

Opening Statement of Chairman Thomas R. Carper
Challenges at the Border: Examining and Addressing the Root Causes Behind the Rise in
Apprehensions at the Southern Border
July 16, 2014

As prepared for delivery:

At last week's hearing, we examined the Administration's response to the current humanitarian challenge at our southern border with Mexico, where unprecedented numbers of undocumented Central American children and families are seeking to enter the United States. Today, we are here to discuss the root causes of this surge in migration from Central America. It is my hope that all of the witnesses will also talk about some things that are working, and that we should do more of, in order to address these root causes.

This is a humanitarian crisis, one that the Administration and Secretary Johnson are taking extremely seriously. Many of the Central American children and families arriving at our borders have heartbreaking stories to tell. We will hear about some of those stories shortly. I believe they require a humane response and one that honors our obligations under U.S. and international law – and is consistent with the admonition that we should love our neighbors as we love ourselves.

It is not, in my opinion, a border security crisis. These Central American children and families are not somehow slipping past the massive amount of security technology and manpower we've deployed along the southern border in recent years. They are being apprehended shortly after stepping on U.S. soil, often searching out Border Patrol agents instead of evading them. But it is obviously not an acceptable situation to have hundreds of unaccompanied children arriving at our southwest border each day. It is not acceptable to us as a country of laws, including immigration laws. And it is not acceptable as a humanitarian matter given the extreme risks these people face trying to come to our country illegally.

One of the factors that is pulling people to come to the United States is the perception in the region that they will be able to stay—even if it is just for a year or two—while their immigration cases are processed. In truth, that often has been the case for many children and families. People from Central America, unlike Mexicans, cannot be turned around at the border—they must be flown back to their countries. This process is even more complicated for unaccompanied children and families, because our laws appropriately require different treatment for these groups. In practice, this has meant that repatriating children and families can take years.

In order to combat the perception that it's somehow possible to get a free pass to live in the U.S., the Administration is taking extraordinary measures to speed up these cases. For example, it has surged immigration judges down to the border to expedite processing of cases, including cases involving families and children. It has greatly expanded its ability to detain families while their cases are heard. It has worked with the governments of El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras to expedite the issuing of travel documents for their citizens, which are needed before someone can be repatriated. This process used to take more than thirty days and now takes as little as four.

And senior Administration officials—including Vice-President Biden, Secretary Johnson, and Secretary Kerry—have traveled to the region in recent weeks to make clear that there is no shortcut someone—even a child—can take to get permission to live here. In other words, those who are apprehended at the border will, in most cases, be returned to their home country as quickly as possible.

So, the Administration has clearly been fully engaged on this issue. And now, Congress needs to do its job and work in the near-term to stop this surge. Just last week, President Obama asked us for \$3.7 billion in emergency funding to address this challenge at the border. Without this money, we have been told that the Border Patrol and Immigration and Customs Enforcement could run out of money some time this summer. It goes without saying that we cannot allow that to happen.

As necessary as this money is, it is only one piece of a complex puzzle. There are strong and entrenched problems in Central America that are driving so many to make the risky journey north. Unless we take a hard look at those underlying problems, we will keep spending money to treat the heartbreaking symptoms at our borders. In fact, since 2003 we have already spent \$223 billion dollars—almost a quarter trillion dollars—enforcing our immigration and customs laws.

Seeking a better life in the United States is nothing new. But for some of these Central Americans—especially the children and the parents who often send them on their journeys—the decision can be a desperate one. Everyday life in parts of Guatemala, El Salvador, and Honduras is more than just difficult today. It can be deadly. Some of our witnesses today will speak to that.

Violence has been steadily increasing in the region, with homicide rates in all three countries among the highest in the entire world. Kidnapping and extortion are endemic. Meanwhile, these countries have stagnant economies that create too few jobs and opportunities for their citizens. Faced with this violence and lack of hope at home, it is no wonder that so many people are risking their lives on the nearly 1,500 mile journey to the United States.

We need to help these countries help themselves. But we cannot do it alone. This must be a shared responsibility first and foremost with the Central American governments, but also with a broad community with vested interests in the region—including Mexico, Colombia, the multilateral banks, the private sector, and institutions of faith.

The steps we need to take are difficult, but I believe that the road-map is clear: we need to work with our partners to create a more secure and more nurturing environment for job creation in Central America. I look forward to hearing from our witnesses today about what some of those steps might be.

Based on my recent conversations and trips to the region, I believe that one of the critical needs there is to foster economic growth. How? By helping to restore the rule of law, lower energy costs, and improve education, workforce skills, and access to capital. I am not suggesting that

any of this will be quick or easy to do. It will require a sustained investment—and focus—on the region by the U.S. and others. But it can be done. In fact, we have already done it with two of our most important allies in Latin America. Twenty years ago, Colombia was close to being a failed state, and the economic situation in Mexico was so bad that more than a million Mexicans were apprehended trying to cross our border every year.

Today, we are seeing record low numbers of Mexicans being apprehended at the border, with some researchers suggesting that more Mexicans may actually be leaving the U.S. each year than are coming here illegally. And Colombia has become a vibrant and trusted democratic partner in the region. Of course, these two countries still face challenges, but I believe we can all agree that there has been a dramatic turnaround in both countries. One of my guiding principles is to find out what works, and do more of that. Well, we need to figure out what worked in Mexico and Colombia, and do more of that. I look forward to doing that during today's hearing.

One of the keys in both countries, I believe, has been economic growth. In Mexico, the North American Free Trade Agreement, or NAFTA, helped make possible its emergence as a middle income nation. In Colombia, one of the keys has been a sustained investment in improving security for their citizens through Plan Colombia. We need a similar commitment to Central America. And in making that commitment, we'll not only prove ourselves good neighbors, we'll also ensure that we won't continue to face an expensive humanitarian crisis at our borders a decade from now.

I am encouraged that the Administration has included \$300 million in its emergency supplemental request for the State Department, some of which will be used to deal with the root causes of Central American migration. But these funds should be seen as a down-payment. This cannot be one and done. If we are serious about improving conditions in the region—and I think we must be—we will need to do more. And frankly, so will others.