

**Statement for the Record before the
United States House Foreign Affairs Committee
Subcommittee on Western Hemisphere, Civilian Security, Migration and International
Economic Policy
Hearing Title: Renewing the United States' Commitment to Addressing the Root Causes of
Migration from Central America
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Introduction

Mr. Chairman, Ranking Member, and Members of the House Foreign Affairs Subcommittee on the Western Hemisphere -- thank you for inviting me here today. I am honored to have this opportunity to speak with you and honored to serve as the State Department's Special Envoy to the Northern Triangle. My role as Special Envoy is to advise the Secretary of State and oversee the Department's plan for a comprehensive approach to migration in North and Central America. To do that, I will engage with governments in the region -- including Mexico, El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras -- on a range of issues. My work is part of a much broader national effort defined by President Biden in his February 2 Executive Order creating a comprehensive regional framework on migration. This approach includes a collaborative strategy for managing migration throughout North and Central America and addressing root causes of forced displacement and irregular migration over the long term. The Vice President leads this national effort and the State Department supports and advances the objectives the Vice President defines for U.S. agencies.

Since assuming this role on March 16, I have traveled with senior State Department and National Security Council colleagues to Mexico, Guatemala, and El Salvador, where we spoke with a wide variety of stakeholders, and I met with Honduran Foreign Minister Rosales in Washington, DC. I have used these engagements to convey the commitment of the United States to addressing the root causes driving migration. We seek to strengthen collaborative efforts to manage migration throughout the region. The message I am sharing is that the United States is committed to working with governments, the private sector, international partners, and civil society to address these issues. We are determined to secure our border. We must enforce U.S. immigration laws while promoting safe, orderly, and humane migration and improving access to protection for those who need it.

The reality is irregular migration will continue as long as the instability, inequity, corruption, and poverty driving people from their homes outweigh their desire to stay. Our job is to alter the recurring cycle of irregular migration that strains the resources of countries across the region and drains Central America of its human capital. At the same time, we must promote access to protection and respect for human rights. This is a huge undertaking but a necessary one if we are to avoid even worse outcomes in future years.

Keeping this Committee and Congress apprised of our efforts and working with you and your teams on how best to tackle these considerable challenges is a key part of my job. I met with House Foreign Affairs Committee staff soon after starting in this position, my team has

consulted multiple times with congressional staff, and I look forward to engaging with you regularly. I welcome this opportunity to share with you what we have done so far and our plans to keep our borders secure while gradually improving access to our asylum system and working with partners to more effectively and humanely manage migration movements in the region.

Although my title is Special Envoy for the Northern Triangle, our approach to these issues must incorporate all of our partners in Central America and Mexico. We acknowledge that El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras are distinct countries that each face their own unique challenges. Our policy must respond to the individual complexities of each.

The Challenge and Approach

As you all know, the President cares deeply about achieving a sustainable solution to the migration challenge in the region. Vice President Harris' direct leadership on this issue is a testament to the importance this Administration places on improving conditions in Central America. The Vice President will lead U.S. engagement with the region's government leaders, private sector actors, and civil society to address the root causes of migration, promote shared prosperity in the region, and address other contributing factors such as climate change and food insecurity.. Both the President and Vice President have already spoken with Mexican President Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador and Guatemalan President Alejandro Giammattei, and Secretary Blinken spoke with the Guatemalan, Honduran, and Salvadoran foreign ministers in February.

We are under no illusion the task of reducing irregular migration to the U.S. southern border will be easy. When a parent decides to send their child on a dangerous journey to a foreign country in the hopes the outcome will be better than the future available at home, we have to examine that calculus. The root causes of irregular migration -- general insecurity, lack of economic opportunity, weak rule of law, and absence of basic necessities like food and healthcare -- are endemic challenges, particularly in El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras, and contribute to a lack of hope that pervades the region. Unfortunately, in some respects, conditions in Central America have gotten worse, not better, over the last decade because of widespread corruption, natural disasters, increasingly unpredictable weather, and weak governance. The COVID-19 pandemic and the devastating storms that pummeled the region in November have exacerbated many of these challenges. Unfortunately, climate change only makes it more likely the region will continue to experience such extreme weather events. Factors like corruption and economic effects of COVID-19 also exacerbate the threat of persecution, exploitation, and violence at the hands of transnational criminal gangs, causing more people to seek new lives in the United States.

Short-term actions

To address this complex challenge, we have organized our activities into three categories: **managing migration, ensuring access to protection, and addressing the root causes of migration**. Achieving the structural changes necessary to address the root causes of migration will take years, but there are actions we are already taking or plan to take in the **short-term** to address the flow of migrants, offer protection to those who need it, and prepare would-be migrants for better futures while we seek commitments to ensure an enabling environment for economic investment and growth in the longer term.

As a first step to **managing migration flows**, we are working with regional governments and international organization partners to ensure the message to potential migrants is clear: (1) the U.S. border is closed; (2) we are expanding access to protection and looking to expand legal pathways for immigration; and (3) we are committed to working with the region -- not just governments but all of society -- to generate hope and create conditions that will allow Central Americans to thrive in their home countries. To ensure we can better manage migration in the region, we will help build the capacity of regional government agencies to enforce their borders, to set up checkpoints, and, as appropriate, to prevent irregular entry to their countries and to stop illicit actors including smugglers and traffickers. A key piece of this effort is our diplomatic engagement: last month, our embassies in Guatemala and Honduras worked with authorities to successfully disperse a coordinated departure of approximately 300 people in Honduras. Sustained diplomatic outreach will help reinforce continued regional collaboration. We also will expand access to legal pathways for immigration to the United States. On March 10, the State Department announced the resumption of the Central American Minors (CAM) program. CAM allows lawfully present, U.S.-based parents from El Salvador, Honduras, and Guatemala to apply for access to the U.S. Refugee Admission Program (USRAP) for their biological, step, or legally adopted unmarried children under the age of 21.

We also want to make sure those who need **protection** can access alternatives within the region and understand that reaching the U.S. southern border is not their only option. We are already working with regional governments to improve their asylum systems and responses to internally displaced persons (IDPs). We will engage in robust diplomacy with regional and international community partners to encourage them to resettle an increased number of refugees from the region.

To **help position individuals for employment in their home countries**, we will draw upon innovative USAID programs in the areas of scholarships, skills certification, education, and job training, and publicize available programs and how to access them.

Addressing root causes

To reduce migration flows and change the calculus for Central American migrants in the **long-term**, we aim to achieve structural changes, political commitments, and policy reforms that will address the root causes driving irregular migration in the region. We will also invest in the change we want to see in these countries -- as evidenced by the President's commitment to a four-year, \$4 billion strategy. U.S. foreign assistance will be crucial to these efforts, but it will not be sufficient alone, and it is not a replacement for political will. We will seek cooperation from the governments, private sector, civil society, and likeminded donors and international organizations. Where appropriate, we will collaborate with Mexico and align efforts with Mexico's Comprehensive Development Plan.

Promotion of good governance, anticorruption, and human rights must be at the center of our efforts. Together they make up the foundation for security, economic opportunity, and accountable government administration. We have seen democratic backsliding in El Salvador, Honduras, and Guatemala. Promoting accountability for government actors, encouraging increased transparency and the creation of an enabling environment for investment, and urging adherence to the Inter-American Democratic Charter and the Inter-American Convention against

Corruption will be central to our efforts. The departure of anticorruption mechanisms from Guatemala and Honduras was a setback to anticorruption efforts in the region. We continue to support attorneys general, anticorruption prosecutors, and executive branch or international-led anticorruption commissions like the International Commission against Corruption and Impunity in El Salvador, CICIÉS, led by the Organization of American States, to investigate and prosecute significant corruption. We will call on regional governments to adequately resource and avoid interference in the work of anticorruption units, as well as limit political pressure, including attempts to intimidate justice authorities through threats of removal of immunity. We will seek regional governments' commitment to develop clear standards for professional expertise, integrity, and political impartiality of candidates for judicial positions. We will also continue to use the tools Congress has provided, including the Global Magnitsky Act and visa restrictions under section 7031(c) of the Department's annual appropriations act, to deter corrupt behavior.

We will urge regional partners to implement reforms that will expand economic opportunity, attract investment, and generate inclusive growth to ensure all sectors of society can live and work in dignity. Broadening access to financial capital and making it easier to start a business and pay taxes will foster the growth of new businesses, particularly small- and medium-sized enterprises, which employ the majority of workers. These changes, together with regional integration, will help Central American countries achieve diversified economies that produce more, higher-value goods for export. Governments must invest in affordable, reliable electricity, and a robust transportation and information technology infrastructure, while providing for the health and education of their workforce. El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras need to make reforms and investments to achieve the growth rates seen by Panama and Costa Rica, and all Central American countries must work to reduce poverty in rural areas.

High levels of violence remain a challenge in the region, and we are committed to working with regional governments to combat transnational organized crime, curb illicit trafficking, and increase confidence in the public security institutions tasked with protecting communities. Through our foreign assistance, we have seen important advances in the professionalism and capability of law enforcement and security services throughout Central America and Mexico. We have seen increases in the capacity of vetted units, community policing, and violence prevention initiatives. Still, challenges remain: uneven capabilities among law enforcement and security services, inadequate resourcing of security needs, the impact of the pandemic on law enforcement, and the military's role in policing. Across the region, gender-based violence -- including but not limited to intimate partner violence, rape, and gender-based killing of women and girls (or femicide) -- and other crimes, including sex and labor trafficking and forced prostitution, hinder the ability of women and girls to participate fully in society and the economy and to contribute to their families and communities. We will seek commitments from our regional partners to implement reforms that support violence prevention and reintegration of former gang members. Again, we will need regional partners to make meaningful efforts to tackle corruption and support transparency in order to achieve sustainable progress across the criminal justice systems of Central America and Mexico.

Including all stakeholders

In addition to partners in civil society and the private sector, you in Congress are key stakeholders in addressing the root causes of migration and holding the region's governments

accountable to their commitments and have been involved in the formulation of our strategy. We will continue to engage a diverse set of actors as we execute our plans. We will also integrate vulnerable and marginalized populations, including women and youth, into our overall approach and activities, as we will only succeed if we expand opportunity and generate hope for all Central Americans.

To be successful in this endeavor, we seek your long-term bipartisan support and flexibility to help address both the push and pull factors. These will be essential elements to our success as we craft sustainable approaches to these challenges. We commit to regularly engaging with you. I'll conclude by reiterating we understand the significance and difficulty of this challenge, and I truly appreciate your interest in achieving a sustainable solution. I look forward to working with you and am happy to answer any questions.