

“SECURING THE BORDER: UNDERSTANDING AND ADDRESSING THE
ROOT CAUSES OF CENTRAL AMERICAN MIGRATION TO THE UNITED
STATES”

TESTIMONY OF
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BEFORE
THE COMMITTEE ON HOMELAND SECURITY AND GOVERNMENT
AFFAIRS
UNITED STATES SENATE
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Mr. Chairman, Ranking Member Carper, and Members of the Committee:

Thank you for the opportunity to testify on the U.S. Strategy for
Engagement in Central America.

Last summer’s increase in migration of unaccompanied children provided a strong reminder that the security and prosperity of Central America are inextricably linked with our own. We also saw how a combination of U.S. leadership and rising political will in the region can successfully tackle shared challenges. The President marshalled an international response to the humanitarian situation caused by the surge in unaccompanied children and families with children to our Southwest border. It remains imperative that the United States support the leaders of El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras to address the region’s security and developmental challenges to avoid an ongoing cyclical migration phenomenon, with significant cost to the United States and tragic consequences for those who suffer at the hands of dangerous criminal smuggling organizations. The stakes are high and our joint efforts demand more than business as usual. The good news is that political will is on the rise in Central America.

Last summer, in partnership with the Mexican and Central American governments, we achieved several important successes. The United States’ public messaging campaigns about the dangers of the journey for children and families, assisted by host country efforts, effectively countered false rumors spread by

smugglers about potential immigration benefits in the United States. The Department of State and DHS have continued to revise and tailor our public messaging to counter any misinformation and warn of the dangers of unlawful migration.

The Department, in coordination with DHS, also launched in-country refugee and parole programs in El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras to provide a safe, legal, and orderly alternative to the dangerous journey of unaccompanied children to the United States. Specifically, the program is open to children of parents lawfully in the United States with the following statuses: permanent resident status, temporary protected status, parolee, deferred action, deferred enforced departure, or withholding of removal. As of March 9, we have received 219 applications. We continue to promote this program in U.S. communities with significant populations of people who may have family in El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras.

Mexico is also playing an important role in managing migration from the Northern Triangle. The Mexican Government has taken significant steps to provide status for Guatemalan workers who have jobs in the Southern Mexican states. And we note the Mexican government is making real efforts to dismantle human smuggling and trafficking organizations--which victimize many of the poorest and most vulnerable migrants and exploit other vulnerable populations--and to effectively shut down the use of "La Bestia" for migration. In 2014, Mexico apprehended 127,332 migrants, including 10,923 unaccompanied children. We continue to work with Mexico to disrupt the organized networks facilitating human smuggling and to strengthen enforcement in Mexico's southern border region, through which many of these poorest and most vulnerable migrants use on their journey north.

These successes cannot be sustained and built upon, without an increased U.S. commitment. Central American governments also need to do much more, in partnership with the Administration and the Congress.

Over the past two years, the U.S. government took a hard look at both our approach and our investments in Central America. Although security is paramount, and will remain so, we realized that we need to broaden our vision for how we achieve it. We developed an interagency strategy – the U.S. Strategy for Engagement in Central America – that balances three interrelated and interdependent objectives. These objectives are prosperity, governance, and security.

Without significant progress on all of these fronts, Central America will continue to face extreme violence and widespread poverty. These conditions will compel tens of thousands of Central Americans to flee their homes each year. Conversely, a secure, democratic, and prosperous Central America will provide an environment in which its citizens can thrive at home, instead of migrating elsewhere for safety and opportunity.

The President requested \$1 billion for Fiscal Year 2016 to support the U.S. Strategy for Engagement in Central America. Our request maintains and expands our current focus on security, including the investments we have made through the Central America Regional Security Initiative (CARSI), and will also support new investments for prosperity and governance consistent with the Strategy. As Vice President Biden recently said, “The cost of investing now in a Central America where young people can thrive in their own communities pales in comparison to the costs of another generation of violence, poverty, desperation and emigration.” This preventative approach is in U.S. national security interests.

Our prosperity agenda for Central America fosters the integration of a regional market of 43 million people and the creation of an enabling environment that encourages businesses of all sizes to invest and grow. Economic integration is happening throughout the hemisphere and, despite its location at the very crossroads of the hemisphere, Central America risks being left behind. Economic growth should reach everyone, not just the well-connected few. Six million young people will seek to enter the labor force in the next decade. Without job opportunities, these youth may end up participating in the illicit economy or coming to the United States.

Our governance agenda recognizes that economic growth and security are only sustainable when the rule of law and democratic institutions flourish, and when civil society and the media can play their rightful roles. Economic growth and good governance are security issues. Citizens and investors will trust institutions once those institutions establish a pattern of transparency, accountability, and effectiveness. Our governance efforts will address critical fiscal, police, civil service, and judicial reforms. The quality of government institutions will determine the quality of results.

Security is at the heart of our agenda but it cannot be achieved without strengthening our efforts in the areas of governance and economic prosperity. We need to continue to reduce violence in the region through U.S. sponsored programs

that help stabilize neighborhoods and eradicate transnational criminal networks that threaten Central America's communities and our own. We must collectively and effectively address insecurity now to ensure our other important investments bear fruit in the longer term.

U.S.-funded security programs make a difference in the lives of people like 17 year-old Kevin from Ilopango, El Salvador. His brother is in prison for murder; his mother left for the United States when he was six; and, after dropping out of school in the 8th grade, he was heading down one of those two paths. However, when USAID established a youth outreach center in Kevin's neighborhood, Kevin immediately joined the center's sports program. He now runs the center's gym, has completed a computer literacy course, and plans to return to school.

USAID has started over 200 youth centers throughout Central America and both governmental and non-governmental partners are replicating the model with their own resources. USAID is coordinating proven community-based interventions using smart targeting with the Department of State's Bureau of International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs (INL). USAID and INL developed a "place-based and people-centric strategy" that targets communities with the highest homicide rates and those individuals who are most at risk of committing violence. These efforts will multiply exponentially the number of stories like Kevin's.

As I said previously, we believe the essential condition for success is present: political will in the region. The presidents of El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras have a plan; they are already making progress and they have publicly committed themselves to a near-term timeline for continued action. The three presidents launched the Alliance for Prosperity plan in November, and are taking steps to implement it. The U.S. Strategy aligns with and supports the goals and objectives of the Alliance for Prosperity.

Since last summer, the Northern Triangle governments have taken important steps. On December 18, El Salvador passed an Investment Stability Law, giving investors assurances that tax and customs regulations will not change over the course of an investment. Indicative of its commitment to resolve long-standing disputes, on October 14, the Guatemalan government reached agreement with 33 communities on reparations for communities where human rights were violated by the construction of the Chixoy dam. And, on October 6, Honduras signed an agreement with Transparency International that includes plans to tackle corruption by making human resources and government procurement information publicly

available. All three governments, as participants in the Open Government Partnership, have also agreed to work with civil society to develop national action plans that will be externally assessed and monitored as they are implemented.

We are calling on Central American governments to do more – to invest their own resources and advance reforms that will lay the groundwork for success. These efforts will enable our assistance to produce better and sustained outcomes in Central America. Vice President Biden traveled to Guatemala earlier this month to meet with the presidents of El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras and raised these very points. The leaders released a strong joint statement, which included specific public commitments – with timelines – to guide continued progress. Each of our countries, the United States included, committed to actions that will help the region’s security and developmental challenges. And we did so publicly, inviting scrutiny and accountability.

We are still a long way from achieving our core goals in Central America. There is no clearer indication of this fact than the willingness of tens of thousands of children to travel to the United States last summer – amid the ever-present risks of rape, abuse, and death – to flee dire conditions in their home communities.

Despite these serious and complex challenges, there is reason to be optimistic about Central America’s future. We have a strong plan that we believe addresses the core of the challenges in the region. New demonstrated political will by Northern Triangle leaders to implement their own Alliance for Prosperity Plan is an important step forward. We want to work with Congress to help Central America and strengthen U.S. national security. As Vice President Biden said, “These [Central American] Presidents have committed to reforms and given themselves deadlines to take concrete steps. We agreed on the actions required, like strengthening police and justice reforms – actions to make your government more transparent, increase revenue bases, make your streets safer.” If we join Central American governments who move forward in this way, we will help get Central America on a new trajectory. I believe doing so will help secure America.

I look forward to your questions.