

TESTIMONY OF
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SUBCOMMITTEE ON STATE, FOREIGN OPERATIONS AND RELATED PROGRAMS
HOUSE APPROPRIATIONS COMMITTEE

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(Extended Testimony)

I want to thank Chairwoman Lowey, Ranking Member Rogers and the members of the Committee for this opportunity to submit testimony on policy and funding priorities for Fiscal Year 2020. I ask unanimous consent to submit extended testimony for the record.

Madam Chair Lowey, Ranking Member Rogers – I first want to express my appreciation for the work you do and for completing work on the remaining FY 2019 appropriations bills. The two of you and the work of this subcommittee have always been a model of bipartisanship, and I'm honored to appear before you.

As part of that final negotiated conference report, please let me thank you for the increase in FY 2019 funding for the Nutrition sub-account within the Global Health Programs account. The \$20 million increase to \$145 million after four years of flat funding is very welcome.

As you know, increased funding in nutrition enables USAID to target nutrition interventions during pregnancy and the early, critical stages of childhood when better nutrition has the greatest impact on the child's development and brain growth. According to independent research, each \$1 invested during this critical period yields a return of \$48 in long-term health and economic benefits. These investments improve lives resulting in a higher quality of life through better health and more productive lives through stable societies.

For these reasons, I respectfully ask the Committee to increase funding again for the Nutrition sub-account in FY 2020 to \$195 million, including an additional \$20 million for interventions to address maternal and pediatric anemia and \$30 million to expand breastfeeding initiatives.

Let me turn now to talking about two regional issues that I believe require and merit this Committee's continued attention – namely, Central America and Colombia.

Regarding Colombia, we hear a great deal about drugs and the crisis in Venezuela, but I ask the Committee to maintain its focus on Colombia proper – and especially the need to support full implementation of the difficult and hard-won Peace Accords that ended over 60 years of internal armed conflict. These Accords hold great promise for the economic, social and political stability, progress and growth for all Colombians, but they are in danger of being undermined or abandoned, which would be bad for Colombia; bad for the region, and bad for the national security of the United States.

I respectfully ask that the Committee continue to maintain current funding levels for Colombia, or even increase the aid, if possible. Emphasis should remain on development and economic aid that supports the full implementation of the Peace Accords, Afro-Colombian, indigenous and campesino community-based development, and aid that promotes human rights, good governance, strong and independent judicial institutions, and breaking the culture of impunity that still protects State actors, the military, the wealthy and well-connected criminal networks from investigation and prosecution. Increased attention and funding support need to be given to the three mechanisms established by the Peace Accords that focus on the rights of victims – namely the Truth Commission, the search for the disappeared, and the special jurisdiction for peace, known as the JEP.

Madam Chair, I am deeply concerned about the fate of the Peace Accords and human rights in Colombia. Right now, the Colombian Congress is debating President Duque's 4-year National Development Plan. As written, the NDP is likely to un-do many agreements reached on rural and agrarian reform in the Peace Accords. If approved, it might well doom Colombia to ever-escalating violence in the rural regions where the conflict has always been most intense, sustained and brutal, ensuring these regions remain ungoverned spaces at the mercy of violent and criminal actors. The NDP also includes provisions to unravel progress made in labor rights, creating sub-standard wages and benefits for workers, especially in the agriculture sector. These standards are even lower than those in place when the U.S.-Colombia Free Trade Agreement was signed, which, I might add, is a violation of the terms of the FTA itself, not to mention Colombia's obligations under the Labor Action Plan. It is important the Committee signal emphatically that such actions place in legal jeopardy all forms of U.S. aid and trade.

It is also critical that the Committee act on the continuing escalation of murders and assaults against human rights defenders and local social leaders. According to the Human Rights Defenders Memorial Project, Colombia is currently the deadliest place in the world for rights defenders. At least one social leader has been killed every two days, on average, since the historic peace agreement signed at the end of 2016. Many judicial experts, such as the Colombian Commission of Jurists, compare today's violence targeting social leaders as similar to what happened in Colombia in the 1980s and 1990s when paramilitary groups, supported by ranchers, businessmen and Colombia's so-called "narco-elite" all but exterminated left-of-center political party activists. Since the beginning of August through February, the first seven months of the Duque government, over 60 social leaders have been assassinated. This figure doesn't include attempted murder, assaults and death threats against human rights defenders and social leaders. While the Colombian government points to "action plans" and high-level strategy meetings on this crisis, it has been very slow to act. Clearly, whatever programs and plans they have devised, they are not working. There is an urgent need for protection and to identify and hold to account those actors who carry out and benefit from these murders and acts of violence. The Committee must ensure that there are consequences for such a stunning lack of urgency on the part of the Colombian State to protect and defend human right and social leaders. I urge the Committee to take a hard line with the State Department on what determines "effective steps" to reduce attacks against human rights defenders in the conditions applied to 20 percent of the FMF funds for Colombia.

I further ask that the Committee provide ample funding for the continuing crisis of the internally displaced inside Colombia and for Colombian refugees who continue to reside in neighboring countries because it is not safe for them to return home. Regrettably, extreme violence in Colombia is still commonplace in many regions, and forced displacement continues at high rates. In its June 2018 annual report, the UNHCR reported that Colombia had 7.7 million IDPs, the highest levels in the world, followed by Syria and the DRC. 90,000 new IDPs were reported in 2017, with rates likely similar or higher for 2018.

Let me conclude with a few issues related to Central America. It is important to recognize that each country is unique with its own set of challenges, many of which contribute to high levels of violence, deprivation, and the lack of hope in the future that drive thousands to flee their homes and seek security elsewhere, including the United States.

We cannot afford to neglect the internal needs of the people in each country and we need an approach tailored for each country based on its own merits. We need to understand how corruption, violence, repression, human rights abuses and impunity developed in each country, and how that history affects people's daily life. This allows us to better understand what might compel thousands of Central Americans to abandon their homes in hope of providing their children even the smallest chance for a safer, better life.

As you know, each of these countries suffers from high levels of internal displacement as individuals and families try to find somewhere safe to live. There are also very high levels of Central American refugees in Costa Rica, Belize and Mexico. And, as we all know, there are increasing numbers of Central Americans at our borders seeking asylum in the United States, especially families, as they flee the violence so endemic to the region. No wall, no barrier, no new restrictions in our asylum laws will keep these families, children and individuals away until the root causes in each country are addressed, including corruption and impunity. This requires long-term commitment and investments on our part, and I thank the Committee for its willingness to maintain steady levels of funding for this region.

In Guatemala, corruption, targeted repression, high rates of femicide, gender-based abuse, hunger and food insecurity need to be addressed. I also want to thank the Committee for always being a strong supporter of the International Commission against Impunity in Guatemala (CICIG). For FY 2020, the Guatemalan government needs to understand that U.S. aid and support are tied to continuing the mandate and full, independent operation of the CICIG.

Along similar lines, it's important for the Committee to maintain its funding and commitment for the Mission to Support the Fight against Corruption and Impunity in Honduras (MACCIH) and the Office of the U.N. High Commissioner for Human Rights in Honduras. In Honduras, in addition to programs that protect and address violence against youth, especially by gangs and criminal networks, it is important that U.S aid and policy respond to the violence against indigenous and land rights activists, where environmental activists are among the most threatened in the world, as well as support for other human rights defenders, journalists and LGBTQ leaders.

In El Salvador, it is very important that the Committee clearly express to the new government the priority of continuing the two independent commissions charged with searching for those who are still missing or disappeared from the period of the armed conflict: one focused on children, Probúsqueda; and the second, on adults, CONABÚSQUEDA. Each of these independent commissions directly affects many American families with members who either came to the United States during the period of the war or who were infants adopted by American families. In each case, the search for and reunion with their surviving family members inside El Salvador or the search to discover the truth about the disappearance of Salvadoran family members during the period of the civil war is deeply meaningful to U.S. citizens and families, as well as thousands of Salvadoran families. To that end, I ask that the Committee specifically designate \$1 million in ESF for the operations of CONABÚSQUEDA, and to maintain El Salvador on the list of countries eligible for grants in forensics assistance and training.

Finally, I want to note that El Salvador has made progress over the past two years in strengthening its judiciary and prosecuting crimes of official corruption. With the recent change in the Office of the Attorney General and the Supreme Court, it is important for the Committee to send a clear signal of support for such investigations and prosecutions, including cases involving human rights crimes, or are of an historic nature, or both. For example, El Salvador has one of the highest rates of femicide in the world, so it is critical that the new Attorney General maintain the unit investigating crimes against women, especially murders. Similarly, as El Salvador grapples with the legacy of the civil war and its aftermath, it is also critical for the U.S. to continue its support for the unit charged with investigating crimes of a historic nature, such as the 1981 El Mozote massacre.

I also respectfully request that the Committee direct the State Department and the Pentagon to provide all documents in its files to the Salvadoran Attorney General and the presiding judge in the El Mozote case for the period of 1981-1982, which is the timeframe leading up to the massacre and its aftermath. During those years, U.S. security assistance was approved by this Committee and the Congresses of that era, which provided the ammunition, equipment and training to the Salvadoran troops that participated in the El Mozote massacre, including the creation and equipping of the Atlacatl Battalion. Now, nearly forty years later, it falls to this Committee to instruct the Departments of Defense and State to provide all relevant files to the Salvadoran judicial authorities engaged in prosecuting this case.

Please let me thank you, once again, for giving me this opportunity to talk about these priorities. I welcome any questions you might have.