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

Good afternoon, Chairman Johnson, Ranking Member Carper, 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 four-day trip to the Mexico-Guatemala border to assess the state of that border and the situation of Central American migrants. When I appeared before this Committee last year we were in the midst of a major humanitarian crisis with the arrival of nearly 50 thousand unaccompanied Central America children at the United States border; and nearly as many arriving in family units, usually accompanied by a mother.

As I noted at the last hearing, there are numerous factors contributing to the rise in number of child migrants from the Northern Triangle countries of El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras. Some of these are historic factors – these are nations that experienced great violence during internal armed conflicts from the late 1970s until the mid-1990s. Several hundred thousand people died during this period, and over a million fled across international borders including to Mexico and the United States. So there is a history of flight from the region that has resulted in an ongoing pull to family reunification. The fact that historic patterns of circular migration have been largely broken as a consequence of stronger enforcement along the U.S.-Mexico border makes the pull of family reunification even greater. Viewed historically, this latest spike is the largest, but by no means the only period of elevated migration from Central America in the last two decades.

We also discussed the serious “push” factors driving migration including extremely high levels of criminal violence and grinding poverty that fed despair and desperation among poor Central Americans, especially youth and children. During 2013, the Northern Triangle Countries were considered the most violent region in the world with three of the top five homicide rates. While things have moderated some – Guatemala and Honduras both demonstrating important improvement in homicide rates- El Salvador saw a significant increase (roughly 30 percent) in 2014, and all three countries remain among the world’s top 10 countries for homicides.

While homicide rates are generally caused by criminal activity, not all homicides are the consequence of international drug trafficking. It’s difficult to disaggregate when it comes to causes, because so few formal investigations are actually carried out, but gang activity, vendettas, extortion, kidnapping, and domestic violence are possibly greater factors in the homicide rate than international drug trafficking.

And criminal activity can also be the consequence of ineffective state institutions. Police and prosecutors are often incapable of, or prevented from carrying out their basic functions. In many cases this is the result of fear or intimidation by criminal networks, but it also results from corruption and penetration of the state by criminal actors - what we refer to as state capture. The absence of the state either in form or function leads to greater impunity which in turns exacerbates a situation of criminality and high violence. In many instances children (and families) in high crime neighborhoods are forced to choose between fleeing their communities, joining criminal networks, or dying. Not surprisingly many decide fleeing is the best option, and with family in the United States, their choice is pretty logical.

Adding to these historic pull and current push factors, is the misperception promoted by traffickers seeking to take advantage of the despair of would-be migrants, that entry into the United States was easy and children in particular would be welcomed. One can see the combination of factors that contributed to last summer’s humanitarian crisis.

Since last summer the number of children turning themselves in at the U.S. border has declined markedly. The reasons are many: it reflects a regular seasonal rhythm as temperatures become dangerously hot or too cold to make the trek across Mexico. It also reflects an aggressive information campaign by the

United States and Central American governments to discourage the risky migration. Finally, it is the result of significant efforts by the Government of Mexico to increase enforcement and vigilance along their southern border region. Detentions are estimated to be up by nearly 25 percent in 2014, and deportations are up as well.

Nevertheless, we cannot be certain the flow of migrants will not return. Initial figures for the months of October 2014- January 2015 suggest arrivals are down significantly when compared to the same period in 2014, but up slightly when compared to 2013. Furthermore, the push factors we discussed last year – high levels of violence; lack of economic opportunity for young people; and ineffective and, at times, null government presence in communities where violence and migration are greatest – continue unabated. According to a report from the three Northern Triangle Countries of El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras – 90 percent of the migrants came from the most violent municipalities in the region.

In this context, the risks for the people of Central America and the United States are great. Inaction or continuing along the current path runs the risk of these states being overwhelmed by criminality, losing control not only of the state, but of their banking systems and economies. They could potentially become havens for other criminal actors, and a drag on the region including key partners like Mexico. These are not unavoidable or predestined outcomes, but it requires careful, focused and well-coordinated intervention by the countries themselves and support from the United States.

This is why it is so critical that the Northern Triangle governments devise and implement a plan that will address the underlying causes driving the migration. We know that an expanding U.S. economy attracts more labor – especially from poor underdeveloped regions in the Americas. This is unavoidable. But there is much that can be done to address the factors contributing to migration by reducing violence, increasing opportunities, and rooting out the corruption that has weakened the Central American government's capacity to respond effectively to the threats posed by criminal networks.

The announcement of the Central American "Alliance for Prosperity in the Northern Triangle" is a welcome sign. If implemented fully, the Alliance plan represents an important opportunity for the people of Central America. Furthermore, I believe President Obama's request for new funding is not only warranted, but reflects a plan that is a marked improvement over the former Central America Regional Security Initiative, or CARSIS program, and is complementary to what the Central American nations themselves are proposing. It suggests there is convergence in important areas, which suggests that these plans have the possibility of succeeding in ways that others have failed.

### **What is good about these plans?**

Most significant is that both the President's plan and the Central American Alliance plan recognize that questions of economic development are deeply intertwined with the violence and instability that afflicts the region. The CARSIS plan did not take economic issues into consideration but focused exclusively on security and thus missed a major factor in migration.

Second, both plans recognize the importance of building strong capable institutions and support for the rule of law. Corruption and neglect have for too long eroded the capacity of Central American governments to provide the most basic security to its citizens. Criminal groups have penetrated and captured entire ministries, so the task of building capable and accountable police and justice systems is paramount. Likewise, adherence to the rule of law is also critical to a better economy. Without institutions that promote the rule of law citizens, entrepreneurs, and investors lose faith in government's ability to ensure security and guarantee a level playing field for the private sector.

Finally, I find it particularly promising that the proposed U.S. strategy emphasizes a “placed-based approach” to dealing with crime and violence in Central America. To me, a placed-based approach means two fundamental things. First and foremost, it means that U.S. programs will be specifically targeted to those areas most in need of intervention. While national-level reform efforts are still needed, they often fail to reach the local level where needs are most urgent. Strategies focused on specific urban crisis in cities such as Medellín and Bogotá Colombia, or Monterrey and Ciudad Juarez, Mexico have proven more successful than others.

Second, the placed-based approach will enable the U.S. government to work in a more coordinated, and hopefully with more impact at the community level. As I understand it both the Department of States’ Bureau of International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs and the U.S. Agency for International Development will plan their interventions in a community together and should thus establish common metrics for reducing youth-related homicides in hotspot neighborhoods.. It’s a simple thing really, but it hasn’t happened very often in the past. The year-long study of CARS I led last year found serious problems around inter-agency coordination. In one instance, INL and USAID were promoting two different models of community policing around Tegucigalpa. More importantly, efforts to improve police capacity were not necessarily implemented in neighborhoods where crime prevention programs were being carried out. I am a strong believer in the idea that prevention programs need to be paired with smart community-oriented policing if there is going to be long-term benefits to either. If INL focuses on building local law enforcement capacity and USAID on prevention programs, and both agencies work together in particular hot spots, then the place-based approach has the potential to have major impact in troubled communities.

### **What are the keys to success?**

Let’s be clear. Plans are just that – plans. They need to be fully and properly implemented if they are going to be effective. As noted, the plans before us now are more promising than what has come before based on a more realistic appraisal of the challenges the countries confront. But the United States has been down this path before, so let’s spend some time thinking about what needs to be in place to ensure there is a modicum of success and we are not wasting the taxpayers money, or worse, contributing to deteriorating landscape of violence and insecurity that is taking the lives of thousands of human beings every year. Let me suggest five areas where we need to be particularly careful and wise as we move forward:

- **Define metrics for success and carry out impact evaluations:** Central American authorities have told me they understand that they will not receive a blank check from the United States. They seem to expect there will be conditions on the money they receive. The challenge is to decide on specific metrics for success and then evaluate these programs for impact. Some examples of metrics I think are critical are as follows:
  - Guatemala** should extend the mandate of the United Nations anti-impunity mechanism known as CICIG. This mechanism has contributed enormously to Guatemala’s relative success in capturing and prosecuting major criminal leaders, and building cases against corrupt officials.
  - Honduras** has promised to reform its civilian National Police. The U.S. should request a copy of this plan and monitor its implementation carefully. Purging corrupt police is key but so is prosecuting corruption. Investing in building the investigative capacity of the police, currently almost non-existent is also critical. Reforming the office of the Public Prosecutor is equally important and as far as I know there is no plan for this.
  - El Salvador** must make progress on two fronts. Reform of the prison system has long been promised and received U.S. support, but progress has been too slow. El Salvador continues to have the most overcrowded prison system in Central America. It’s a reflection of a broken law

enforcement system based on zero tolerance where people are arrested, but rarely prosecuted. As a result prisons become breeding grounds for criminal activity where adolescents with minor criminal records grow into hardened criminals. This is why reform of El Salvador's justice system is also critical so that pre-trial detention is reduced, and timely and effective adjudication is increased from its current sub-regional rate.

- **Establish mechanisms to monitor progress** in each of the program areas, progress should be carefully monitored and publically reported, and further disbursements condition on demonstrated progress. There already exist models for conditioning disbursements on compliance with set targets. The most commonly mentioned ones are those used by the Millennium Challenge Corporation and the President's Partnership for Growth. The advantage with each of these mechanisms is that they are a product of negotiation with the country. The country agrees to the list of conditions and the method of evaluation so it's not simply an imposition by the United States. This process has worked well in the case of El Salvador and ensured that in the recent political transition prior commitments were largely kept. This could be a particularly valuable tool in the case of Guatemala where Presidential and congressional elections are coming up in September. We would want to ensure that commitments made by the current government are kept by the next. It is my understanding that the countries are considering such an arrangement already, so this should be an achievable measure.
- **Promote adherence to the rule of law.** This may be the most important and most difficult. Neither the United States nor Central America has been particularly successful in dealing with these issues in the past. Rather than focusing solely on the technical issues of rules and laws the Central American governments and the United States need to focus on the adherence part – getting people and institutions to submit to the rule of law. There are too many examples in which anti-corruption laws are passed only to have the political and economic elite of the country ignore them. Honduras saw millions of dollars stolen from its national hospital system by the very people charged with overseeing the system. Overcoming these problems require independent auditing and investigative mechanisms that do not depend on the good will of the President or Congress or wealthy entrepreneurs. This is why the CICIG mechanism has been successful in Guatemala because it has independent authority to investigate corruption.

Increasing transparency in government is a second way to increase adherence to the rule of law by giving citizens the opportunity to monitor their government and increase accountability. Honduras has signed an unprecedented agreement with Transparency International and a local organization (Association for a more Just Society) which gives these organizations access to information about government expenditures in several areas. This is an important step but should be expanded to cover expenditures on security from the Honduran President's special security fund.

- **Empower Civil Society:** Where corruption is elevated and governments are unwilling to make the tough decisions to hold people accountable, the United States 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 United States should also do more to encourage and nurture independent investigative journalism. Freedoms of expression and access to information are the essential building blocks of democracy so they must be a priority in U.S. policy. Unfortunately, journalists are too often threatened, sometimes by the government, and there have been too many cases of violence against journalists. Two journalists were killed just days ago in Guatemala and one was seriously injured in the same incident.

Conclusion: There are no easy solutions or shortcuts for dealing with the crime and violence, corruption, and economic distress driving Central American migration. It will require a long-term bipartisan commitment to the region, discipline to stay focused on the framework, and adequate, not unlimited, resources. But the risks of doing nothing or keeping the status quo are too large for Central America, Mexico, and the United States. We have an important opportunity to get things right for a change, and an excellent opportunity before us with these plans, but it requires constant vigilance. 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.