

**Assistant Secretary for the Bureau of Population, Refugees,
and Migration (PRM) Julieta Noyes's Testimony Before the
House Foreign Affairs Subcommittee on the Western Hemisphere
July 24, 2024, Hearing**

Good morning, Chairwoman Salazar, Ranking Member Castro, and distinguished members of the Subcommittee. I am pleased to be here today to talk with you about the Fiscal Year 2025 Migration and Refugee Assistance budget request as it relates to the humanitarian needs of refugees, vulnerable migrants, displaced persons, and stateless persons in the Western Hemisphere.

Context and Needs

At the end of 2023, there were more than 117 million forcibly displaced persons around the world, more than 21 million of them in the Western Hemisphere. Violence, organized crime, persecution, human rights abuses, and natural disasters are driving them to leave their homes. Millions of people also are on the move in search of economic opportunity or family reunification, resulting in unpredictable movements, complex challenges, and opportunities across the region. It is important to note that the vast majority of the over 21 million forcibly displaced persons in this hemisphere are not coming to the United States, however, but seeking opportunities and rebuilding their lives in other countries. Nearly 19 million of those displaced at the end of 2023 were residing in Central and South America or the Caribbean. For instance, Colombia alone is currently hosting nearly 3 million Venezuelan migrants and refugees, with Brazil, Ecuador, Peru and Chile hosting another 3 million.

The Department's FY 2025 budget request for Migration and Refugee Assistance includes \$475 million for humanitarian programming in the Western Hemisphere and another \$300 million for the Safe Mobility initiative. The request takes into consideration the unique reasons people are on the move with humanitarian assistance for those in need and promotion of solutions for refugees and vulnerable migrants to integrate

into host communities closer to their countries of origin. The Administration will support these solutions through robust humanitarian diplomacy in our Hemisphere and with like-minded partners.

This request advances a holistic approach to addressing forced displacement and migration management in the Western Hemisphere through enhanced access to protection and integration in the region. The humanitarian assistance funding in the President's budget request is intended to:

- **Strengthen** national asylum, registration, regularization, and integration frameworks throughout the Western Hemisphere;
- **Prevent** refoulement, the forcible return of persons to a place where they would be persecuted or tortured;
- **Protect** and assist the most vulnerable refugees and migrants; and,
- **Increase** refugee resettlement and other safe, humane, orderly, and lawful migration pathways.

This humanitarian assistance request is part of the Department's comprehensive approach, with other U.S. agencies and partners, to address irregular migration and displacement. Other aspects of this strategy include stabilizing **host communities** to welcome migrants in other countries; strengthening **humane border enforcement** and repatriation capabilities abroad; tackling **root causes of irregular migration** so people do not feel compelled to leave their homes; and expanding **lawful migration pathways** to growth and opportunity in the United States and other partner nations. No country can address irregular migration alone, which is why the President has partnered with countries across the hemisphere to pursue a comprehensive regional approach. The Biden Administration led the adoption of the Los Angeles Declaration on Migration and Protection, an innovative framework endorsed by 21 other partner countries to promote dialogue and solutions on migration and displacement. PRM's FY 2025 budget request is consistent with the Declaration's principles and the Administration's Collaborative Migration Management Strategy.

Integration

The Migration and Refugee Assistance funds Congress generously provided in this and previous fiscal years have had a significant impact in stabilizing displaced populations closer to home in host countries throughout the Hemisphere, while also supporting their host communities. By strengthening access to legal status, including asylum and regularization, in countries in the region, displaced people can remain in their countries of first refuge and find employment and stability, rather than undertaking dangerous journeys north. Of the nearly 8 million Venezuelan refugees and asylum seekers, over half remain without valid legal status, and the 2025 budget request will help bridge that gap.

In **Colombia**, for example, PRM has provided more than \$400 million since 2021 to support refugees, Colombian returnees with protection concerns, internally displaced people, vulnerable migrants, and host communities. Over 2.5 million Venezuelans have settled in Colombia with legal status and accessed education, health care, and employment. On a recent trip to Colombia, I met with Venezuelan refugees who had started their own businesses and even created jobs for Colombians. They are inspiring examples of how good protection policies can help turn adversity into opportunity. In June 2024, the Government of Colombia announced a new regularization program to expand residency options for certain populations with corresponding access to services. PRM support has been critical to the successful integration of Venezuelans with temporary status and will continue to be essential as Colombia expands regularization.

PRM funding also supports **Brazil's** Operation Welcome, which has enabled the voluntary relocation of more than 128,000 Venezuelans in over 1,000 cities across Brazil for jobs and family reunification. Our support has helped Brazil provide temporary residency to more than 420,000 individuals since 2018 and fostered their successful integration. A recent International Organization for Migration (IOM) survey showed eight out of ten adults in these populations had found jobs or started their own businesses.

We also are supporting similar efforts to regularize and integrate refugees and vulnerable migrants in **Ecuador, Peru**, and other countries across the region. **Costa Rica** hosts more than 600,000 Nicaraguans and is a regional leader on migration. The FY 2025 budget request includes continued support for Costa Rica's asylum and regularization programs, via partners like the UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR), to help thousands of refugees, asylum seekers, and vulnerable migrants find protection and integrate into Costa Rican society. PRM's funding in Costa Rica is needed to support historic reforms to refugee and regularization programs facilitating economic integration.

PRM's support for **Mexico's** asylum agency (COMAR) through UNHCR has increased Mexico's capacity to receive and process asylum seekers by over 500 percent since 2017. COMAR registered more than 140,000 asylum applications in 2023. Mexico now operates one of the largest asylum programs in the world. PRM funding for local integration in Mexico has relocated and matched over 39,000 refugees with jobs. Over 70 percent of participants remain where they are long-term.

Protection for the Most Vulnerable

While we invest in regularization and integration as solutions to displacement in the region, PRM continues to prioritize life-saving assistance to meet dire needs. Many asylum seekers in Northern Central America, for example, face risks of targeted violence and extortion by organized criminal groups and need emergency shelter, medical care, and other assistance. This budget request prioritizes the PRM's core mandate to provide life-saving assistance and protection to refugees, asylum seekers, vulnerable migrants, and stateless persons. It will fund water, nutrition and hygiene support, urgent health care, and basic humanitarian aid to the most vulnerable where they are. It will help reunify displaced and separated children with their families, provide medical and psychosocial support to survivors of gender-based violence, and improve access for refugees with disabilities and members of displaced indigenous populations to meet their basic needs.

Irregular migration through the Darien continues to be a challenge, despite it being one of the world's most dangerous migration routes. PRM's budget request includes life-saving humanitarian assistance in **Panama** for refugees, asylum seekers, vulnerable migrants, and host indigenous communities. PRM programs supply potable water and provide emergency health services and nutritional support to tens of thousands, including children and lactating women. PRM funding also supports access to protection for asylum seekers in Panama, including those arriving through the Darien, and provides essential health services for survivors of gender-based violence and family tracing for unaccompanied and separated children.

In **Guatemala**, PRM's support through international organization and NGO partners provides water, sanitation, health, and protection services to thousands of vulnerable migrants, refugees, and asylum seekers. At the same time, with U.S. support, Guatemala is slowly becoming a destination for refugees. PRM's budget request includes support for its nascent but growing asylum system. As a result of U.S. support through UNHCR, Guatemala's refugee recognition rate has climbed from less than 50 percent to around 80 percent since 2019, when PRM began scaling up its response. PRM's partners support the successful integration of refugees and asylum-seekers into Guatemalan society by supporting access to services, documentation, and livelihoods alongside robust support for host communities.

Humane Migration Management

In our work to increase regional collaboration, PRM supports our partners' humane migration management, strengthening their protection systems, policies, border management, and emergency response preparedness. We have expanded access to circular labor pathways within the region as alternatives to irregular migration to the United States. Through a tailored labor migration program, U.S. assistance has enabled over 39,000 migrants to travel regularly from Panama and Nicaragua to work in Costa Rica, filling critical labor shortages while providing access to legal documentation and

services. Due to its success, this program is expanding to other countries in Central America. Our programs have similarly supported Costa Rica, Guatemala, and Honduras to adopt new national migration strategies for holistic approaches to safe, orderly, and humane migration management.

Since 2018, our programs have also assisted over 10,000 vulnerable migrants in our Hemisphere to voluntarily return to their countries of origin in safety and with dignity.

Lawful Pathways

This budget request also will strengthen lawful migration and protection pathways, providing a meaningful alternative to irregular migration. Since 2021, the United States has expanded lawful pathways to help refugees, vulnerable migrants, and forcibly displaced persons in the Western Hemisphere. Individuals seeking international protection and new opportunities have options for lawful migration to the United States and other countries, including refugee resettlement, parole processes, family reunification, labor pathways, and asylum. Some may also access support services provided by international organizations and NGOs in the region.

The Safe Mobility initiative (known by the Spanish name *Movilidad Segura*) is one of the ways the United States is allowing eligible individuals to apply for safe and lawful migration pathways from countries in the region, so migrants do not have to undertake dangerous journeys in search of safety. Safe Mobility Offices (SMOs) are currently operational in Colombia, Costa Rica, Guatemala, and Ecuador.

Applicants apply via an online platform through which experts from international organizations, specifically IOM and UNHCR, help individuals assess the options available for them. Applicants may receive information about services and programs available to them in their country of origin or country of application so that they are able to remain where they are. Working closely with international organization partners, and running

extensive messaging campaigns, we are exponentially increasing the number of people who receive information or services via the SMOs.

For those with protection needs, the Safe Mobility initiative has revolutionized how we identify and process individuals in the region for refugee resettlement to both the United States and other countries. Applicants must meet the same requirements as refugees elsewhere in the world and undergo the same rigorous vetting process as others approved by the U.S. government for refugee status. The great innovation of the SMOs is that they co-locate many aspects of the refugee resettlement process in one location, significantly improving coordination among UNHCR, IOM, and government officials. This streamlining and colocation has provided efficiencies that have reduced the processing time for refugee resettlement and could be duplicated around the world. However, I would like to emphasize again that refugee applicants from SMOs still undergo the exact same multi-layered security vetting process as applicants do anywhere else in the world.

As of June 30, through the Safe Mobility initiative, more than 45,000 individuals have been referred for potential resettlement to the United States, and more than 22,600 individuals have been screened for other lawful pathways to the United States. More than 12,000 individuals have already arrived in the United States under the Safe Mobility initiative.

We are also working with other countries to expand the reach of the SMOs and provide additional lawful alternatives to irregular migration, including labor-related resettlement pathways with Spain and Canada. More than 500 vulnerable migrants in Costa Rica have been referred for resettlement to Spain via the SMO mechanism. The Administration is also working with several other countries to connect them to applicants from the Safe Mobility initiative.

CONCLUSION

In closing, I'd like to thank the members of this Subcommittee for the opportunity to discuss the President's budget request. The United States' humanitarian diplomacy, assistance, and durable solutions are key aspects of our approach to our Hemisphere. PRM advocacy also encourages other governments to step up their own responsibility as hosts, donors, and resettlement countries to protect the most vulnerable. The United States is also pursuing contributions and greater collaboration from other governments, international financial institutions, and the private sector. The FY 2025 budget request will support U.S. leadership to save lives, alleviate suffering, provide protection, and advance durable solutions to today's historic levels of forced displacement. I appreciate your support and look forward to your questions.