



Testimony of

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**“Securing the Border: Understanding and Addressing the Root Causes
of Central American Migration to the United States”**

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Introduction

Good afternoon Chairman Johnson, Ranking Member Carper, and distinguished Members of the Committee. Thank you for inviting the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) to testify on the root causes of Central American migration to the United States. Secretary Johnson and I appreciate this Committee's interest in this important issue.

Overview

As part of the President's \$1 billion request the United States effort continues to support Central America via the Central America Regional Security Initiative (CARSI), which is the primary U.S. implementation structure for U.S. citizen security assistance in the region. Through CARSI, partner nations, the State Department and the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID), DHS, as well as other departments and agencies all work to strengthen institutions to counter the effects of organized crime and uphold the rule of law. However, the wave of unaccompanied children (UC) from Central America crossing the U.S.-Mexico border last summer presented a humanitarian dimension catapulting the United States to an immediate response to the urgent situation. Through foreign assistance to the region, the United States directs its efforts towards improving the security and economic situation in these countries. This includes addressing the causes of the migrant influx and gaining political will from these countries to meet their own political, economic, and security challenges. Through CARSI and other funding initiatives, the United States will continue to expand successful programs that will make short to medium-term sustainable impacts to reduce levels of crime and violence, build the capacity of law enforcement and rule of law institutions, and support prevention programs for youth and in communities at-risk of crime and violence.

In my discussions with government officials in El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras, they cite educational and employment concerns, daily threats of violence, the desire for family reunification, and the role of smuggling networks as the central causes for the increase in the number of unaccompanied children who migrated to the United States in 2014 and as part of a trend beginning in 2011.

On February 27, 2015, the U.S. Government Accountability Office (GAO) published a report to congressional requesters on "Central America: Information on Migration of Unaccompanied Children from El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras." GAO was asked to review issues related to U.S. assistance to Central America addressing the rapid increase in migration of unaccompanied minors from El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras to the U.S. The report identifies U.S. mission-level efforts to (1) identify causes of the rapid increase in migration of unaccompanied children and (2) address the causes identified. Identical to my discussions with senior government representatives in these countries, they identified crime and violence and economic concerns as the causes primarily responsible for the recent rapid increase in migration to the United States by unaccompanied children. Examples of criminal activity that can influence migration include gang activity, drug trafficking, and the growth of criminal organizations; economic drivers include the loss of agricultural jobs and farms due to a coffee rust fungus spreading in Central America. These causes were followed by educational concerns, the desire for family reunification, the role of smuggling networks, and the perception of United States immigration policy, among others. These are challenges the region has long faced but lacked the political will and resources necessary to address.

These issues have strong implications for the national security and economic prosperity of the United States. If economic prospects remain poor and the crime rate remains high, Central

America may remain a source of instability for Mexico and ultimately the United States in the form of illegal migration and even more entrenched organized crime in the Western Hemisphere, including in the United States. To the extent that these problems constitute grounds for asylum or other international humanitarian protections, we expect people to continue to seek that protection from the United States, as we have committed to provide through both treaty and statute.

Unaccompanied Children (UC)

Over the past few years, there was a substantial increase in the number of unaccompanied children, who are some of the most vulnerable individuals who interact with our immigration system, apprehended at the U.S.-Mexican border. Similar to the way it addresses other security issues, in its response, DHS has utilized a risk-based strategy for border security.

According to U.S. Customs and Border Protection (CBP), the number of UC from any country apprehended at the U.S.-Mexican border climbed from more than 24,000 in fiscal year 2012 to nearly 39,000 in fiscal year 2013, and to nearly 69,000 in fiscal year 2014. Prior to fiscal year 2012, the majority of UC apprehended at the border were Mexican nationals. However, more than half of the UC apprehended at the border in fiscal year 2013, and 75 percent apprehended in fiscal year 2014 were nationals of El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras. UC apprehensions for fiscal year 2015 to date have decreased, owing in large part to the response by DHS, as well as our interagency and international partners to prepare for the seasonal increase in UC migrants that normally begins in the winter and increases each spring.

More specifically, during the uptick in the number of UCs arriving at the U.S.-Mexican border, DHS worked closely with the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS), to whom DHS is mandated by law to transfer custody of these children once they are identified as unaccompanied, to resolve issues related to HHS' ability to absorb the increase in UCs. This continues to be an issue that Secretary Johnson follows very closely. These efforts actually build on several years of increased and strengthened coordination between DHS and HHS. DOD also played an important role in providing temporary shelter for UCs and family units at the beginning of the increase in 2014.

On June 2, 2014, President Obama directed Secretary Johnson to establish an interagency Unified Coordination Group to ensure Federal unity of effort in responding to the influx of unaccompanied children across the Southwest border. Among other actions, and in order to achieve the unity of effort required to respond to this situation, Secretary Johnson designated Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) Administrator Craig Fugate as the Federal Coordinating Official to lead and coordinate the Unified Coordination Group across the Executive Branch. In this role, Administrator Fugate led and coordinated Federal response efforts to ensure that Federal agencies were unified in providing relief to the affected children.

I am pleased to report that as a result of the multi-agency effort we undertook the numbers of UCs arriving at our border are well below the numbers we experienced last summer. Given the seasonal pattern of Central American migration to the United States, we remain vigilant to prevent or address any increase in numbers as we approach the summer months. To that end, and consistent with the overall Unity of Effort initiative Secretary Johnson announced in April 2014, DHS has embarked on a common, DHS-wide Southern Border campaign plan. DHS-wide campaign planning and the Department's establishment of three new Joint Task Forces – East, West, and Investigations – will enable a more effective, more efficient, and more unified approach for the range of homeland security and border security efforts across our southern border and approaches.

DHS will continue to ensure the proper care of unaccompanied children when they are temporarily in DHS custody and coordinate closely with HHS, the Departments of State and Defense, the General Services Administration and other agencies, to ensure a coordinated and rapid government-wide response in the short-term and to undertake broader, longer-term reforms to address the root cause behind these recent migration trends. We will also continue to work closely with the governments of Mexico, Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador. We must, and we will, address this situation.

One way of helping to provide a safe, legal, and orderly alternative to the dangerous journey that some children are currently taking to the United States to reunite with their parents is the establishment of the Central American Minors (CAM) Refugee/Parole Program. This program was created as part of a broader commitment to working with Central American countries to help create the economic, social, governance and citizen security conditions to address factors contributing to increases in migration to the United States. Vice President Biden announced the establishment of the program in November 2014, and the application period opened on December 1, 2014. The program provides certain qualified minors in El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras with parents lawfully present in the United States the opportunity to apply for refugee status.

U.S. Department of Homeland Security (DHS) Engagement with Central America

In February, I traveled to El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras with senior CBP and ICE officials for a series of meetings to promote regional security and economic prosperity, to work on approaches to deterring illegal migration, and to ensure that we are prepared for seasonal fluctuation or any other potential should there be another seasonal increase in the number of UC migrating to the United States this year.

Looking forward, DHS will continue to support U.S. government economic and security objectives. DHS will continue to promote information campaigns through radio, television, and print media to dissuade potential undocumented migrants from embarking on the dangerous trek north to attempt to enter the U.S. illegally. These campaigns are essential in combating the misinformation promoted by smuggling organizations. DHS will also continue its excellent bilateral partnerships with our Central American partners to further enhance the quick, efficient, and safe repatriations of children and families who are apprehended in the United States. This includes bilateral cooperation on travel document issuance, the number of permitted repatriation flights, the availability of consular interviews, and infrastructure at reception centers. ICE uses the Criminal History Information Sharing (CHIS) program as a vital international public safety tool that provides participating nations with certain egregious criminal history information in advance of an undocumented migrant's removal from the United States. DHS signed a CHIS agreement with the Government of El Salvador on May 14, 2014, Guatemala on July 9, 2014, and Honduras on August 19, 2014. CHIS data transmissions are operational in all three countries.

To promote investigative capacity-building and anti-smuggling efforts, DHS, with DOS funding, will increase the presence of the Transnational Criminal Investigative Units (TCIU), which are sponsored by ICE in Honduras, Guatemala, El Salvador, and Panama. Comprised of foreign law enforcement personnel, TCIUs facilitate information exchange, rapid bilateral investigation, and ultimately enhance the host country's ability to investigate and prosecute individuals involved in weapons trafficking and counter proliferation; money laundering and bulk cash smuggling; human smuggling and trafficking; narcotics trafficking; intellectual

property rights violations and other customs fraud; child exploitation; cybercrime; and other violations within the ICE investigative purview. DHS also plans to expand border-focused vetted units, such as the Special Tactics Operations Group or *Grupo de Operaciones Especiales Tacticas* (GOET) in Honduras, to El Salvador and Guatemala in partnership with CBP. Through these vetted units, DHS provides training and capacity building to foreign counterparts, empowering them to investigate, identify, disrupt, and dismantle transnational criminal organizations that are engaging in illicit activities in the host country. Partner nation authorities in Central America, including immigration services and border police, collect biometrics in cooperation with ICE's TCIUs and through ICE's Biometric Identification Transnational Migration Alert Program (BITMAP). The host country owns the biometric data and shares the information with ICE for intelligence and screening.

DHS will also support increased passenger and cargo information sharing via programs designed to collect and verify information through U.S. databases, as well as information regarding transnational criminal organization smuggling routes. By pursuing efforts to expand the Joint Security Program (JSP) and Advanced Passenger Information Sharing (APIS) in Central America, DHS will augment the ability of host country law enforcement and migration officials to identify and respond to illicit trade and travel occurring at major transit hubs, primarily at the international commercial airports. Finally, to encourage economic development, DHS will pursue efforts to promote trade, travel and commerce through trade facilitation, port infrastructure assistance, and information sharing.

On my recent trip to Central America, I was impressed and encouraged by the political will demonstrated by each country, which is a critical component to our success. In El Salvador, key law enforcement leaders described the need to build investigative capacity within the national police, with a particular focus on building capacity on the border. In Guatemala, the government has an agreement with the government of Mexico to add eight new border ports of entry along the Mexican border to better facilitate legitimate trade and travel. The Government of Guatemala emphasized the need to go beyond messaging and give Guatemalans a reason to stay. Their government is currently working on efforts to provide economic development for high migration source-regions through the development of training centers to provide technical education for children. In Honduras, senior officials outlined their goal to increase capacity of domestic police units, particularly in investigative capabilities, to crack down on crime and violence. The Government of Honduras also expressed a strong interest in pursuing efforts to improve airport security and migration control. These efforts are but a few examples of how the governments of Central America are taking ownership of these challenges. During the Vice President's trip to Guatemala earlier this month, he also noted the important steps the governments of El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras have taken to address the root causes of migration to the United States and the need for them to remain committed to meaningful action.

Conclusion

We appreciate the support Congress has provided to improve security at our borders and ports of entry. With that support, we have made great progress. There are now increased personnel, technology, and infrastructure on our borders, more than ever before. As we work to increase border security, however, we must continue to look beyond our borders. We are actively engaging our international partners to identify and interdict threats at the earliest possible point, before they reach our borders. We are sharing more information with these partners; we are working in a joint capacity to counter transnational criminal organizations, human and drug

smugglers, and those who traffic in persons; and we are building greater security and integrity into our shared systems of trade and travel. We will continue to engage with our foreign and interagency partners to extend our security beyond our borders and address threats as far from the homeland as possible.

As part of our whole-of-government approach, DHS continues to build our risk-based approach to address the challenges present in Central America. Additionally, the governments of El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras are taking ownership of these challenges and addressing them head on. One important step was creating a strategic vision through the “Plan of the Alliance for Prosperity in the Northern Triangle: A Road Map,” which was created by the three Central American countries themselves with support from the Inter-American Development Bank (IDB). This plan emphasizes the importance of regional economic integration through stronger transportation, communications, customs, and border linkages.

On my trip to the region last month, I personally saw the desire in each of these countries to do more to address these longstanding issues. As the Vice President stated in his op-ed in *The Hill* on March 10, 2015, “The challenges ahead are formidable. Solving them will take years. But Central America’s leaders have now laid out a shared plan to move their region forward and taken the first steps to make it a reality. Central America can become the next great success story of the Western Hemisphere.”

Thank you for the opportunity to testify today, for your continued support of the Department, and for your attention to this important issue. I would be pleased to answer any questions at this time.