

**Statement of Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for
Western Hemisphere Affairs Emily Mendrala Before the
Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs
“Securing and Ensuring Order on the Southwest Border”
May 5, 2022**

Chairman Peters, Ranking Member Portman, Distinguished Members of the Committee, I welcome the opportunity to testify regarding the Biden-Harris Administration’s priorities on regional migration.

This is a pivotal moment for our Hemisphere as we broaden the shared responsibility on humane migration management. The Department of State is actively working with governments, the private sector, civil society, and international organization partners throughout the region to increase cooperation and address our shared responsibility to humanely manage migration and to provide protection for those fleeing persecution or torture.

We recently concluded the second Hemispheric Ministerial meeting on Migration and Protection, co-hosted by Secretary Blinken in Panama April 19-20. Secretary Blinken urged collaboration on stabilization of migrant and refugee receiving communities and sought expansion of security efforts. The ministerial served as an action forcing event to conclude the bilateral migration arrangement with Panama, laid the groundwork for negotiations on the Los Angeles Declaration for Migration and Protection, and shined a spotlight on the need to work together with international organizations and multilateral development banks to stabilize host communities.

President Biden will host the Ninth Summit of the Americas June 8 to 10 in Los Angeles. As the only meeting of leaders from across the Americas, the Summit serves as the most important forum to address our region’s shared challenges and opportunities. The Ninth Summit marks the first time the United States will host the event since the inaugural gathering in Miami in 1994.

The theme of the Ninth Summit -- “Building a Sustainable, Resilient, and Equitable Future” -- represents a shared vision developed with the region’s governments, civil society, and private sector.

The Summit will produce concrete outcomes, including in responding to the pandemic, building strong and inclusive democracies, addressing irregular migration, and increasing equity and inclusion. The President has announced our

intention to adopt the Los Angeles Declaration on Migration and Protection as an expression of leaders' commitment to addressing irregular migration and forced displacement.

The Department of State has worked diligently to implement the Administration's Comprehensive Approach to Migration, which includes the U.S. Strategy for Addressing the Root Causes of Migration in Central America and the Collaborative Migration Management Strategy. The Biden-Harris Administration's comprehensive approach builds on both significant U.S. government resources and substantial private sector investments to support the long-term development of Central America. To advance the Root Causes Strategy, the Vice President met with regional leaders and traveled to Guatemala, Mexico, and Honduras to launch new initiatives and strengthen relationships to sustainably address the root causes of irregular migration in Central America. The Vice President also brought together private sector leaders through the U.S. government's *Call to Action* initiative that has generated more than \$1.2 billion in commitments to create new jobs and opportunities for people in the region. In addition, she has engaged partners around the world to generate new commitments.

As part of the Vice President's *Call to Action*: Microsoft is connecting four million people to broadband across the region, with nearly one million already connected to date. Nespresso will invest \$150 million to double the number of farmers it works with in the region and begin to source coffee from El Salvador and Honduras, and Mastercard is bringing five million people into the formal financial economy while digitizing one million micro and small businesses. Parkdale Mills is investing \$150 million to support a new yarn spinning facility in Honduras and an existing facility in Virginia, supporting 500 jobs in each location demonstrating these efforts can bring benefits to the U.S. economy, as well. PepsiCo is investing at least \$190 million in northern Central America through 2025 to improve its plants and expand distribution routes. CARE International is establishing a \$50 million Center for Gender Equity in Central America.

Through these long-term efforts, the Biden-Harris Administration continues to make significant progress toward creating hope for people in El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras that a better life can be found at home. Highlights to date include U.S. initiatives providing micro and small businesses access to \$100 million in financing to support economic recovery in the region, the U.S. Government's \$300 million *Centroamérica Local* initiative empowering local organizations to address the drivers of irregular migration, and delivery of more than 15 million COVID-19 vaccines to northern Central America.

We also continue helping to hold migrant smugglers accountable. The State Department's Bureau for International Narcotics and Law Enforcement (INL) partners with DHS and DOJ to provide foreign law enforcement with the skills and resources necessary to become reliable, trusted partners for U.S. law enforcement. Since its creation in June 2021, Joint Task Force Alpha and its partners collaborated on over 40 investigations and cases involving migrant smuggling, resulting in dozens of arrests, indictments, and convictions both in the United States and with regional law enforcement partners. Through an INL assistance program with the DOJ, Embassy Bogota assisted Colombian prosecutors to break up a large criminal organization engaged in smuggling over 1,300 migrants from Haiti and Venezuela bound for the United States. INL programs also enhance criminal intelligence sharing on migrant smuggling networks. One such effort facilitated the identification of nearly 1,200 members of transnational criminal organizations in 2021.

U.S. programs also support victims of gender-based violence, survivors of human trafficking, and unaccompanied migrant children. New U.S. government programs and scholarships improve access to education for nearly 18,000 returning/potential migrants and at-risk youth.

While the CDC Order under Title 42 suspending the right to introduce certain non-citizens into the United States to protect public health from the introduction, transmission, and spread of COVID-19 remains in effect until May 23, the Administration is doing its due diligence to prepare for potential changes at the border. The Department of State works closely within the interagency and with partner governments in the region to improve humane migration management throughout the Western Hemisphere. We have alerted countries to the upcoming changes in processing at U.S. borders and requested flexibility in cooperation with regional partners as regional migration flows change, including repatriating individuals without a legal basis to remain in the United States.

Governments throughout the hemisphere have closed routes used for irregular migration, including implementing visa requirements for populations arriving in large numbers at the U.S. southern border. For some nationalities, these requirements have already reduced the numbers of encounters at the U.S. southern border. The State Department will continue to work with governments throughout the region to ensure these positive trends and cooperation continue.

The Department actively seeks to identify and respond to disinformation about migration. We work with the interagency to track disinformation – especially that circulated by smugglers – about U.S. migration and border policy.

In the immediate term, we are countering mis- and disinformation by broadcasting accurate information about U.S. policy via Department representatives—including the Secretary of State and our Ambassadors in the region—speaking via the media and social media to audiences in high-emigration communities across the Western Hemisphere. We also broadcast accurate policy information on the radio, through popular social media platforms, and in google-search advertising, specifically targeting demographic groups at highest risk for irregular migration.

To build longer term resilience to disinformation in the region, the Department has a number of programs that train journalists and citizens on digital literacy and tools to identify and avoid disinformation. To cite just one example, in the last year we invited a number of journalists from Mexico, El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras to virtual visits of the U.S.-Mexico border, where they learned about border policy and the dangers of irregular migration through direct dialogue with representatives from U.S. Customs and Border Protection and non-governmental organizations working with migrants.

Chairman Peters and Ranking Member Portman, Members of the Committee, thank you for the opportunity to testify. I look forward to your questions.