Testimony of Ambassador Roberta S. Jacobson (ret.)
Former U.S. ambassador to Mexico (2016-2018) and Assistant Secretary for Western Hemisphere Affairs (2012-2016)
House Foreign Affairs Committee
"The Importance of U.S. Aid to Central America"
April 10, 2019

Chairman Engel, Ranking Member McCaul, members of the Committee, it's a great pleasure to appear before you today—for this first time as a private citizen. I'd like to start by thanking you all for the interest and commitment so many of you have shown to issues of the Americas to which I've dedicated my professional life. After thirty-one years at the State Department, all of them working on advancing U.S. interests and cooperation in the Western Hemisphere, I hope you will forgive my thinking they are the most important issues affecting Americans on a daily basis.

I greatly appreciate being asked here today to speak about the importance of U.S. assistance to Central America—and the implications of cutting aid to the Northern Triangle of El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras.

The countries of the Northern Triangle of Central America have long suffered from violence, corruption, and slow economic growth. These countries, unlike Mexico,

which has an aging population, still have a demographic "youth boom" for at least a few years more. In practical terms, what this means is that the economies of these countries are not producing sufficient jobs for the young men and women who should be entering the work force—even if those young people had the skills for employment, which in large measure they do not. In addition, drought in the region, as well as the blight known as "coffee rust", have resulted in severe economic privation in rural areas. Transnational organized crime, specifically gangs and drug traffickers, have wreaked havoc on communities and social structures, leaving those young men and women vulnerable to forced recruitment for those criminal organizations or to face extreme violence, with among the highest homicide rates in the world in countries not at war. Many families find themselves risking violence if they are unable or unwilling to pay extortion by gangs and traffickers. Finally, although it is very early days in a new presidency in El Salvador, corruption by government officials in all three countries has reached levels that compound the desperation and helplessness felt by citizens who seek protection or economic opportunity.

Thus, the decisions by Central American migrants to leave their countries and attempt to reach the United States, often to join family members already here, even

when taken by “family units” with young children, can be seen as a rational decision when confronted with extreme poverty and violence.

Unfortunately, migration policy by this administration appears based on the assumption that if one makes things difficult enough for migrants, they will not come. Whether zero tolerance, family separation, or threats to cutoff aid or close of the US/Mexico border, such policies are wrong-headed, needlessly cruel, and all but useless as long as the root causes of migration remain unaddressed.

Those root causes – poverty, violence, corruption—cannot be overcome without partnerships with the governments of the Northern Triangle and Mexico. Such partnerships are exactly what U.S. foreign assistance is intended to advance. There is often a misunderstanding of the purpose of U.S. aid. It has always been intended to advance U.S. interests and objectives. Indeed, within the assistance that the Administration intends to stop are programs carried out by the Department of Homeland Security, Department of Justice, Treasury and therefore directly relevant to our national security and safety.

Where we find partners in host governments on those objectives—such as poverty or violence reduction—then they may be of assistance to those governments as

well. But it's important to recognize that, especially in the Northern Triangle and Mexico, the vast majority of such funds do not go directly to governments. Our aid is "projectized"—that is, destined for non-governmental organizations or very specific projects or equipment if within governments, and designed in coordination with the USG and utilized only for the purpose intended.

Thus, any threat to cut assistance has to be seen as reducing support for our own objectives. Nearly all assistance in Central America is specifically designed to reduce the very root causes of migration that the Administration surely views as an objective. A good example is programs by U.S. law enforcement entities, such as the FBI's anti-gang "TAG" program which directly focuses on the very gangs, MS 13 and the 18th Street gang, that are often identified as among the drivers of violence in both Central America and the US. In 2015, such aid-funded cooperation resulted in the arrests of over 30 MS-13 members in Charlotte, North Carolina, and there have been many other prosecutions in the United States as a result of the professionalism of units we have trained and equipped in Central America. Operation Citadel, begun in 2013 and continuing, which works with Northern Triangle countries to pursue human smuggling and trafficking to the United States, resulted in over 70 criminal investigations being initiated, and more than 500 arrests in the United States. Biometric programs initiated with Mexico

and expanded to the Northern Triangle, enable U.S. law enforcement agencies, working in close cooperation with those governments, to gain valuable data on migrants who may have criminal records in the United States, or be identified as gang or Transnational Criminal Organization (TCO) members—enabling those countries and our authorities to ensure they don't reach the United States—unless it is for prosecution.

In my own experience with such assistance to Central America and Mexico as Assistant Secretary for the Western Hemisphere for more than 4 years and ambassador to Mexico for two, I often saw that countries only created and maintained specialized police or military units that directly helped us prosecute TCOs when we provided the assistance and training for them to do so. Cutting such aid can only hurt those vulnerable to increased violence in the Northern Triangle AND the people of the United States as it has resulted in prosecutions of gang leaders and members in the U.S.

Former Commissioner Kerlikowske will speak about some of the "best practices" we learned in our assistance to the region during his tenure, and thus while constantly adapting, we know what works in these countries with sufficient

resources. Commissioner Kerlikowske was one of the finest public servants I've had the privilege to work with, and the credibility he had as a former city police chief was essential when he spoke with counterparts and designed programs that were implemented by DHS with the very foreign assistance at risk of being cut off.

So, the fact is, as former colleagues of mine have said, if you like the current migration crisis, you ain't seen nothing yet. Because if we cut aid to the Northern Triangle, it is almost guaranteed that we will see MORE, not fewer, migrants attempting to enter the U.S. They will be poorer, more desperate, victims of greater violence, than they are with our aid.

When we began the Merida Initiative with Mexico to counter transnational organized crime in 2008, we included a relatively small amount of funds for Central America, recognizing that many of the problems were throughout Meso America, not confined to Mexico and that we needed to re-engage in Central America. By 2015, it was clear that the scale of the problem in Central America required significantly greater investment over a sustained period. Thus, with the countries of Central America themselves working with the Inter-American Development Bank and others on the "Partnership for Prosperity", $1bn a year was initially conceived for the region, and as then Vice President Biden said, would be

necessary for at least 3-5 years. Congress responded with a robust percentage of that $1bn request. All such aid programs are slow to start—especially in countries where we had down-sized or eliminated USAID missions over the years. We also needed to find capable partners in both government and civil society to implement the programs so that they would be effective. Thus cutting aid right now—affecting FY'17 and FY'18 assistance—means we would never have given this more aggressive effort a chance. Indeed, assistance to these countries has been going down already in the past few years—from $754M in FY '16 to an FY '20 request of $445M.

These programs focus on such issues as: Reducing rural poverty and food insecurity, Strengthening the rule of law, improving security in the most violent communities, as well as transnational anti-gang units, and transnational criminal investigative units. These are precisely the reasons migrants give for attempting to come to the United States.

Foreign officials in these countries are confused and frustrated with the fickle and inconsistent nature of our migration policy. The Honduran government expressed irritation with the announced cutoff, noting the "contradictory" nature of our policy. Tonatiuh Guillen, Mexico's national migration commissioner, called it

"schizophrenic". One day DHS Secretary Kirstjen Nielsen is signing a compact on migration and security with the Northern Triangle countries and Mexico, and the very next day, the President orders aid cut off. Even so, the Northern Triangle countries issued a statement warning their citizens of the dangers of illegal migration and confirming their commitment to combat trafficking and other offenses. But how likely is it that those foreign leaders will take political risks or do the difficult work of keeping up their end of such agreements once aid is truly cut? Slim at best.

There are other reasons it is in our interests to continue and improve our assistance: to give us the "seat at the table" or leverage to influence decisions taken by those governments on issues of direct national security to the United States, and because if others become the "partner of choice" for these hemispheric countries, they will do so without any of the conditions or policy goals that we require of aid recipients.

On the issue of leverage, assistance from the United States enables us to work with these countries on strategies for combatting violence, opening their economies to U.S. goods and investment, improving governance, transparency, and especially reducing corruption. Indeed, we required that Northern Triangle countries

establish an autonomous accountable entity to oversee the plan we were implementing together; investigate and prosecute government officials credibly alleged to be corrupt, target criminal gangs and other TCOs, and focus on preventing young people from joining gangs through community-based programs. That seat at the table also increases our influence on myriad foreign policy decisions by those governments, including at international organizations such as the United Nations, the OAS, and in helping to form a like-minded community that can help when combatting challenges in the Americas (such as Venezuela), and beyond.

Were others to enter into a space that has traditionally been occupied by the United States, such as China, there is little doubt that these values—of free markets and democratic practices, would not be part of such investment. And over time, that simply makes it less likely that any of these countries "graduate" from being aid recipients and continue to be allies in larger, transnational and security concerns.

As Dan Restrepo and I wrote in November, migration policies that focus on our southern border, and not more comprehensively have already failed—they need to be effective both earlier and in broader geographic scope. Humane policies that uphold American values do not mean letting in every petitioner. Economic

migrants do not qualify for asylum; they should understand that, for them, the perilous journey north will ultimately be a fruitless one. But in addition to increasing our assistance to Central America, we must also improve and accelerate our asylum process, as migration experts such as Doris Meissner and Andrew Selee of the Migration Policy Institute have outlined. The slow rate at which we allow migrants to present asylum claims and then process those claims means that other options will become more appealing. We need to focus on adjudicators, judges, and others who can separate out legitimate asylum claims from economic migrants more quickly and help reduce the absurd backlog.

Returning economic migrants to their home countries much more quickly, while protecting due process, is one of the only ways to effectively transmit the message that such journeys will be for naught. Yet despite the Administration's stated goal of returning migrants, they have failed to use resources to accelerate that process, and thus the system has become even more overloaded—and a crisis created where one might be avoided. To return non-refugee migrants to their home countries, we also need the cooperation of those home governments—for documentation and to ensure they get some support at home that will reduce the likelihood that they will attempt the trip north again. Here too, our arbitrary and constantly changing policy and blame game makes such cooperation more difficult and less likely.

As we wrote in November, instead of tough talk and empty gestures, it is time for the United States to provide leadership based on both our national interests and our values. If it is smart and open to working with others, the administration can manage the flow of migrants humanely and efficiently. If it is not, this crisis will only get worse.