

**Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for Western Hemisphere Affairs,
Eric Jacobstein's Testimony
Before the House Foreign Affairs
Sub-Committee for the Western Hemisphere
"The U.S.-Honduras Bilateral Relationship"
Wednesday, October 25, 2023, 2:00 p.m.**

Thank you, Chairwoman Salazar, Ranking Member Castro, and Members of the Subcommittee for the opportunity to testify today on Honduras. I am pleased to testify alongside my USAID colleague Deputy Assistant Administrator Mileydi Guilarte. And it is a particular honor to be back here with the Foreign Affairs Committee, a place where I worked for 10 years, including on this Subcommittee. The role of the Foreign Affairs Committee and the Western Hemisphere Subcommittee remain vital in U.S. efforts to enhance ties with our partners in the region.

Honduras is an essential partner. We share a host of common objectives, including countering corruption, creating employment, improving education, protecting human rights, enhancing security conditions, combating drug trafficking, and humanely managing migration. In line with the U.S. Strategy for Addressing the Root Causes of Migration in Central America, we work with the Honduran government to focus on results in these areas that reduce forced displacement and irregular migration from Honduras to the United States.

This is not an easy undertaking. Honduras faces longstanding challenges, including poverty, inequality, crime, endemic corruption, narcotrafficking, extreme weather catastrophes, and policies that inadequately support key drivers of economic growth.

To address shared challenges, we partner with Honduras in a range of areas with an emphasis on overlapping interests.

President Castro's November 2021 election victory presented an opportunity to break with the corruption and democratic backsliding that took place under former President Juan Orlando Hernandez, who currently awaits trial in New York on drug trafficking charges.

Earlier this year, I joined an interagency delegation to Tegucigalpa to participate in a bilateral strategic and human rights dialogue during which we sat down with Honduran leaders and took stock of the bilateral relationship after the government's first year. We discussed how we could move forward together on a variety of shared objectives that support the goals of the U.S. Strategy for Addressing the Root Causes of Migration in Central America, on issues including migration, security cooperation, rule of law, democracy, and human rights.

In September, we hosted President Castro and senior Honduran officials on a visit to the U.S.-Mexico border, which served to improve our shared response to managing migration and strengthening border security. We applaud Honduras' progress in passing legislation regarding internally displaced persons and working with us on enforcement efforts. We are also grateful for Honduras' regional efforts under the framework of the Los Angeles Declaration on Migration and Protection to collaboratively address irregular migration and strengthen protection for refugees and other forcibly displaced people.

We have a long-standing security cooperation relationship with Honduras, including through our presence at Soto Cano Air Base. For decades, Joint Task Force-Bravo, which is stationed there, has enabled robust security cooperation, humanitarian assistance, and disaster relief in country and across the region. We look forward to continuing this cooperation with Honduras.

We also look forward to continued collaboration to make progress on effective governance and the rule of law in Honduras.

Honduras has committed to addressing corruption and impunity and President Castro has invited the UN to establish an independent anti-corruption commission. We applaud this effort but urge its rapid establishment in accordance with UN guidelines. We also urge the government to fully fund existing units that investigate corruption.

The Honduran National Police continue to prioritize our security relationship and actively seek out our support in the areas of police education, combatting kidnapping, border security, and gang prevention. At the Strategic and Human Rights Dialogues earlier this year, we also announced our intent to work together to address gender-based violence.

The Honduran government states its foreign policy is to meet its international cooperation needs by opening the doors to new countries, including the People's Republic of China. While we acknowledge that diplomatic recognition is a sovereign decision, we note that the PRC often makes promises in exchange for recognition that ultimately remain unfulfilled.

Amid a highly politicized environment marked by charged language on all sides, we have been concerned by inflammatory rhetoric to attack those who have raised legitimate concerns. This includes civil society actors, journalists, the private sector, and members of the international community – even our ambassador. We have firmly pushed back on this rhetoric in public and in private.

With regard to the economy, we aim to mobilize additional investment in Honduras through the Vice President's Central America Forward initiative, which has already brought \$4.2 billion in investment commitments and new jobs to northern Central America. Future commitments will depend on a favorable investment climate and sound economic decisions.

We applaud the Government of Honduras' prioritization of human rights. Tragically, human rights, environmental, and labor activists continue to work under threat of violence and death. We continue to call upon the Honduran government to protect activists like Miriam Miranda and Jose Ramiro Lara who face serious threats, and to complete timely and transparent investigations into killings of activists, including Jairo Bonilla and Aly Dominguez.

Finally, on the topic of civic space: In the context of the recent supreme court election and ongoing attorney general election, we continue to emphasize the fundamental importance of legal, transparent, and peaceful democratic processes.

The situation in Honduras is complex, but we remain committed to a strong bilateral relationship, given our two countries' cultural, economic, familial, and geographic ties. The best way forward to advance U.S. interests in the region is to engage deeply with Honduras. The success of Honduras will be our success.

Thank you, and I look forward to your questions.