

**Opening Statement of Ranking Member Thomas R. Carper**  
***“Securing the Border: Understanding and Addressing the Root Causes of  
Central American Migration to the United States”***  
***March 25, 2015***

*As prepared for delivery:*

Last week, we heard about the enormous federal outlays to strengthen the security of our border with Mexico – billions of dollars for boots on the ground, fencing, aerostats, observation towers, drones and other assets.

Yet despite these investments, we know that last summer tens of thousands of families and unaccompanied children arrived at the U.S. - Mexico border in South Texas. Most of these families and children, some as young as four years old, had traveled 1,500 dangerous miles from Central America. And most did not slip past our borders undetected or even try to evade border patrol agents. They surrendered voluntarily, often seeking asylum.

Fortunately, the number of Central American children and families apprehended at the border this year is well down from last summer, and even from this time last year. For example, Border Patrol agents have apprehended 12,509 unaccompanied minors at the southwest border so far in fiscal year 2015, compared to 21,403 at this time last year.

We have mother-nature to thank, in part, for that decline. But we also owe a great deal of thanks to our own government and the governments of Mexico and the Northern Triangle – Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador –for stepping up in response to the surge.

In particular, I am pleased that the Northern Triangle governments have worked together on a “truth campaign” to warn would-be migrants about the very real dangers of the trip and the likelihood that they will be returned home once they arrive in this country.

But border officials and experts know we have not seen the last of desperate migrants from Central America.

I visited all three of these countries last year and saw first-hand how corruption and lawlessness, as well as lack of economic opportunity and hope led so many parents or relatives to do the unthinkable – put their children in the hands of human smugglers to try to get their flesh and blood to the United States. Indeed, if we were to put ourselves in the place of those parents, I suspect many of us would do the same.

Corruption and violence in the Northern Triangle are widespread, fueled in part by America's appetite for illegal drugs. In some communities in those three nations, gangs rule by brute force and fear. Too often, police officers don't police; prosecutors don't prosecute; and judges don't administer justice.

For too long, the governments of these countries have been unable or unwilling to tackle these challenges effectively. Fortunately, there are now real signs of change.

The leaders of Guatemala, Honduras and El Salvador have embarked on an unprecedented collaborative effort, called the Alliance for Prosperity, to boost security and prosperity within their region.

Last week, Chairman Johnson and I met with the foreign ministers from these countries in an effort to learn more about this plan. They told us they are committed to investing their own money in the development of their infrastructure and workforce, and to making difficult changes to promote transparency, security and the rule of law.

Yesterday, Chairman Johnson, along with Senators Heitkamp, Shaheen, and I, met with four of our country's Ambassadors to Central America in order to gain their perspectives on whether those changes are for real. Among other things, I am interested in hearing from our witnesses today about their impression of the plan's progress in the Northern Triangle and its challenges.

We should be good neighbors and support Guatemala, Honduras and El Salvador in this effort, just as we helped Colombia reverse its downward spiral with Plan Colombia in the 1990s. We already provide a considerable amount of assistance to Central America – as our second panel will describe in detail today – but we are long overdue for a significant and comprehensive focus on the region.

I was pleased to see the President request \$1 billion dollars in next year's budget to partner with the governments of Central America as they seek to address these challenges. For example, some of the funding would support better police training and youth centers for those at risk of gang violence. Some of it would be used to attract foreign investment or support efforts to build a stronger court system and electric grid.

This is important for their future and for our own security; no one benefits if this region falls deeper into the sway of violence and trafficking. But the aid must be tied to strong accountability and measurable outcomes – a message I know Vice President Biden has already shared with the leaders of the Northern Triangle. Addressing these tough challenges should be a shared responsibility among the United States, the governments of the Northern Triangle, other nations and other partners. The private sector and international development banks must step up, as well.

Achieving the changes that are needed in these nations won't be easy, but I believe we have a moral obligation to help. Clearly, this is a shared responsibility. But like they say at Home Depot, 'You can do it. We can help.' After all, addiction in the U.S. to cocaine, heroin and other illegal drugs directly contributes to their misery. But if we work together, real progress can be made. If you don't believe it, just take a look at Colombia today.

In closing, let me end by saying that if we turn our backs on these countries, I am convinced that we will be back here again, this summer or 10 years from now, dealing with another expensive and heartbreaking humanitarian crisis on our border. We've got to be smarter than that.