

**Statement for the Record before the
United States Senate Committee on the Judiciary
Hearing Title: Ensuring the Safety and Well-Being of Unaccompanied Children, Part II
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Bureau of Western Hemisphere Affairs
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Thank you, Chairman Durbin and Ranking Member Graham, for holding this important hearing. I am honored to be joined by my colleagues here who are the true experts in the fight against trafficking and what happens once Central Americans make the difficult choice to leave their countries. I'm grateful for the opportunity to talk to you more about the complex conditions that drive them to migrate from northern Central America, as well as important progress on our efforts to address them.

Northern Central America faces several serious challenges. Democratic backsliding in the region affects peoples' trust in institutions and perception of how freely they can exercise their rights. Victims of corruption are more likely to express intentions to migrate. High youth unemployment rates, numerous barriers inadequate access to education, and vast economic inequality spur migration. Coupled with high levels of informality, low wages that do not cover basic needs, and a vicious cycle of reliance on debt to meet those basic needs, the lack of decent jobs in all three countries contributes to the migratory wave. Despite decreased homicide rates, other types of crime and violence – including rampant gender-based violence – cause insecurity. Many individuals and families see migration as their only alternative to escape poverty, instability, narcotics violence, and climate-related catastrophes.

In 2021, the Biden-Harris Administration launched the Strategy to Address the Root Causes of Irregular Migration from Central America. The Root Causes Strategy focuses on creating good jobs, promoting democratic governance, protecting human rights, improving security, and countering gender-based violence to help Central Americans build better futures at home. The strategy addresses the factors that drive irregular migration and forced displacement from northern Central America, including food insecurity, chronic structural challenges, extreme poverty, citizen insecurity, poor governance, and endemic corruption.

First and foremost, we need strong governance in the region. Without it, we cannot achieve sustainable, equitable progress across all strategic areas, including economic prosperity and security.

We partner with civil society, the private sector, labor unions, regional governments, and international actors to advance U.S. policy goals.

In the last year, the State Department and U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) supported more than 1,500 human rights defenders and trained more than 300 independent journalists. This support provides quick help to embattled human rights defenders and civil society organizations through emergency assistance, supporting human rights actors and media practitioners to remain resilient, mitigate risks, overcome threats, and continue their important

work as safely as possible.

Through the Voices Initiative, we bring together U.S. resources – public and private diplomacy, foreign assistance programming, and enforcement authorities – to protect, defend, and promote civic space in Central America. The initiative focuses on promoting digital democracy and countering digital authoritarianism, promoting freedom of expression, strengthening independent media, countering criminalization, and providing protections for those who are targeted.

We are also taking actions to promote accountability for corrupt and undemocratic actors, as well as human rights abusers. On July 19, the U.S. government issued our most recent public list, consistent with Section 353 of the United States–Northern Triangle Enhanced Engagement Act, of individuals who knowingly engaged in acts that undermine democratic processes or institutions, engaged in significant corruption, or obstructed investigations into such acts of corruption in El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, or Nicaragua. This critical tool promotes accountability, and we appreciate bipartisan support for it.

In Fiscal Year 2022, the State Department trained over nine thousand civil police officers in the region. Our vetted units supported over four thousand arrests in the region.

On economic growth, Vice President Harris leads “Central America Forward,” an innovative public-private partnership to create good jobs in the region. Under Central America Forward, companies have committed to invest over \$4.2 billion in El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras. These investments have created thousands of good jobs, connected four million people to the internet, brought more than one million people into the formal financial economy, and trained almost 500,000 people to enhance workforce abilities, including digital and language skills. This is key to ending irregular migration. But this is not just about investment. Our private sector engagement reinforces the rule of law, good governance, and human rights. USAID supported more than 465,000 students through primary and secondary education programs in fiscal year 2022, far exceeding annual targets. Over 300,000 students received USDA nutrition assistance.

We certainly are not naïve about the challenges we face. It will take time to address many of these long-term, structural issues. My team works on these issues day in and day out, and we are grateful for continued, bipartisan support to ultimately help the people in the region maintain their futures in their home countries. Thank you for the opportunity to testify before this committee today. I look forward to working with Congress to strengthen our approach.