

“Challenges at the Border: Examining the Causes, Consequences, and Responses to the Rise in Apprehensions at the Southern Border”

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**Francisco L. Palmieri
Deputy Assistant Secretary**

Bureau of Western Hemisphere Affairs

U.S. Department of State

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Mr. Chairman, Mr. Ranking Member, Members of the Committee, I am pleased to be here to discuss the Department of State’s response to the sharp rise in the number of unaccompanied children and family units arriving at our southwest border, the direct link between this activity and dire conditions in the region and the influence of smuggling networks, and what we are doing to further the national security interests of the United States. I appreciate your attention to this important issue and look forward to working with you on this issue.

The Administration is deeply concerned by the substantial increase in the number of children and family units from Central America who are leaving their countries of origin and attempting unauthorized immigration to the United States.

The Department of State is implementing a five-part strategy:

1. We are working on a common understanding of the problem with the source countries of El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras, and with Mexico in its role as a transit country.
2. We have launched updated public messaging campaign with El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, and Mexico to discourage families from sending their sons and daughters on this dangerous journey.
3. We are helping El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras expand their repatriation and reintegration efforts.
4. We are working with Mexico to stop migrants at Mexico's southern border and interrupt the well-known smuggling routes used in southern Mexico.
5. We are leading a new whole-of-government effort to address the underlying causes of this migration, especially the security concerns and lack of economic opportunity in the source countries.

We know that these unaccompanied children and families are primarily arriving from El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras. Central America faces daunting economic, governance, and security challenges, which impact the citizens of the region and the choices they make. It is in the best interests of the United States for the countries of Central America to be prosperous, democratic, and secure.

Our vision for the countries of Central America is a secure, well-governed region that creates opportunities for each nation's people within their respective sovereign borders. This is one key part of the strategy to diminish the factors driving high emigration flows. Stronger economic performance in Central America will also create jobs in the region and benefit the U.S. economy.

The political, economic, and social conditions in El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras are challenging, with extreme violence from transnational criminal organizations and street gangs, endemic poverty, declining rural and farm incomes, and often ineffective public institutions – all combining to create an environment that many people want to abandon.

Aggressive criminal smugglers seek to exploit this situation. Smugglers prey on the hopes and dreams of the poor, spreading misinformation about immigration benefits available in the United States. They would be less able to do so if those societies offered more economic prosperity, better educational opportunities, and a safer environment for children.

My colleagues from the Departments of Homeland Security and Health and Human Services have described the scope of the enormous challenge they face in processing and placing or detaining, as appropriate, unaccompanied children, adults with children, and adults arriving at the border. They are working tirelessly to protect our borders, enforce our laws, and meet the pressing humanitarian needs of migrants, especially the children. These efforts not only serve to enforce U.S. laws, but they are also the right thing to do to help these vulnerable individuals. As we work with our partners in Mexico and Central America, the safety and well-being of these individuals, especially the children, remains among our top concerns.

Our diplomatic engagement in support of this effort has been sustained and intense. Last month, Vice President Biden traveled to Guatemala to meet with the Presidents of El Salvador and Guatemala and representatives from Honduras and Mexico and established that we all must take steps to stem the flow of undocumented migrants. We continue daily, senior-level contact with those governments to deploy short-term efforts to stem the flow of migrants and to develop long-term solutions to address the root causes of migration.

In Panama on July 1, Secretary Kerry obtained agreement on greater collaboration from the Governments of El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras. All three nations' foreign ministers traveled to Washington July 3 to meet with nine different U.S. government entities at the Department of State. All three foreign ministers agreed to work with us on a coordinated response to this migration challenge.

At our request, El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras increased consulate staffing levels on the U.S.-Mexico border to expedite processing of unaccompanied children, ensuring they are moved from law enforcement facilities to Health and Human Services custody as quickly as possible and then for eventual return to their home countries following humanitarian screenings and immigration court proceedings.

The President spoke to his Mexican counterpart, Enrique Peña Nieto, in June about Mexican efforts to interrupt well-known smuggling routes. We are working with Mexico to accelerate its Southern Border Strategy announced on Monday that will increase Mexican inspection and interdiction capacities and reduce drug and human smuggling across Mexico's border with Guatemala and Belize.

As part of a broader inter-agency effort, we are working to increase immediately the migrant repatriation capacity for El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras, so that these governments can accept more migrants returned from the United States each week. To this end, the Department allocated \$9.6 million to help with repatriation and reintegration efforts.

We are also focused on the role human smuggling organizations are playing in this urgent humanitarian situation. They have spread rumors – and let me emphasize that these rumors are absolutely false – that promise immigration benefits to these children and family units once they are in the United States.

To this end, we are deploying public messaging campaigns in El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, and Mexico to underscore that children and family units who reach the United States will not enjoy special status. Each government in the

region is developing and deploying its own public messages that will complement U.S. efforts as well as dedicating more law enforcement resources to taking down these smugglers.

In addition, the Department continues to focus on a longer-term approach to address the systemic issues Central American countries face and that are creating the push factors behind this phenomenon: weak governing institutions, lack of economic, educational, and employment opportunities, and high levels of violence and insecurity. The Department of State is applying a more balanced regional approach to prioritize and integrate prosperity, security, and governance – thereby addressing the root causes that are driving migrants, including these vulnerable children, to the United States.

We are dedicating existing resources to manage the near-term surge in unaccompanied children and family units and to implement programs to address the long-term challenges that constitute the complex and systematic factors driving migration.

However, we must be realistic. In order to achieve the substantial, transformative change in Central America that will truly stem migration flows, all the governments, including greater collaboration with international partners, must demonstrate the political will and necessary commitment. We will continue to work closely with Congress on developing a comprehensive, whole-of-government approach that provides the necessary resources to meet this migration challenge.

Thank you. I look forward to answering your questions.