response and optimize the use of taxpayer funds and resources.

USAID is addressing the effects of the pandemic in 30 countries throughout Latin America and the Caribbean, including nations in which we do not currently have bilateral Missions, such as Ecuador, Bolivia, and Uruguay. Since March 2020, we have provided more than \$105 million from the International Disaster Assistance and Global Health Programs accounts and the Economic Support Fund, as well as other resources from across USAID for the response. We are working with local governments, international organizations, the American and local private sector, faith-based organizations, and non-governmental groups to deliver urgent assistance to those who need it most. This includes supplemental funding appropriated by the Congress in response to this global crisis.

At USAID, we deliver more than just funds. Our assistance puts communities in a better position to respond to this dangerous pathogen. We are strengthening health care while providing expert technical assistance, training, capacity building, and life-saving diagnostics and treatment in partner countries throughout Latin America and the Caribbean to respond to COVID-19.

For example, the United States is proud to partner with the governments of the countries of the region to send much needed ventilators that will help provide care for the most critically ill patients. To date, USAID has delivered 750 lifesaving, high-quality, American-made ventilators

to aid the urgent need to treat patients with severe COVID-19 in Brazil, Honduras, Perú, and the Republic of El Salvador, and we are working on several more deliveries over the coming days, weeks, and months. USAID is also providing additional ventilator supplies (such as filters, tubes, mouth pieces, and other important accessories), service and maintenance packages, and technical assistance (where necessary) to assess health facilities' capacity to use the equipment and help strengthen their ability to provide safe and appropriate clinical care for people with severe COVID-19.

With both supplemental resources and ongoing programs, we are improving clinical care in the region, minimizing the risk of onward transmission and helping to prevent and control infections in healthcare facilities. We fund enhanced case-finding and event-based surveillance for COVID-19, and help train and equip rapid-response teams to investigate cases and conduct contact-tracing. We finance the rehabilitation and repair of water systems to ensure there is access to clean water at health facilities, promote healthy hand-washing behaviors, and work with utilities and other service-providers to maintain access to clean water and sanitation so businesses and markets can reopen safely. We also help Ministries of Health to provide the public with reliable, verifiable information that keeps citizens informed about how best to protect themselves and each other.

We are making progress in reaching those most affected by COVID-19 in the region, by tailoring our response to the needs on the ground. For example, as the first cases were diagnosed in the Republic of Guatemala, USAID helped to convert the *Villa Nueva* speciality hospital into the national emergency site for treating suspected, moderate, and severe cases of COVID-19. USAID-funded experts provided technical support to the Guatemalan Ministry of Health to ensure this key hospital was ready to start caring for COVID-19 patients. In Perú, USAID-financed partners are working in some of the most heavily affected regions in the Amazon and along the Northern Coast, where they will establish an accredited molecular testing lab; administer 36,000 COVID-19 tests; expand capacity to provide oxygen therapy; conduct 450,000 telemedicine consultations through a medical call center; and support outreach by community health workers to 18,000 vulnerable households. In Colombia, USAID has worked with the Colombian Victims' Unit (*Unidad para Atención y Reparación Integral a las Víctimas*) to train women who are former victims of the conflict to produce more than 6,400 essential masks to deliver to vulnerable communities. In the Republic of Haïti, USAID funds 164 hospitals and health centers in all ten of Departments, and is providing chlorine, hand-washing stations, and locally procured masks to help communities address the pandemic. We are also working with the United Nations Haïti Cholera Response Multi-Partner Trust Fund to ensure long-term investments in water and sanitation support efforts against COVID-19.

### **Moving Forward**

As USAID continues to address the immediate needs posed by COVID-19, we have rising concerns about the ongoing and future second- and third-order effects of the pandemic in the region. COVID-19 is not simply a health crisis, and our response cannot be just a health response. Controlling epidemics requires more than a stand-alone effort, and we must integrate our health efforts into a broader development approach. We have seen that when we do not address poor governance and conflict, we wipe out investments in health, education, and other

basic social services. Because of this reality, USAID is leveraging our development programming to complement our investments in global health.

According to projections by the World Food Programme, the socio-economic impact of the pandemic in countries where the organization has a presence in the region potentially could leave nearly 14 million vulnerable people severely food-insecure this year, an increase of 400 percent in one year.”<sup>1</sup> Similarly, the International Monetary Fund has predicted that regional economic growth “is projected to contract by 5.2 percent in 2020, yielding the worst recession in 50 years.”<sup>2</sup>

These are significant challenges, but USAID is already looking over the horizon and working to address them. We have built excellent relationships with governments, civil society, and the private sector in our partner countries through our long-term programs in the region, and we are pivoting programs and dedicating supplemental resources from the Economic Support Fund to mitigate the non-health effects of COVID-19 across a variety of sectors and prevent development backsliding. Our programs work with governments, the private sector, non-governmental organizations, and commercial firms to advance countries’ own development, rather than trap them in unsustainable debt through offers that come with strings attached, as we have seen with "predatory assistance" from the Chinese Communist Party and other malign actors.

Through this funding, USAID is incentivizing the private sector to invest in mitigating the non-health effects of COVID-19 on both rural and urban vulnerable populations; addressing critical needs in the areas of social protection, psychosocial support, education, water and sanitation, and food security; and creating jobs and increasing access to credit. This funding bolsters strong development gains in the region and ensures the effectiveness of our existing programs across a variety of sectors. In addition to mitigating second-order effects via supplemental funding, USAID is also a proud part of the U.S. Government’s *America Crece - or Growth in the Americas* - an initiative that helps to build more resilient, connected economies in the region. For example, our Caribbean Energy Initiative is addressing the systemic issues of high electricity prices, frequently poor service, and heavy reliance on expensive, imported fossil fuels, which continue to plague many parts of the region. The program also works in tandem with the private sector to boost the resilience of the energy sector in the face of hurricanes, earthquakes, floods, and market shocks. We continue our efforts to build strong, citizen-responsive, democratic societies, through programs that advance transparency and root out corruption, and also through our funding for civil society, faith-based organizations, independent media, and human-rights defenders.

USAID has begun to think about how we can successfully execute our mission in the COVID-19 world, in a way that is flexible and agile. To that end, under the direction of Acting Administrator Barsa, as part of our effort to work across USAID to look over the horizon, to ensure alignment of USAID’s policies, programs, and operations with the new development landscape of the post COVID-19 world. We are analyzing and planning for the medium- and long-term effects of COVID-19 because we know the United States will remain a trusted partner, and should be the preferred partner, in countries across the world, especially in Latin America

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.wfp.org/news/covid-19-millions-risk-severe-food-insecurity-latin-america-and-caribbean>

<sup>2</sup> <https://blogs.imf.org/2020/04/16/economic-policy-in-latin-america-and-the-caribbean-in-the-time-of-covid-19/>

and the Caribbean. No other nation can match our unparalleled generosity; our open, collaborative approach; or our long-term commitment to helping communities on their Journey to Self-Reliance.

### **Countering Malign External Actors**

I would like to speak briefly to the challenge of malign external influence. As you are aware, the Administration and Congress have been speaking out through hearings, statements, and reports that shed light on the Chinese Communist Party's (CCP) malign behavior and its impact. Beijing has intervened in sovereign nations' internal affairs to engineer consent for its policies, and authorities from the People's Republic of China have attempted to extend their influence over discourse and behavior around the world, including Latin America and the Caribbean. PRC actors are exporting the tools of the CCP's techno-authoritarian model to countries around the world, which are enabling authoritarian states to exert control over their citizens and surveil the political opposition; training foreign partners in propaganda and censorship techniques; and using bulk collection and analysis of data to intimidate dissenters and design propaganda to shape public sentiment. Similarly, efforts to control the flow of information related to COVID-19 by the CCP and other disinformation efforts around the world have disrupted the response to the pandemic.

As USAID continues our efforts to address COVID-19, we are pre-eminently aware that being the leader in the kind of international development that helps countries develop beyond the need for foreign assistance is only one portion of the fight. The CCP party-state controls the world's most heavily resourced and sophisticated set of propaganda and surveillance tools. The medium- and long-term prosperity of the region's national and economic security, as well as the integrity of development enterprise, will require the United States to tell our story effectively and accurately, identify areas to engage further and more directly with local communities in their languages, and align our resources appropriately for the challenges ahead

### **Conclusion**

As around the world, the COVID-19 situation in Latin America and the Caribbean is still in progress and remains dangerous, and is likely to exacerbate underlying conditions and ongoing crises. COVID-19 remains a serious and ongoing threat, and we foresee future difficulties as the second-order effects of the virus further buffet the region's health care, economies and democracies, and as criminal groups and malign actors exploit chaos to attempt to expand their networks.

Thanks to the generosity of the Congress, and of course, the American people, USAID has provided critical needs and resources to health facilities that were at capacity and bracing for collapse. We have an obligation and national-security imperative to continue to do the same when it comes to limiting the secondary effects of this pandemic.

USAID is steadfast in our commitment to helping our neighbors fight this pandemic even as we fight the virus on the homefront. We are confident that using the resources appropriated to us by Congress, our programs will help the region build stronger, healthier, more resilient societies. This is the right thing to do, and it is key to our own domestic national security and prosperity.

Chairman Sires, Ranking Member Rooney, thank you again for the invitation to testify. I welcome your questions.