



Statement By

Eric L. Olson

Associate Director, Latin American Program

Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars

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House Committee on Foreign Affairs**

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**Regional Security Cooperation:
An Examination of the
Central America Regional Security Initiative (CARSI)
And the Caribbean Basin Security Initiative (CBSI)**

Good afternoon, Chairman Salmon, Ranking Member Sires and Members of the Committee. Thank you for the opportunity to appear before the Subcommittee today on behalf of the Woodrow Wilson Center.

I have just returned from a 10-day trip through Central America's Northern Triangle – Guatemala, Honduras and El Salvador with a particular focus on the security situation and borders. This trip was the first in a series of research trips I hope to take over the next two years that will enable me to draw more specific conclusions but, for now, I came away with some important impressions.

1) The security situation remains dire throughout the region and is at a crisis level in Honduras. Central America continues to be an important link in the trafficking chain northward from the Andes to the US. While drugs, and especially cocaine, are still the most lucrative product being trafficked we know that smuggling of migrants, extortion and ransom, and natural resource smuggling – such as lumber, precious metals and stones, and petroleum products - are also major sources of revenue. The region is also experiencing a major increase in firearms and bulk cash smuggling and has become a center for money laundering.

2) While there is some evidence that homicides have dropped slightly from their historic highs in El Salvador, most likely due to a year-old gang truce, and Guatemala – possibly due to improved police and prosecution work, there is no evidence of improvement in Honduras. Organized crime in all its many manifestations – transnational drug traffickers; criminal transportation networks; and even youth gangs - continue to prosper, enjoy widespread impunity, and distort the economies of these countries, their financial systems, and the functioning of government.

3) Efforts to strengthen institutions, ultimately the best approach, have produced few identifiable and concrete benefits. Prisons remain dangerous, overcrowded and too often inhumane places for holding criminals, many of which are minors. Sadly, in the case of Honduras, the Embassy rightly decided to withhold additional prison assistance when officials did not take even minimum steps to reform the system including failing to segregate inmates or ensuring prisoners did not have access to cell phones. Judges and prosecutors are still largely ineffective. Impunity rates of 90% and higher are commonplace. At present, the Honduran Attorney General is effectively suspended, and police's criminal investigative unit (DGIC) of roughly 1,200 officers is also in some kind of limbo category because the government cannot figure out how to legally fire them. As far as I could tell no one is conducting criminal investigations in Honduras at the moment.

Despite widespread corruption and ineffectiveness within many state institutions, there are small glimmers of hope in each country. The courageous work of Guatemala's Attorney

General Claudia Paz y Paz stands out. She has irritated the political and economic establishment in the country because of her attempts to prosecute former strongman Efraín Ríos Montt for genocide against the Maya Ixil people, but even her detractors recognize that she has done a good job of investigating and prosecuting criminals involved in trafficking and violence.

In El Salvador, despite political polarization, law enforcement institutions are relatively better trained and capable than in other countries, and some of the basic tools of law enforcement such as searchable databases and uniform crime reports allow the National Civilian Police to track prisoners and deportees and to check criminal records when they detain someone. Unfortunately none of this is possible in Honduras where there is no unified crime reporting system and no national searchable databases.

In Honduras, glimmers of hope are harder to find and those that exist are incipient. For example, the new security minister reported to the Honduran congress last week the findings of an internal audit which discovered that there are hundreds of “ghosts” on the police force collecting salaries; significant equipment including 162 vehicles that cannot be located and about \$25,000 in communications equipment that has never been used. Meanwhile the process of poly-graphing the police found large numbers of officers unfit to serve. While this is a good first step the fact that the Attorney General is currently suspended and there is evidence of widespread corruption within the ministry suggests that prosecution for any of the corruption identified in the police is unlikely.

3) Borders. With a few exceptions, Central America’s borders remain mostly underdeveloped, isolated, difficult to access and therefore hard to patrol or protect, and easily penetrable by migrants, criminal groups, licit and illicit commerce. This is especially true in the Northern Triangle.

For example, there are 8 official crossings between Guatemala and Mexico but only 4 are consistently open and supervised by Guatemalan authorities, while there are an estimated 125 informal crossings large enough to accommodate small truck traffic and utilized by those involved in smuggling everything from contraband to humans to firearms and money; as well as, individuals migrating northward.

I am particularly alarmed by the situation between Honduras (North) and Guatemala (East) - an area well known for not just criminal activity but criminal control with no effective state presence. Even when the U.S. mounts surprise joint operations with a vetted unit of the Honduran Border Police the operation is rendered meaningless within 15 minutes because of the criminal intelligence networks operating there. For example, the Honduran government can only enter some areas of the State of Copan with large armored contingencies and, if done,

the result is usually a major battle. Apparently they enter infrequently. The area is famous for local mayors and politicians reputedly with close ties to traffickers that use local police as their protection.

I would consider this area largely under the control of criminal networks and benefiting from the collusion of Honduran and Guatemala officials.

Ironically, Guatemala's efforts to strengthen border enforcement are focused on the other side of the country and its border with Mexico. I don't know why this has been the priority since one would think there would be more effort to keep criminals out than stop them from leaving.

The situation in El Salvador seems somewhat different. First, while plagued by a large presence of violent street gangs such as the MS 13 and the 18th Street gang, the country has not yet become a major trafficking route for drugs. This is not to say that drug trafficking does not occur in El Salvador, but that traffickers still seem to prefer the relatively easy passage through Honduras, Guatemala, and into Belize or Mexico. Instead, El Salvador is increasingly a place for money laundering and bulk cash smuggling in part because of its dollarized economy and because of the strong migrant ties between El Salvador and the U.S.

Based on these observations I have drawn the following tentative conclusions.

1) Strengthening the capacity of Central American countries to tackle crime and violence is essential. Only through partnership and collaboration with the region can public security and the possibility of greater economic opportunity for all be achieved.

2) Nevertheless, this process is not simply about giving the region more resources or equipment to fight drug trafficking. State capture by criminal groups and the lack of independent mechanisms of accountability and oversight mean that well intentioned aid is often misused, stolen, and can be turned against the very people we are trying to help when police and military forces are linked to criminal activity and, worse, human rights violations such as executions or what is euphemistically called "social cleansing."

I would argue that transparency, oversight, and accountability are the basic building blocks for any effort to fight crime whether in the US, Central America or the Caribbean and we see far too little of it in the Northern Triangle

3) Violence prevention programs are likewise important and are often not prioritized. Much of the violence in Central America is the result of conflicts in the retail drug markets, extortion, kidnapping, and street gangs rather than the trans-national trafficking of drugs and humans. The U.S. needs to be concerned about these domestic issues, even if it does not affect us directly, because this kind violence is what is terrorizing society and weakening the state.

Dealing more effectively with local crime will enable each country to more effectively face larger criminal organizations.

4) Border security, monitoring and protection have not been and are not likely to become priorities for the Northern Triangle countries. With limited resources and major violence in urban areas, the peripheries have often been overlooked by central governments. It would be a mistake for the U.S. to try to pressure these countries to use scarce resources and personnel to patrol the spaces between ports of entry, especially when these are largely inaccessible to law enforcement and armed forces. Instead, the focus should be on making the official points of entry more efficient, less corrupt and abusive, and capable of being a brake on organized crime. Additionally, depending on the outcome of the immigration debate in Congress there may be new incentives for migrants to use legal routes and means to enter the United States making them less vulnerable to organized crime and abuse by authorities. Meanwhile, legitimate commerce is being held up sometimes for days although no basic measures of border wait times are available.

5) CARSI – The broad outlines and goals of the program seem appropriate. Reducing street-level violence, strengthening state capacity, and efforts to re-establish state presence and control throughout the region and increase coordination and cooperation between Central American countries should be top priorities. Unfortunately progress on most of these has been very limited, and in some cases nonexistent. For example, re-establishing effective state presence in at-risk areas has not happened in most cases in part because it would require the state itself to be transformed.

The challenges and problems are not at the goal setting level but in the delivery of those goals. Penetration of the state and political systems by organized crime makes efforts to reform and strengthen democratic institutions essential but extraordinarily difficult. To strengthen the state the focus of policy needs to be less on equipment transfers and training, and much more on establishing the building blocks of transparency and accountability. In many instances countries don't know how many agents they have on the payroll, how many prisoners are in their jails, how many criminal cases have been opened much less investigated, prosecuted or sentences handed down. Without transparency and accountability, corruption and abuse run rampant and effective law enforcement is impossible.

6) The United States' dilemma. The United States wants to prevent illegal drugs from entering our country but it faces two countervailing realities. First, every "success" is met with a shifting tide of drugs. Because of demand in the United States, drug trafficking is like a river that simply moves around whatever impediment is placed in its way.

Second, preventing or prohibiting drugs from entering the U.S. may be akin to attempts to prohibit prostitution – they are rarely successful. While important, there are limits to what law enforcement and the military can do stop the flow of drugs. A policy too focused on stopping drugs in Central America may be doomed to failure. Instead a policy that emphasizes strengthening civil society and governmental institutions – law enforcement as well as education and health systems – will be more successful in the long run than a narrow focus on drug trafficking.

Ultimately, a more realistic option for the United States and Central American nations may be to redirect drug trafficking to less damaging places thereby reducing its most egregious impacts on society and government long enough to establish and strengthen the building blocks of a democratic society. These are long term goals that require a long-term approach with judicious investments, but the alternative may be even worse – wasted money that strengthens criminals and their allies in the state while producing paltry results.

Thank you for your attention and I welcome your questions.