

**“Children Migrating from Central America:
Creating a Humanitarian Crisis”**

**Testimony before House Foreign Affairs Committee, Subcommittee
on the Western Hemisphere**

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Chairman Salmon, Ranking Member Sires, Members of the Committee, I am pleased to speak with you about the Department of State’s role in addressing the migration of unaccompanied alien children to the United States, particularly from Central America. I appreciate your attention to this important issue and look forward to working with you.

The Administration is deeply concerned by the substantial increase over the past year in the number of unaccompanied children who are leaving their countries and attempting to immigrate illegally to the United States. We know that they are primarily arriving from El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras. The number of children from these countries arriving at the southwest border has overwhelmed existing facilities. The U.S. government is working non-stop to arrange humane care for these

children, consistent with U.S. legal requirements, once they have arrived in the United States.

The Department of State, in coordination with other agencies, with the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) in the lead, is working on a rapid government-wide response in the short term, while realigning our broader, long-term efforts to address the systemic challenges in the region that drive migration. Most importantly, let me be clear: At the senior most levels of the Administration, to include the President, Vice President, Secretaries of State and Homeland Security, and the Department of State Counselor among others, we are engaging every day with our foreign government counterparts to help stem the flow of children leaving their countries. We are doing this not just because it is part of enforcing our laws, but because it is the right thing to do.

Not only are these children exposed to life-threatening risks on the journey to the United States, but there is the potential for them to be misled about potential immigration benefits available in the United States. Our first concern must be about these children's safety. For that reason we are taking concrete steps to stop the spread of misinformation through criminal networks, diaspora groups, and the media, which encourage these hazardous journeys. To counter these messages, we and

the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) - with Central American governments and Mexico – are developing new targeted public service announcements that will better reach the population centers that are the source of many of these child migrants.

The State Department is funding additional public service announcements in El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras. Embassies in each of these countries – as well as in Mexico – have launched aggressive public outreach campaigns to counter false messages and accurately portray the dangers of the journey. Our Ambassadors and embassy officials constantly engage with the media in these countries. We are funding reporting tours and press briefings targeted at migrant communities. These reporting tours are bringing Central American journalists to U.S. Customs and Border Protection facilities on the border for discussions with Spanish-speaking DHS officials who can accurately explain U.S. immigration policy and emphasize the humane removal process for unaccompanied children. Again, we need to dispel the misguided notion that these children will not face deportation proceedings.

Our Mexican and Central American partners have been fully cooperative in this messaging endeavor and are working to develop and deploy complementary information campaigns in their respective countries. We

hope these information campaigns help change the way of thinking that exists in the region in order to prevent more people from making this incredibly dangerous journey.

The Department will provide assistance to increase the capacity of the Central American governments to receive returned migrants. As the Vice President noted in Guatemala last week, the Administration will spend \$9.6 million in support of increased capacity and to provide specialized training on procedures for receiving returned citizens.

Our short term objectives include increasing the repatriation capacity of Central American governments and improving media outreach on the dangers of the journey and to correct misperceptions about U.S. immigration law. In addition, the Department continues to focus on a longer-term approach to address the systemic issues Central American countries face and that are creating the push factors behind this phenomenon: lack of economic, educational, and employment opportunities, weak institutions, and high levels of violence and insecurity. In this respect, the Department of State is balancing our regional approach to prioritize and integrate prosperity, security, and governance. We aim to address the growth, insecurity, and accountability issues driving migrants, including unaccompanied children, to the United States.

The solution to the increase in illegal migration of unaccompanied children is not solely focused on Central America. Mexico plays an important role in addressing this humanitarian situation, and we are working closely with the Government of Mexico on short- and long-term solutions, given our shared responsibility for promoting security in both countries and in the region. During his call with the President last week, Mexican President Pena Nieto committed to working with us on this issue, including on the need to return children safely to their families, to build Central American capacity to receive returned children, and to address factors driving migration. The Vice President was pleased to have Mexican government Secretary Osorio Chong join the meeting in Guatemala last week. We are working to enhance our existing cooperation with Mexico to disrupt the organized criminal networks facilitating smuggling, strengthen enforcement at Mexico's southern border, and develop an information campaign that highlights both the dangers of the journey, and to dispel the misguided notion that these arriving migrants will not be subject to removal proceedings. While unaccompanied children from Central America are not eligible for expedited removal, they will be placed in removal proceedings and may be subject to deportation. Please note: unaccompanied children from Mexico may be repatriated immediately.

In addition, we are working closely with Mexico to increase enforcement along the dangerous “La Bestia” train route on which many of the most vulnerable migrants travel through Mexico.

From a foreign affairs perspective, we are using our existing resources to both manage the near-term surge in unaccompanied children and to implement programs to address the long-term challenges that constitute the complex and systematic factors driving migration. It is clear, however, that substantial, transformative change in Central America requires greater efforts by all the actors involved. It is equally clear that a whole of government approach and greater collaboration with international partners is required to avoid the extremely high costs of the domestic humanitarian and law enforcement response.

Thank you, and I look forward to answering your questions.