

**Written Testimony of  
Greg Howell, Senior Deputy Assistant Administrator for Latin America and the Caribbean  
Before the House Foreign Affairs Subcommittee on Western Hemisphere  
“The Curse of Socialism in Central America and the Caribbean”  
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Chair Salazar, Ranking Member Castro, distinguished members of the Subcommittee, thank you for the invitation to discuss the work USAID does to advance economic opportunity, democratic values, and human rights in Central America and the Caribbean.

In the decades that USAID has spent working in the region, we have seen the consequences of governments putting political agendas ahead of people and we have learned how to address these challenges most effectively.

Globally, we forge our partnerships not with specific political parties or administrations but with people, democratic institutions, the private sector, and civil society organizations that share our values and bravely push for democratic change, prosperity and human rights in difficult conditions. This is work that’s not only critical to local communities, but to broader regional stability and our own national security here at home.

That’s especially true of USAID’s efforts in countries like Nicaragua, Cuba, and beyond.

### **Nicaragua**

In Nicaragua, where the Ortega-Murillo regime’s repressive authoritarian rule is creating an increasingly volatile, non-permissive environment, USAID stands with the brave Nicaraguans who are continuing to make their voices heard in support of the democratic principles and respect for human rights that will be critical to any democratic progress. The regime, with the support of malign actors including the PRC and Russia, is increasingly persecuting civil society actors, forcing the closure of most independent media outlets, and attacking religious institutions and individuals who speak out against the regime.

Our efforts in Nicaragua are especially important, as USAID is one of few donors supporting human rights defenders and implementing partners exiled abroad. While the context is volatile, some of our deepest, most enduring foreign partnerships have stemmed from supporting other nations in their darkest hour. The work of these partners to call out the regime’s abuses and advocate for democratic change is vitally important, and USAID is proud to stand behind them.

### **Central America Programming**

We work to support those who shine a light on injustice across Central America through the Voices initiative. Administrator Power launched the Voices Initiative at the 2022 Summit of the Americas to bring together USAID, the State Department, and like-minded partners including governments, civil society, and the private sector so we can bring to bear all of the U.S. government’s tools – from public and private diplomacy, to foreign assistance programming, to enforcement authorities – to protect and promote civic space.

At USAID, we have used our voice to protect our partners and those under threat, consulting closely with organizations to better understand risks they are facing and increasing our programming to meet some

of those challenges. That includes our work offering at risk human rights defenders, journalists, democracy activists, and anti-corruption champions with immediate support such as legal, psychosocial, and even relocation assistance, to more medium-term protection with fellowship opportunities at U.S. universities for those from Guatemala, Honduras, El Salvador, and Nicaragua.

These regional efforts ensure that those fighting for democracy have access to protection and can continue their work from outside their countries, if needed. Amidst closing civic space, our work to strengthen cross-border civil society networks are important for information-sharing and documentation of corruption, freedom of expression, and human rights at a regional level.

## **Cuba**

In Cuba, USAID operates within the parameters of the Cuban Democracy and Libertad Acts. For nearly 30 years, across four U.S. administrations, USAID has helped the people of Cuba in the face of oppressive government rule, supporting human rights, fundamental freedoms, and democratic values by strengthening civil society and providing improved access to information.

USAID provides ongoing humanitarian assistance to political prisoners and their families, and to politically marginalized individuals who face hardship because of their political beliefs or efforts to exercise their fundamental freedoms. There are currently more than 1,000 political prisoners in Cuba. USAID provides assistance to approximately 800 of those individuals and thousands of Cuban families including nutritional food items, vitamins, and over-the-counter medicines, which are an invaluable lifeline to improve their physical and psychological well-being.

USAID also promotes the free flow of information to, from, and within Cuba through greater access to independent news about issues relevant to Cubans on the island and around the world. Over the last decade, USAID helped train hundreds of journalists whose work in major international outlets has counteracted the regime's disinformation campaign by documenting the dismal conditions on the island, and the human rights violations and abuses by the regime. Those violations include the forced labor, garnished wages, threats, and surveillance endured by doctors who serve in overseas Medical Missions, and the on-island impact of exporting so many of Cuba's medical professionals and much-needed medications and medical supplies.

We are proud to support brave Cuban activists and citizens who are risking their lives to advocate for a free and democratic future for their country.

## **Conclusion**

At a time of global power competition in the hemisphere and alarming examples of leaders in the region betraying democratic principles, it is in the interest of the United States to foster effective partnerships that work toward a more peaceful, democratic, prosperous, and stable hemisphere. That is why it is critical USAID maintains a presence across the region and supports those who champion our shared values.

Thank you for the opportunity to appear before you today to talk about USAID's work. I look forward to answering your questions.