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**Challenges at the Border:  
Examining and Addressing the Root Causes  
Behind the Rise in Apprehensions at the Southern Border**

Good morning, Chairman Carper, Senator Coburn and Members of the Committee. Thank you for the opportunity to appear before the Committee today on behalf of the Woodrow Wilson Center.

I have just returned from a six-day trip through Central America's Northern Triangle—Guatemala, Honduras and El Salvador—the latest in a series of research trips focused on the region's security situation and U.S. efforts to improve citizen security there. Given the current crisis involving unaccompanied Central American children arriving at the U.S. border I believe we have a unique opportunity to examine the root causes compelling people to risk their lives on a perilous journey through Central America and Mexico to face an uncertain future at the United States border. **The “push factors” are real and overwhelming, suggesting that for many the long odds of coming north are better than the impossible odds of staying in place.**

## **I. The Context and Factors Compelling Children to Flee Central America**

There are essentially three factors compelling people to take this harrowing journey. These factors have existed for a long time so the so-called “surge” has actually been building for a while. But it has been made worse, recently, by unfounded rumors promoted by “coyotes”—or traffickers—seeking to profit from people's fear and desperation.

These long term factors include widespread violence that has convulsed the region since the early 1980s, the result of Cold War conflicts, and later at the hands of violent and powerful criminal networks some of which emerged from demobilized armed actors. Additionally, increased deportations from the United States in the 1990s and 2000s further fueled the violence with the arrival of thousands of gang members. Finally, already weak law enforcement and rule of law institutions have been further debilitated by criminal organizations that have penetrated and captured state institutions rendering the state largely incapable of providing security for its citizens, especially in poor and marginalized communities. This is particularly the case in Honduras where, following a 2009 coup, survival of the regime took precedence over needed police and justice reforms and little was done to reverse the stranglehold criminal groups had on the communities.

As a result, these three countries together form the most murderous region in the world with Honduras ranking first globally with a homicide rate of just over 90 per 100,000 inhabitants, and El Salvador and Guatemala in fourth and fifth place with rates of just over 41 and nearly 40 respectively. By comparison, Colombia is in the low 30s and Mexico is in the low 20s. Worse, homicide among young people is extraordinarily high. According to Central American Business Intelligence, out of the 5,253 homicides in Guatemala in 2013, 47.1 percent of homicide victims are between 15-30 years old. The overwhelming majority of homicide victims are male.

But homicides don't tell the entire story. Community-level violence at the hands of local gangs takes an even greater toll on neighborhoods and individuals. Gangs impact every aspect of life in many communities by extorting economic activity and forcing people to be loyal. In one community I have been visiting for 30+ years people told me that there are roughly six groups “taxing” economic activity including the bus service, taxis, and anyone who tries to sell something from their home to make a little extra cash. If you don't pay up they threaten and sometimes kill people. This is in a community where Honduras's new Military Police stands guard over a soccer field. People feel invaded on all sides—gangs and police. Many are happy the military police are present but they cannot depend on the security forces to protect them from extortion and threats, and fear their children will be forced to join the criminal activity or flee. One friend told me her neighbor reported she had given a “coyote” about \$1,200 and her daughter condoms and prayed she would make it to the United States.

An additional factor is that migrant smuggling, sex and labor trafficking, and extortion of migrants have become big business for criminal networks. Criminal groups such as the Zetas in Mexico have devised a sinister method to continue drug trafficking through the region, literally on the backs of migrants who are forced to carry drugs for them, and whose families are also extorted along the way by ruthless coyotes who call family in the U.S. and say something like, “if you want to see your son or daughter again you will have to wire money.”

Additionally, according to the State Department’s report on Trafficking in Persons all three Northern Triangle countries are in the “Tier 2” category meaning the “...government does not fully comply with the TVPA’s minimum standards, but are making significant efforts to bring themselves into compliance with those standards.” Each is also classified as a, “Source, transit, (and) destination country for women, men and children subjected to sex trafficking and forced labor.”

The backdrop for the violence is weak economies and failing health and education systems, the second “push” factor. El Salvador’s economy grew at less than 2 percent for the last two years. Guatemala and Honduras have done a little better hovering between 3 and 4 percent respectively. Roughly two-thirds of the Honduran population lives in poverty (less than \$1.25/day) and roughly a quarter of the population drops out of school after elementary school; an estimated eight percent of the lowest 20 percent income bracket graduate from high school—63 percent of the highest 20 percent graduate. Roughly 2 million (23 percent) Central Americans between the ages of 15 and 25 do not work and do not study. In Honduras, the rate is about 28 percent. Poverty rates in Guatemala are slightly better at 54 percent but half of all children under the age of 5 are chronically undernourished according to UNICEF, and the rate is nearly 70 percent among the indigenous population.

In the context of chronic violence and dismal economic prospects it is little surprise that Central Americans from the Northern Triangle have been fleeing north for decades. What appears to be a third impetus for this latest increase is the very strong drive for family reunification. Many Central Americans in the U.S.—here legally or not—have increasingly despaired of any opportunity to be reunited with their children. The belief that immigration reform was just on the horizon led some to think that there was a solution at hand, but as that possibility has faded, people have gotten more desperate. Additionally, violence and economic distress have been on the upswing again in these three countries so the incentives on the ground have been ratcheted up.

At the confluence of these factors, the coyotes and sometimes well-meaning but mistaken people in the United States, Mexico and Central America have begun to spread rumors that the U.S. will treat children with leniency and allow them to reunite with parents. Their pitch, not subject to truth in advertising standards, is that “now” is the time to go. Unfortunately, many people bought into that notion in a context where desperation and fear for one’s children trump the risks of heading north on a treacherous and uncertain journey.

## **II. Dos and Don’ts for US policy in Central America and the Unaccompanied Minor Crisis**

The United States is now faced with a serious humanitarian crisis with roots in the region. The President’s request for funding to address this situation includes roughly \$300 million for programs in Central America, which is in addition to the roughly \$800 million in security assistance the United States has provided the region since FY 2008. Given the opportunities, challenges and risks more money represents for the region, I would like to suggest a series of “dos and don’ts” the United States should consider as they move forward.

**The United States should not treat this humanitarian crisis as something to be solved at the border.** The Border Patrol has doubled its personnel along the border in just 10 years, but the number of Central Americans arriving has continued to grow. The so-called “surge” of the last 10 months has taken place

when the border is at its strongest. Furthermore, many young migrants are seeking out (not evading) border officials to turn themselves in believing these will be given “permission” to enter. More agents have not and will not stop the historic migration flow.

**The United States can do more to discourage the migration but it must do so by safeguarding those who have a legitimate claim to protection.** The United Nations estimates that as many as 58 percent of those fleeing Central America could be eligible for some form of protection. If the United States attempts to expedite the hearing process for children in must be done with care and the full knowledge that young people are being trafficked, are fleeing extreme violence at home, and some percentage will certainly face death if they are deported. The challenge is to ensure that those with legitimate claims to protection are separated from those with no such claim. Expediting this decision-making process could send the signal that arriving at the border is no guarantee that one will be granted lawful entrance.

**The United States should not make the violence in Central America solely about drug trafficking.** Trans-national drug trafficking is a factor, of course, but its relationship to the kinds of community level violence driving the migration of children is indirect and much more complex than we imagine. International drug traffickers are eager to transport their illegal products from the Andes to major consumer markets in the U.S. They are not interested in engaging in extreme violence and community-level criminal activity in Central America that represent costly and wasteful delays. The violence in Central America is predominately related to local criminal markets especially extortion, kidnapping, and local drug markets. Children and families are fleeing because conditions in their local neighborhoods have become so desperate.

**The United States should focus more on addressing the underlying causes of migration from Central America, but the U.S. should not spend more money without a clear strategy.** The U.S. has a framework for addressing security concerns in Central America called CARSI. It stems from the Bush Administration. It includes many well intentioned projects, some better than others. But it lacks an overall strategic framework that sets priorities and ensures that programs are complementary rather than working at cross purposes. Inter-agency coordination has to mean more than simply reporting what each agency is doing. We need to measure outcomes—like a reduction in crime and more effective prosecution—not inputs—like how many police we have trained—to ensure that our efforts produce the desired outcomes. Training alone is insufficient to turn the tide against corruption and criminal networks operating within government institutions. Aggressive anti-corruption and prosecution strategies are more immediately important.

**The United States should name a high-level coordinator or special envoy** to ensure that a strategy is fully articulated and, more importantly, successfully carried out. This person should have the capacity to alter course and redirect efforts (in consultation with Congress) when things are not working out as hoped. At times the U.S. lacks the partners in the region to accomplish its goals. Political and economic elite often lack the political will to carry out difficult reforms, so a high-level coordinator should be senior enough to press for reforms and should have the authority to hold back assistance when the political commitment to implement to program is not there.

**The United States should not make this solely about law enforcement.** Police and prosecutors have an important role to play but it should be targeted and specific, not broad and generalized. Putting more people in already overcrowded jails is not the answer. A well-coordinated and balanced program that includes both crime suppression and prevention is essential. Neither the U.S. nor Central America can arrest their way out of this problem.

**III. What Is the Agenda Going Forward? Reduce violence, Fight Corruption, Build Capacity, and Integrate Economic Opportunity.**

The United States already has a program—the Central America Regional Security Initiative (CARSI)—to address many of the same issues driving today’s migration. The U.S. has been funding some of these same programs—rule of law promotion, police professionalization, and poverty reduction—in Central America for decades. Why, then, are we still experiencing the kinds of migration and dysfunctional state institutions that we’ve been trying to fix since the 1980s?

The answer, I believe, is one of focus and prioritization. There are many good ideas and programs but the focus has been misdirected. To be successful the United States must prioritize its interventions in Central America, focusing like a laser on the follow five things:

**Reduce violence, build community resilience.** Our efforts must focus on reducing the kinds of community level violence that is driving the migration. This means pursuing community oriented programs in policing, crime and violence prevention, and economic opportunities that are attuned to the specific needs of the community. Focusing on local gangs and efforts to end extortions is central to this strategy. We must also increase and expand prevention programs in targeted high crime areas. This includes direct intervention with gang members. Reorienting strategies to focus on community-level violence reduction and strengthening the community’s ability to resist crime and criminals (sometimes called community resilience) will have a direct impact on people’s decisions to stay or flee.

**Fight corruption.** Building effective and professional police, prosecutors, and courts in the region is essential if Central American countries are ever going to be able to resist crime on their own with minimal U.S. assistance. But the U.S. has been trying to do this for decades with little success because we have focused too much on training, equipment, and infrastructure and insufficiently on corruption. The problem goes beyond catching a few bad apples. Organized crime has taken control of parts of or entire institutions of government meaning that in some instances the entire barrel is rotten.

We should refocus our efforts on fighting corruption at every level by strengthening mechanisms of transparency and accountability in government, investigating and holding government officials accountable, and doing a better job of vetting new forces and purging old forces that don’t measure up. Transparency in government is also essential and often overlooked. Information like crime statistics, numbers and kinds of detentions and progress of cases through the justice system are essential to determining if security efforts are being successful. Failure to do this will undermine the public’s already low confidence in state institutions and weaken other well-intentioned and well-designed programs.

**Demand more from Central America’s political and economic elite.** Many of our best programs are undermined by the lack of adequate support and partnership from the host government. Conversely, the few examples of success in Central America come where there has been a strong and innovative partner that takes the lead in making things happen. Guatemala’s former Attorney General, Claudia Paz y Paz, and the Rector of Honduras’s National University, Julieta Castellanos, come to mind as individuals who helped transform their institutions and turned them into agents of change. Unfortunately, these are uncommon leaders and the U.S. tends to continue spending its money on good programs that have little chance of success because there is no “buy-in” or political commitment to make the difficult decisions about fighting corruption, promoting accountability, and take the necessary actions against vested interests to bring about change. Additionally, the U.S. needs to insist that the Central Americans bear more of the costs of transforming their governments through fiscal reforms and increasing tax revenues. Finally, the U.S. needs to think of ways to incentivize change, considering ways to condition economic benefits such as special trade preferences if specific reforms or actions promoting transparency and accountability are taken.

**Empower Civil Society:** When corruption is elevated and governments are unwilling to make the tough decisions to hold people accountable, the U.S. should encourage civil society organizations to play that role and open spaces for policy debate with civil society. Civil society organizations can monitor

government programs and report on progress. The U.S. should also do more to encourage and nurture independent investigative journalism. Most Central American groups and universities with whom I've met have no idea what the U.S. or other donors are doing in their country and whether these policies or programs are appropriate or simply leading to further corruption and cynicism about government and the international community. Freedom of expression and access to information are the essential building blocks of democracy so must be a priority in our efforts.

**Make economic opportunity part of the security strategy.** Traditionally we think in a linear fashion about the relationship between security and economic development. The “clear, hold, build” model pervades. Despite its logic in some places, for Central America I would recommend a more integrated strategy where security and economic opportunity reinforce each other. Fighting crime by investing in children is a well-regarded strategy to reduce violence and future crime. With the exception of El Salvador, which participates in the Partnership for Growth (PFG) program, the CARSI strategy does not include an economic development component. I recommend that the U.S. expand to Guatemala and Honduras a PFG-type program. While they are not eligible for PFG, a similarly holistic and integrated program is urgently needed. Providing targeted workforce development programs to the 2 million young people who don't work and don't study is critical to improving security and slowing migration. A second benefit of the PFG is that it reflects a mutually agreed upon assessment of the problem faced, a contractual agreement with the U.S. on how to address these problems, and specific reporting requirements that allows everyone with access to a computer to monitor and evaluate progress being made. These are important tools that improve transparency and accountability.

Conclusion: There are no easy solutions or shortcuts for dealing with these issues. It will require a long-term bipartisan commitment to the region, discipline to stay focused on the framework, and adequate, not unlimited, resources. Hopefully some of these ideas can help orient the discussion going forward. I look forward to your questions and am anxious to be helpful to the Committee and Congress where I can. Thank you.