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ADVANCING U.S. INTERESTS IN THE WESTERN HEMISPHERE

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BEFORE THE

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ADVANCING U.S. INTERESTS IN THE WESTERN HEMISPHERE

WEDNESDAY, JULY 11, 2018

HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES,
COMMITTEE ON FOREIGN AFFAIRS,
Washington, DC.

The committee met, pursuant to notice, at 10:08 a.m., in room 2172, Rayburn House Office Building, Hon. Ed Royce (chairman of the committee) presiding.

Chairman ROYCE. We will call this hearing to order. Today we look at U.S. policy toward Latin America and the Caribbean. Our relationships in the Western Hemisphere are forged by deep cultural and economic ties. We export a lot of goods to the Caribbean, and that supports many U.S. jobs. Across Latin America, our trade ties are just as strong. But today, as the region faces urgent challenges and transitions, the United States must be more engaged than ever.

As always, the safety of Americans serving abroad is a top priority for this committee. The still unexplained attacks on Embassy personnel in Havana, and now in China, are very disturbing. Twenty-six Americans have been medically evacuated from Havana with serious symptoms, including sharp ear pain, headaches, vertigo and other conditions consistent with brain injury or concussion. Canadians have been impacted, as well. We need to know what happened, who is responsible, and how to respond.

The administration is actively addressing the Western Hemisphere's major crisis starting with Venezuela. The United States has repeatedly condemned the illegitimate election of President Maduro as well as the human rights abuses and economic meltdown unfolding there.

The administration has rightly deployed targeted sanctions hitting Venezuelan officials responsible for this catastrophe, not the suffering Venezuelan people, is the way to go. The Vice-President has traveled to the region three times to urge regional leaders to do more for the Venezuelan people.

In Nicaragua, the administration has rightly designated three top officials for human rights abuses and for corruption. But we should do more to support the Nicaraguan people. The repressive Ortega regime has killed more than 200 advocates for free and fair elections since this April. One of the civilians murdered on a village street was a former neighbor of an Orange County friend of mine. Subcommittee Chairman Paul Cook will convene a hearing to further examine this matter tomorrow.

Across the hemisphere, transnational criminal organizations continue to pose a major threat. These violent gangs are fueling the drug and migration crisis that the United States struggles with today. As we fight the deadly impacts of opioids in our communities, we must continue working closely with our regional neighbors to increase counternarcotics cooperation. The recent increase in cocaine production in Colombia is unacceptable, and I am hopeful that the election of President Ivan Duque is a sign that the country will redouble efforts to confront gangs and the cartels.

This committee continues to support U.S. efforts to work with the countries of Central America's Northern Triangle, El Salvador, Honduras, and Guatemala, to help shore up institutions, combat crime, and combat corruption, and create conditions that will keep people from migrating north. I agree with the administration that combating corruption in the region must be a key part of the strategy to create opportunity and stability. The committee will continue to support assistance to the region.

Finally, the recent election in Mexico raises questions about the future of the U.S.-Mexico security relationship under the Merida Initiative. I hope that President-Elect Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador's campaign promise to root out corruption is a sign that our two countries can continue to cooperate on matters of security. One of those is the Merida Initiative, and we will hear more from you on this.

The U.S. and Mexico share a 2,000-mile border, and must continue to work together to enhance both security and trade that benefits both our countries. NAFTA should be updated for the 21st century, not scrapped. And with that, let me go to our ranking member, Mr. Engel of New York, for his opening statement.

Mr. ENGEL. Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman. Thank you for calling today's hearing. This region is particularly important to me as a former Western Hemisphere Subcommittee chair. Ambassador Merten, Deputy Assistant Administrator Lynch, welcome, and thank you both for your service. You are both doing great work. But again, I must say the White House's failure to fill key positions in a timely manner means we can't adhere from those setting the course for foreign policy. That is too bad, because in my view, the administration has put us on a very dangerous course when it comes to the Western Hemisphere.

The way the President talks about this region says it all. Falsely insisting Mexico will pay for a border wall we don't need, the ugly language calling Mexicans drug dealers and rapists, the dehumanizing language about immigrants and characterization of Haiti and El Salvador using the word I won't repeat.

Democrats and Republicans have worked for two decades together to improve the U.S.-Mexico relationship long characterized by mistrust. Bilateral cooperation on counternarcotics was once unimaginable. Amazingly, it became the norm with the Mexican Government extraditing the world's most dangerous drug kingpin, Chapo Guzman, to the United States in the last hours of the Obama administration.

On July 1, Mexicans elected a new President, Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador. I worry that if President Trump continues along the same lines, President-Elect Lopez Obrador may pull the plug

on security cooperation. Where would that leave us the next time we are seeking an extradition, or if terrorists sought to cross the U.S.-Mexican border? Too much is at stake in our bilateral relationship, and we simply don't know if the President will continue to do this, take to Twitter, and do damage.

And looking south, Mexico is just a start. For months, the families have been torn apart, and Central American children essentially have been held ransom to a radical anti-immigrant agenda. The President created this policy. He then said only Congress could fix it, which wasn't true, made clear by the fact that he then signed an executive order trying to end the policy, but the damage was done. Children to this day still remain apart from their parents. That has to change. The Organization of American States unanimously adopted a resolution on June 29 criticizing the inhumane family separation policy.

It is hard to remember a time in recent memory when the OAS permanent council has so forcefully condemned the United States, and that is just the start. The administration is making it harder for victims of abuse to come to the United States, saying domestic violence shouldn't be grounds for asylum, that women and children who have endured rape and other forms of violence should look elsewhere for sanctuary.

The United States also just opposed a U.N. resolution promoting breastfeeding. I mean, it is unbelievable, and I fear the worst is yet to come. Temporary protected status will soon end for 262,000 Salvadorans, 86,000 Hondurans, and 58,000 Haitians. As Mark Schneider of CSIS pointed out in The Washington Post this week, this move may result in 273,000 American-born children being separated from their parents. This is a deeply troubling pattern in dealing with the treatment of women, of families of immigrants.

Is this what we are becoming as a country? I hope not. I won't accept it, and I will fight tooth and nail against these policies that betray our values and make it harder to advance our interests abroad. After all, we are facing very real and urgent crises in the region.

President Maduro has turned Venezuela into a full-fledged dictatorship, and rejected humanitarian aid. State Department sanctions against human rights violators were a step forward. But instead of working with regional partners, we have, again, bellicose rhetoric and threatening to invade Venezuela. The result, Maduro is empowered and alienated key allies at the same time.

In Nicaragua, the Global Magnitsky Act has allowed us to crack down on thugs tied to President Ortega who are killing innocent people in the streets. Yet, the administration zeroed out democracy assistance to Nicaragua in its 2019 budget. And in Guatemala, absurd and unconfounded attacks on the U.N. International Commission Against Impunity in Guatemala, what we call CICIG, threaten the institution's ability to fight corruption and support the rule of law.

Most recently, I was disturbed by the Guatemalan Government's decision to put CICIG personnel at risk removing a large portion of their security detail. President Morales should immediately reverse its decision. And I must say, since I have been critical of the

White House, this time I was pleased that the White House came out in strong support of CICIG just this week.

I congratulate Ivan Duque on his recent election victory in Colombia. Outgoing U.S. assistance is essential for implementing the peace process and supporting smart drug policies that go after kingpins while not harming small farmers or the environment. And in Argentina, I was glad to join Mr. McCaul in founding the Argentina Caucus to focus on a relationship that has improved a great deal since President Macri took office.

Finally, the Caribbean. In 2016, Congresswoman Ros-Lehtinen and I authored the U.S. Caribbean Strategic Engagement Act, which President Obama signed into law in his last few days in office. Last June, the State Department released a strategy mandated by our law. It is an ambitious and impressive strategy, but unfortunately, 1 year later, it still has not been implemented. With hurricane season under way, the parts of the strategy related to disaster preparedness and resilience are especially urgent. I implore our witnesses to put some meat on the bones of what are on paper is an excellent strategy, and I would be remiss not to mention that Haiti is very much on my mind this week. Haiti has suffered far more than any country should, and I stand with the Haitian people at this difficult moment.

So I thank you again, Mr. Chairman, and I look forward to hearing from our witnesses, and I yield back.

Chairman ROYCE. Thank you, Mr. Engel. So this morning, we are pleased to be joined by Ken Merten, Acting Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for Western Hemisphere Affairs, and Sarah-Ann Lynch, Senior Deputy Assistant Administrator of USAID for Latin American and the Caribbean. We welcome them to the committee. Ambassador Merten has been serving as the Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for Western Hemisphere Affairs since August 2015. He is a two-time Ambassador, having served as the U.S. Ambassador to Croatia, and also, as the U.S. Ambassador to Haiti.

Ms. Sarah-Ann Lynch currently serves as Senior Deputy Assistant Administrator for Latin America and the Caribbean at USAID, and prior to that, she was the mission director in Iraq. So we appreciate them both being with us here today, and without objection, the witnesses' full prepared statements are going to be made part of the record and members are going to have 5 calendar days to submit any statements or questions or extraneous material for the record.

So if you could, Ambassador, I would ask you to just summarize your statement in 5 minutes, each of you, and then we will go to questions. Thank you.

STATEMENT OF THE HONORABLE KENNETH H. MERTEN, ACTING PRINCIPAL DEPUTY ASSISTANT SECRETARY, BUREAU OF WESTERN HEMISPHERE AFFAIRS, U.S. DEPARTMENT OF STATE

Ambassador MERTEN. Thanks very much, Chairman Royce, Ranking Member Engel, members of the committee. Thanks for the opportunity to allow us to come here and talk a little bit about the

administration's approach to our Hemisphere, the Western Hemisphere.

We know that a democratic, prosperous, and secure Western Hemisphere enhances our national security and benefits our economy. Our policies are built upon that premise. The United States shares common values and has strong economic bonds with all the countries in this region. These long historical connections bind us to the nations of the Western Hemisphere more closely than in any other region.

Our economic engagement with the Americas cannot be overstated. The United States is the top trading partner for more than half the countries in the region. We trade more than twice as much with the hemisphere as we do, for example, with China. We also share fundamental values. In the last decades, Latin America has largely transformed itself into a region of vibrant, peaceful democracies.

The United States recently reaffirmed its commitment to these shared values and to our partnership with the region at the eighth Summit of the Americas in Lima, Peru in May. At that summit, leaders acknowledge the need to continue working together to address corruption, to strengthen institutions, and to improve transparency.

We rely on strong hemispheric partnerships to fight transnational criminal organizations, and we work hand in hand with our partners to disrupt illicit networks and trafficking roots.

Because our mutual security and prosperity are so connected, we work together to counter the illicit activity and the poverty that drive illegal immigration to the United States. As such, the U.S., together with our partners, is renewing its commitment to address the root causes of Central American migration.

While most of the region enjoys democratic rule, Venezuela, Cuba, and Nicaragua continue to undermine the region's shared vision for effective democratic governance enshrined in the Inter-American Democratic Charter.

The United States remains committed to standing with the people of Cuba, Nicaragua, and Venezuela in their struggle to achieve the liberty that they deserve.

In Cuba, the regime continues its repressive hold on power despite the recent transition to President Diaz-Canel. President Trump's June 2017 Cuba policy emphasizes advancing human rights and democracy, and aims to ensure that the benefits of U.S. engagement flow to the Cuban people.

In Nicaragua, we condemn the violence and excessive force used against demonstrators resulting in 215 deaths and hundreds more wounded since protests began now in mid April. We urge Nicaragua's government to strengthen democratic processes and institutions, and to respect human rights and fundamental freedoms and support the proposal for free and fair elections that would occur soon.

In Venezuela, the Maduro regime has completely undermined democracy. We join the nations of the world in standing with the Venezuelan people as they seek to return to a stable, prosperous democracy they deserve. We are also addressing the humanitarian

component of the Venezuelan crisis by supporting Venezuelans who are deprived, suffering, and increasingly forced to flee their homes.

Overall, the United States is providing nearly $31 million in humanitarian assistance to Venezuelans in the region. We will continue to work with our partners to help restore democracy to Venezuela, Nicaragua, and Cuba, and we will continue to build a democratic, prosperous, and secure Western Hemisphere that further enhances our own national security and benefits our economy.

So I look forward to your questions today. Thanks very much for the opportunity to speak with you.

[The prepared statement of Ambassador Merten follows:]

ADVANCING U.S. INTERESTS IN THE WESTERN HEMISPHERE

TESTIMONY OF
KENNETH H. MERTEN
ACTING PRINCIPAL DEPUTY ASSISTANT SECRETARY OF STATE
BUREAU OF WESTERN HEMISPHERE AFFAIRS
U.S. DEPARTMENT OF STATE
BEFORE
THE HOUSE COMMITTEE ON FOREIGN AFFAIRS
July 11, 2018

Chairman Royce, Ranking Member Engel, and Members of the Committee:

Thank you for the opportunity to testify on the Administration's approach to the Western Hemisphere.

We know that a democratic, prosperous, and secure Western Hemisphere enhances our national security and benefits our economy. We build our policies towards the region upon that premise. The United States shares common values, strong economic bonds, and geographic proximity with the countries in this region. These connections bind us to the nations of the Western Hemisphere more closely than to any other region.

Our economic engagement with the Americas cannot be overstated. The United States is the top trading partner for more than half of the countries in the region. We trade more than twice as much with the hemisphere as we do with China. The United States has free trade commitments with 20 countries worldwide – 12 of those countries are in the Western Hemisphere. We traded $1.8 trillion in goods and services within the hemisphere last year, supporting millions of U.S. jobs and leading to a $12 billion goods and services trade surplus with the region in 2017. We believe in strong and fair trade that will create more opportunities for U.S. businesses.

Our economic engagement is underpinned by shared values. Latin America has largely transformed itself into a region of vibrant and peaceful democracies. Costa Rica, Paraguay, Colombia and, most recently, Mexico elected new presidents in 2018, and Brazilians will head to the polls later this year. We look forward to working with these newly-elected administrations.

The United States reaffirmed its commitment to our partnership with the Americas at the Eighth Summit of the Americas in Lima in May. The central theme of the Summit was "Democratic Governance against Corruption." Corruption corrodes institutions and trust in democracy in the region and globally. Citizens across the Americas have demonstrated increasing intolerance for corruption.

At the Summit of the Americas, leaders adopted the Lima Commitment. It marks a watershed in the willingness of leaders to acknowledge their responsibility to address corruption. The Commitment provides a roadmap outlining steps to curb corruption and promote transparency, including furthering a culture of citizen participation in anti-corruption efforts.

The region's institutions are also responding. A money laundering investigation entitled "Operation Car Wash" in Brazil revealed a regional corruption case that implicated at least 10 Latin American countries. This case was not brushed aside or ignored; instead, Brazil's ability to share evidence related to the Odebrecht bribery case accelerated a wave of activity on the case across the Hemisphere.

In Central America, the International Commission against Impunity in Guatemala (CICIG) (SEE-sig) and the Organization of American States (OAS) Mission Against Corruption and Impunity in Honduras (MACCIH), (MAH-see) play important roles in supporting the attorneys general in Guatemala and Honduras to strengthen the rule of law, fight impunity, and combat corruption.

Unfortunately, corruption is not the only challenge we must confront together in the hemisphere. Another pressing issue we face is transnational crime.

We rely on strong hemispheric partnerships to fight transnational criminal organizations, and we work with our partners to disrupt illicit networks and trafficking routes.

The U.S. Strategy for Central America; our partnership with Mexico; and the Caribbean Basin Security Initiative are essential tools in addressing this threat. Continued bilateral cooperation with Colombia, Peru, and others is also important. At the U.S.-Colombia High-Level Dialogue in March, the United States and Colombia agreed to expand counternarcotics cooperation to reduce the alarming growth of Colombia's cocaine production and coca cultivation to 50 percent of current levels by 2023.

Because our mutual security and prosperity are connected, we continue to work together to counter the illicit activity and poverty that drive illegal immigration to the United States. As Vice President Pence said during his visit to Brazil and Guatemala last month, it is of paramount importance that the citizens of our hemisphere have a chance to build a better life for themselves in the land of their birth. As such, the United States is renewing its commitment to address the root causes of Central American migration.

In the Caribbean, our Caribbean 2020 strategy guides our engagement, which focuses on security, prosperity, energy, diplomacy, education, and health.

Sustaining economic growth and ensuring security in the region requires strong democratic institutions that safeguard fundamental freedoms.

While most of the region enjoys democratic rule, Venezuela, Cuba, and Nicaragua continue to undermine the region's shared vision for effective democratic governance as enshrined in the Inter-American Democratic Charter.

The United States remains committed to standing with the people of Cuba, Nicaragua, and Venezuela in their struggle to achieve the liberty they deserve.

In Cuba, the regime continues its repressive hold on power and authoritarian rule despite the recent transition to President Diaz-Canel. President Trump's June 2017 Cuba policy emphasizes advancing human rights and democracy, and aims to ensure the benefits of U.S. engagement flow to the Cuban people rather than Cuba's military, security, or intelligence services. This policy amplifies efforts to support the Cuban people through the expansion of internet services, free enterprise, free association, free press, and lawful travel.

In Nicaragua, we condemn the violence and the excessive force used against demonstrators, resulting in at least 215 deaths and hundreds more wounded since protests began in mid-April.

We call on the Government of Nicaragua to end the government-sanctioned attacks and intimidation campaign against peaceful protesters, fully implement the recommendations of the independent Inter-American Commission on Human Rights, and act upon its findings to ensure accountability and justice for human rights abuses and violations. We urge Nicaragua's government to strengthen

democratic processes and institutions and to respect human rights and fundamental freedoms and support the proposal for early free and fair elections.

We support a broad-based dialogue to resolve the conflict, and urge the Nicaraguan government to negotiate in good faith to achieve a democratic future for all Nicaraguans. On June 7, the Department of State adopted visa restrictions on those responsible for human rights abuses or undermining democracy in Nicaragua, barring their entry into the United States. On July 5, the Treasury Department sanctioned three individuals pursuant to Executive Order 13818 as responsible for serious human rights abuses against the Nicaraguan people or significant corruption at their expense.

In Venezuela, the Maduro regime has completely undermined democracy. We join the nations of the world in standing with the Venezuelan people as they seek to return to the stable and prosperous democracy they deserve.

We were pleased to join with our partners to issue a Declaration on Venezuela at the Summit of the Americas. Despite calls at the Summit of Americas for a free and fair election, the May 20 elections in Venezuela were a sham. We joined the EU, the Lima Group, the Vatican and over 40 countries in condemning them.

At the June 4-5 OAS General Assembly, the United States and 18 other countries delivered a strong statement on Venezuela by passing a resolution that condemned the May 20 elections and denounced the rupture of democratic order they represent. The resolution set the procedural steps for Venezuela's expulsion from the OAS under the Inter-American Democratic Charter, as Vice President Pence had called for in May remarks to the OAS.

The OAS resolution also called on member states and OAS permanent observer states to implement economic and political measures to apply pressure on the Maduro regime until it restores Venezuela to genuine democracy and provides access for the international humanitarian aid that the Venezuelan people so desperately need.

President Trump has made it clear: the United States of America will not stand idly by as Venezuela crumbles. We are using the full range of diplomatic and economic tools to support the Venezuelan people's efforts to restore their democracy and return to prosperity.

We have sanctions in place designed to pressure those in the Maduro regime responsible for abuses, while limiting their ability to use our financial system to conceal their stolen wealth. We have imposed strict financial sanctions on more than 50 current or former Venezuelan government officials. We sanctioned the "Petro" cryptocurrency and announced additional sanctions to ensure that Venezuelan state assets are not further liquidated by the corrupt Maduro regime at the expense of the Venezuelan people.

We are also addressing the humanitarian component of the Venezuelan crisis by supporting the Venezuelans who are deprived, suffering, and increasingly forced to flee their homes,

Every day, some 5,000 Venezuelans flee the land of their birth, in the largest cross-border mass exodus in our hemisphere's history. The International Organization on Migration (IOM) estimates approximately 2.3 million Venezuelans fled to other countries in Latin America and the Caribbean over the past three years. An outflow of another 1.8 million is expected by the end of this year.

Vice President Pence announced nearly $16 million dollars of direct aid for the regional response to the Venezuela crisis at the Summit of the Americas. In May, Deputy Secretary Sullivan announced an additional $18.5 million in bilateral assistance for the Government of Colombia's efforts to address the influx of Venezuelans seeking safety. On June 26, during an official visit to Brazil, Vice President Pence announced $9.6 million in additional U.S. government humanitarian assistance for emergency response efforts related to the Venezuela regional crisis. Overall, the United States is providing nearly $31 million in humanitarian and development assistance to Venezuelans in the region. Despite this clear signal that the United States, in conjunction with the international community, is here to help, the Maduro regime continues to callously refuse to accept desperately needed humanitarian aid for its people.

We will continue to work with our regional partners to help restore democracy to Venezuela, Nicaragua, and Cuba, and to build a democratic, prosperous, and secure Western Hemisphere that enhances our national security and benefits our economy.

I look forward to your questions. Thank you.

Chairman ROYCE. Thank you, Ambassador. Ms. Lynch.

STATEMENT OF MS. SARAH-ANN LYNCH, SENIOR DEPUTY ASSISTANT ADMINISTRATOR, BUREAU FOR LATIN AMERICA AND THE CARIBBEAN, U.S. AGENCY FOR INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Ms. LYNCH. Thank you. Chairman Royce, Ranking Member Engel, and members of the committee, thank you for the invitation to testify today. I had the distinct pleasure of traveling with some of you recently while Administrator Green and I were in Peru at the Summit of the Americas in April, and thank you so much for your continued interest in our work in the region.

USAID's engagement in Latin America and the Caribbean advances U.S. national security and economic prosperity, demonstrates American generosity, and promotes a path to recipients' self-reliance and resilience. This is a region with considerable opportunities, but also critical challenges. USAID works to increase the security and prosperity of the hemisphere by addressing issues of poverty, insecurity and governance. For example, our work in Mexico and Central America responds to challenges that inhibit business development, empower criminals, and lead to out-migration. Recent high levels of illegal migration from Central America come largely as a result of poverty, instability, and weak governance, including high levels of corruption and impunity.

Therefore, USAID's programs focus on engaging young people before they turn to crime and violence, improving democratic governance, and addressing the economic conditions that drive people to make the perilous journey north.

In Mexico, we partnered with the government to strengthen national institutions, spread the rule of law, and promote the protection of human rights. And together with Mexico, we are working closely with the Northern Triangle governments to address those challenges to security and prosperity that we collectively face.

Two of our primary areas of focus in South America are Colombia and Peru. These countries are making enormous economic and social strides, but remain plagued by coca cultivation, which enriches transnational criminal organizations that threaten regional security. In Colombia, USAID is working in some of the most dangerous and hard to reach areas, which were cut off from state presence for decades during the conflict. Our efforts to reduce the power and influence of illegal-armed groups build a culture of legality, expand state presence in former conflict areas, and enable licit rural economic growth are seeing promising results.

Similarly in Peru, USAID assistance helps to reduce the flow of illicit drugs by providing farmers with alternatives to coca cultivation, and the results—the achievements are impressive.

As the third border to the United States, the Caribbean remains vital to American security and prosperity. I would like to thank Ranking Member Engel and Ms. Ros-Lehtinen for their continued interest and engagement on Caribbean topics, and especially for authoring H.R. 4939, which helps lead the U.S. strategy for engagement in the Caribbean.

Under the Caribbean Basin and Security Initiative, CBSI, we are working to improve citizen security and provide employment and

education opportunities to youth at risk of joining gangs and other transnational criminal organizations.

We are also working with countries across the Caribbean to increase resilience so that they are better able to withstand shocks, such as tropical storms and hurricanes. Maybe we need to focus for our work in the Caribbean where we are addressing poverty, promoting good governance, improving health, and advancing transparent and accountable government institutions. However, as this weekend's violence has demonstrated, Haiti's progress and stability continues to be fragile.

And unfortunately, Haiti is not the only place in the region where we have seen violence and instability recently. We are very concerned for the people of Nicaragua who are suffering a brutal crackdown at the hands of the Ortega government. USAID has given rapid assistance to the brave civil society groups, human rights organizations, independent media, and others involved in peaceful protest. And we remain flexible to respond to needs as they emerge. USAID also helps to maintain an operating space for those in Cuba who seek to preserve their basic freedoms of speech, religion, assembly and democratic voice. But one of our most pressing priorities in the region right now is the outflow of Venezuelans who are fleeing their country in record numbers in search of food, medicine and healthcare.

To help these families who have fled to neighboring countries, USAID has partnered with these countries to provide humanitarian and development assistance to meet the most urgent needs. And while humanitarian assistance will help with immediate needs, it will not and cannot address the root causes of Venezuela's instability. Only lasting political and economic reforms will provide sustainable solutions.

To help the Venezuelan people maintain their voice, USAID supports human rights, civil society, independent media, electoral oversight, and the elected national assembly.

In this discussion, I cannot overlook the rise in competing foreign engagement in the region. We recognize that some countries have different development models than ours, but we believe we offer the clear choice. For example, where other countries assistance models may further dependence, our development assistant promotes a country's own journey consistent with U.S. supported universal values and interests bolstering our partners' self-reliance and prosperity.

To accomplish our goals, we coordinate and leverage the work of the U.S. interagency, other donors, the private sector, faith-based communities, and nongovernmental organizations. In all of our work, we are committed to oversight and ensure that our programs are smart and impactful. We use a range of tools, such as monitoring surveys, evaluations, and assessments to understand the effects of our programs and help us capture changes at the community or other subnational levels. We know very well our responsibility to the American taxpayer, and we take our obligation very seriously.

Mr. Chairman, Ranking Member Engel, I want to thank you and the committee for the opportunity to give an overview of our work, and I welcome your questions. Thank you very much.

[The prepared statement of Ms. Lynch follows:]

"Advancing U.S. Interests in the Western Hemisphere"
Prepared Testimony of Sarah-Ann Lynch
Senior Deputy Assistant Administrator for Latin America and the Caribbean
United States Agency for International Development (USAID)
Before the House Foreign Affairs Committee
Wednesday, July 11, 2018

Chairman Royce, Ranking Member Engel, and members of the Committee, thank you for the invitation to testify today. I am grateful for the Committee's support for the United States Agency for International Development's work in Latin America and the Caribbean, and am pleased to have this opportunity to discuss this critical topic with you. USAID's work advances U.S. national security and economic prosperity, demonstrates American generosity, and promotes a path to recipient self-reliance and resilience.

USAID's engagement in Latin America and the Caribbean is a reflection of the region's proximity to and close ties to with the United States. Events in the region affect us here at home, whether those events include increased migration flows from Central America to our southwest border; the crises in Venezuela and Nicaragua; new governments taking power in Colombia and Mexico; a rise in competing foreign assistance in the region; or corruption and transnational criminal organizations that pose a threat to long-term security and prosperity. Our programs present the most at-risk citizens with legal alternatives to crime and violence, helping to disrupt the influence of criminal organizations and shut down illicit pathways to our borders. USAID works in coordination and cooperation with relevant USG agencies to ensure that our programs are not duplicative and leverages USG foreign policy and strategy in the region.

Responding to Crises and Promoting Democratic Values: Venezuela, Nicaragua, and Cuba
The outflow of Venezuelans is our most pressing priority in South America. To assist those who have fled to neighboring countries, and in partnership with host country governments, USAID has provided humanitarian and development assistance to meet the most urgent needs and help neighboring countries to respond.

However, while humanitarian assistance will help to alleviate the immediate needs of many Venezuelans, it will not—and cannot—address the root causes of Venezuela's instability; lasting political and economic reforms are the only sustainable solutions to the crisis. To help the Venezuelan people maintain their voice, USAID works to support human rights, civil society, independent media, electoral oversight, and the National Assembly in Venezuela. The people of Venezuela deserve a return to democracy and the rule of law, and a peaceful, hopeful future.

Our other urgent concern in the region is for the well-being of the people of Nicaragua, who are suffering a brutal crackdown at the hands of the Ortega government. The United States is the only remaining donor working on democracy, governance, and human rights in Nicaragua, and we are a crucial lifeline for civil society organizations, emerging leaders, and independent media. Since April 2018, thousands of students, members of civil society, and independent journalists have been illegally arrested and attacked, and more than 300 have been killed for exercising their right to peacefully protest government actions, corruption, lack of democracy, and violence.

USAID commends the bravery of students, journalists, human rights defenders, members of civil

society, religious leaders, and indigenous groups who have united their voices in a call for justice, rule of law, and a return to democratic order. From the beginning of the crisis, we have given rapid assistance to civil society groups, human rights organizations, independent media, and others involved in peaceful protest. Our assistance has included digital security for civil society and journalists to combat cyber attacks, grants that enable human rights and civil society organizations to provide legal support to victims, and funds that help journalists to keep the lines of communication open so that they can disseminate accurate information. We remain flexible to respond to needs as they emerge. The United States calls on the Ortega government to cease the repression of protesters immediately and heed the demands of the people of Nicaragua. As the State Department has said, the United States notes the widespread call among Nicaraguans for early elections and believes early elections represent a constructive way forward.

USAID also helps to maintain an operating space for those in Cuba who seek to preserve their basic freedoms of speech, religion, assembly, and democratic voice. Cubans are detained arbitrarily, harassed, beaten, and arrested for peacefully exercising their fundamental rights. USAID's programs in Cuba support human rights, the free flow of information, civil society strengthening, and humanitarian assistance in the form of food and medicine to political prisoners and their families, and other marginalized individuals and organizations. The programs offer a lifeline to improve activists' well-being and reduce their dependence on the state.

Addressing the Root Causes of Migration: The U.S. Strategy for Central America
Central America, particularly the Northern Triangle countries of El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras, is also a priority for the U.S. government in the hemisphere. Recent high levels of illegal migration are largely a result of poverty and a lack of opportunity, instability marked by crime and violence, and weak governance, including high levels of corruption and impunity. USAID is working with other USG departments and agencies, as well as the governments of the region, the private sector, and civil society to address the drivers of illegal migration. Our programs focus on engaging young people with workforce training and education before they turn to crime and violence, furthering democratic governance, and addressing the economic conditions that drive people to make the perilous journey north.

To reduce crime and violence, for instance, we focus on at-risk youth and support an integrated approach that combines our prevention efforts with law enforcement efforts by the Department of State in the areas with the highest rates of violence and migration. To increase prosperity, we are improving the business and investment climate, expanding access to markets and financial services, building a skilled workforce, and promoting education alternatives for at-risk youth. In support of good governance, we further accountability, enhance anti-corruption efforts, strengthen revenue generation, and improve the juvenile justice system.

Our work has seen results. Through agriculture programming in Honduras, USAID has increased incomes by more than 97 percent, lifting 29,000 households out of poverty. USAID has leveraged $51.6 million from the Government of Honduras to co-invest and expand this model of poverty reduction. And thanks to a concerted effort by USAID and the Department of State and leadership from the Government of Honduras, there was a 62 percent decrease in homicides between 2013 and 2015 in the Rivera Hernández neighborhood of San Pedro Sula, Honduras. We are heartened by the overall reduction in homicides in the region; homicides per 100,000

people in El Salvador dropped from more than 100 in 2015 to 81 in 2016 to 60 in 2017, and homicides in Honduras dropped from 59 in 2016 to 46 in 2017. This is important progress.

A Practical Imperative: Haiti
Recent violence in Haiti reminds us that its progress and stability continue to be fragile. USAID's programs address poverty, promote good governance, improve food security and nutrition, fight infectious disease, strengthen primary healthcare services, and advance transparent and accountable government institutions. A more prosperous, stable, and democratic Haiti is mutually beneficial, as it reduces illegal migration to the United States, lowers the humanitarian costs of recurring disasters and crises, reduces transnational crime, and improves a business climate that provides economic opportunities to American businesses. One example of steady progress being made in Haiti is in the agriculture sector, where we have introduced improved seeds, fertilizer, irrigation, and other technologies to more than 118,000 farmers. In the North, the continued development of the Caracol industrial park in which the U.S. Government has partnered with the IDB and the Government of Haiti, now employs more than 13,000 people, most of whom were unemployed prior to the park's opening.

Ensuring Continued Progress: Mexico, Colombia, and Peru
In Mexico, we partner with the government to strengthen national institutions, build rule of law capacity, and promote the protection of human rights. Our efforts include working with at-risk youth to prevent crime, improving access to justice and victims' services, strengthening civil society, and working with communities to make them more effective in combating crime and violence. These programs build upon progress made in the past several years, such as increased use of alternative dispute resolution from 15 to 30 percent in the 12 states where USAID works; the resolution of 1,387 cases resolved in 100 days, compared to a baseline of 319 days; and significantly reduced rates of recidivism among youth in conflict with the law. We look forward to continuing these efforts in collaboration with President-elect Lopez Obrador.

In Colombia, we are working to reduce the flow of illicit drugs and support Colombia's efforts to implement a sustainable and inclusive peace. USAID assistance helps to reduce the power and influence of illegal armed groups, build a culture of legality, expand state presence in former conflict areas, and improve the conditions necessary for licit rural economic growth, which is an important counterpart to U.S. eradication and interdiction programs. Our programs expand access to justice and human rights, strengthen the ability of local governments to provide basic public services, foster reconciliation among those affected by the conflict, build civil society capacity, and increase rural economic development. We have had an impact. For example, over the past 5 years (2012-2017), USAID's work in the four of the top coca producing regions of the country, has supported over 35,000 families and over 520 organizations, while leveraging over $265 million in public and private resources. We look forward to working with President-elect Duque on these efforts.

In Peru, USAID assistance helps to reduce the flow of illicit drugs into the United States by supporting the Peruvian government's efforts to combat the illicit drug trade through alternative development programs that support licit, economically viable alternatives to growing coca, complement security assistance, and help to sustain reductions in coca cultivation in targeted areas. We also work with communities affected by illegal gold mining - which is more lucrative

than coca production and attracts child labor, human trafficking, violence, and land grabs - by helping them to address social conflicts and rehabilitate affected land. Our work in Peru has seen results. For example, in FY 2017 alone, USAID helped more than 25,000 families transition to licit livelihoods on more than 49,000 hectares of crops, including cacao and coffee.

Cross-Cutting Challenges: Corruption and Transnational Criminal Organizations
Throughout the region, USAID is working to address the long-term challenges of corruption and the influence of transnational criminal organizations. Corruption undermines trust in government, makes it difficult for businesses to operate, threatens the rule of law, and drives people to the United States in search of a better life. Criminal organizations pose a threat to security as they use violence and intimidation to further their illegal activities.

USAID carries out anti-corruption projects in almost all of the countries in which we work in Latin America and the Caribbean. Our projects include work with local and national governments, civil society organizations, independent media, and faith-based organizations to further accountability, enhance transparency, strengthen revenue generation, and improve juvenile justice systems. We seek to help governments become more open, accountable, and responsive to their people's needs, build citizens' trust in local and national government institutions, and teach citizens their rights and responsibilities in democratic societies.

We also work to disrupt the influence and activities of transnational criminal organizations. In drug-producing areas of Colombia and Peru, we work with the governments to provide farmers with lucrative alternatives to growing coca and connecting them with national and international markets. Throughout the region, and particularly under the Caribbean Basin Security Initiative and Central America Regional Security Initiative, we work with youth at risk, especially those at risk of joining gangs and other transnational criminal organizations. Combined with our good governance work that establishes trust in government, these efforts help to bring people into the licit economy and give them a future free of crime, violence, and other illegal activity.

Supporting Greater Access and Inclusion: Energy and Commerce
Throughout the region, USAID has helped to ensure that more people have access to energy, which is crucial to the development of prosperous, secure societies. Our work in Central America has promoted stronger integration of the regional electric power grid, modernization of electricity supply, and improved energy quality to address an underreported drag on productivity and job creation. Projects with governments in Central America and the Caribbean have supported the enabling environment for development of a range of modern energy systems. These efforts are intended to broaden access, improve the quality, and lower the price of electricity to improve the business climate in the region. This supports more job creation, making it less appealing for local citizens to migrate out of the region to earn a livelihood.

The United States' commercial ties with Latin America and the Caribbean support jobs and benefit businesses both at home and in the region. However, inefficiencies such as high cost and time to trade goods across borders undermine regional competitiveness, increase costs for U.S. and local businesses, and hinder countries' ability to compete in the global market and create jobs. U.S. assistance supports customs and trade facilitation through improved infrastructure, training for trade-related government agencies and private sector stakeholders, and enhancing

information technology connectivity of border control agencies. U.S. assistance improved cargo management, contributing to a reduction in the average time to export goods from Guatemala by 40 percent and reduced transport and logistics costs by 30 percent from early 2016 to 2017.

Remaining the Partner of Choice: Addressing Competing Foreign Assistance in the Region
While USAID does not preclude collaboration with like-minded partners where it is in America's national interest, our main goal remains to improve security, prosperity, and good governance in the hemisphere that we share. Where other countries' assistance models may further dependence or unsustainable debt, the United States' model is one of partnership with the countries in which we work. Our development assistance promotes a country's own journey, consistent with U.S.-supported universal values and interests, bolstering our partners' self-reliance and prosperity.

Partnerships
To maximize taxpayer investments, guard against duplication, and ensure greater sustainability, USAID ensures that host-countries are invested in their own development. We coordinate and leverage the work of other donors, the private sector, faith-based organizations, universities, including many U.S. land grant institutions, and non-governmental organizations. We are forging agreements with Mexico, Chile, Brazil, and Colombia to tackle shared challenges in the region. We are also focused on private sector engagement, including with companies based in the United States, to catalyze economic growth, development, and trade in the region. In FY 2016, 57 U.S.-based private sector organizations were engaged in active partnerships in the region, including companies like Chevron, Starbucks, Johnson & Johnson, and CISCO.

Oversight and Data-Driven Decision Making
USAID uses a range of tools, such as monitoring, surveys, evaluations, and assessments, to ensure that our programs are a smart and impactful use of taxpayer funds. We monitor the effects of our programs to help us capture changes at the community or other sub-national levels. We compare these indicators to national or regional averages to help us understand the larger context in which we are working. On average, USAID conducts approximately 20 performance and impact evaluations in Latin America and the Caribbean each year.

Conclusion
USAID's work in Latin America and the Caribbean prioritizes the challenges that most directly affect the United States. We are addressing situations in Venezuela and Nicaragua while confronting the long-term challenges of corruption and the influence of transnational criminal organizations. We will continue to work on the prosperity, security, and good governance programs that encourage people to build better societies for their families and home communities. We thank this Committee for its interest in and support for our work, and look forward to collaborating with you to address the challenges and opportunities in the region.

Chairman ROYCE. If I could begin with this question, we have got 26 U.S. diplomats and their family members who have suffered symptoms similar to brain injury or concussion following sonic attacks in Cuba. We have another three officials now in China who have suffered similar symptoms. In response to the attacks, the State Department ordered the departure of nonessential personnel and their families in Havana. Sixty percent of the U.S. mission diplomats in Cuba have been withdrawn. Other than the Canadian mission in Havana where the Canadians report 10 of their diplomats were targeted, have any other Embassies been affected, to your knowledge?

Ambassador MERTEN. Not to my knowledge, Mr. Chairman. This is something which is very worrisome to us, but we are not aware of any other Embassies at this point.

Chairman ROYCE. What is the health condition of the U.S. diplomats and the family members affected by these unexplained attacks at this point?

Ambassador MERTEN. Well, I think you covered it very well in your opening remarks. The health effects differ from person to person. Some are more serious on some individuals. On some individuals, they are less serious. But the bottom line is the impact of these attacks on folks is serious, which is why they were withdrawn, and we have gone down to a skeleton crew at the Embassy there.

Chairman ROYCE. And the last question I would ask you on this is how close is the administration to understanding and identifying the source and cause of these attacks?

Ambassador MERTEN. Well, we have taken this, as I mentioned, very seriously, both in the Cuba context and in the China context, which is, frankly, still very much evolving. Bottom line answer is, we don't know who is responsible, and we don't know what is responsible for this. We have various investigations ongoing. The FBI is involved. The CDC is involved in looking at this. We have employees who are being looked at by outside medical care. But we are still unsure exactly what it is these people have been afflicted with.

Chairman ROYCE. Let me go to a question about the crisis in Venezuela, which is worsening. While President Maduro further cemented his power with sham elections this past May, we have seen the situation on the streets there and especially the widespread food and medicine shortages that continue to displace Venezuelans that create a regional crisis, refugee crisis, as well as a humanitarian crisis, obviously. And meanwhile, despite sitting on the world's largest oil reserves. Venezuelan oil production has fallen by half in the last few years. Venezuela, in the meantime, has been sending several hundred thousand barrels of oil every day to China as repayment on the tens of billions of dollars it has borrowed, and more recently, China's development bank announced a new quarter billion dollar investment to shore up Venezuela's struggling oil production.

Is the administration concerned about China's economic stranglehold on Venezuela? And is China using Venezuela's as a foothold to gain influence in the rest of the region?

Ambassador MERTEN. Thanks for the question, Mr. Chairman.

It is not clear that China is necessarily using Venezuela as a foothold. Our information indicates that the Venezuelan economy still continues to crater, if you will excuse my using that term. Oil production continues to go down. The national oil company, PDVSA, has been plagued by mismanagement, by political hacks replacing people who knew what they were doing, and the company continues to deteriorate, and thus, robbing the Venezuelan people and the Venezuelan Government of what should be a very valuable source of income for them.

We are, obviously, watching very carefully what China does throughout the hemisphere. You know, and we monitor that very carefully. We are concerned about the role they play. We believe we are a much better partner for all our friends in the hemisphere. We share values. We share goals. And it is not clear to us that the Chinese government or entities operating overseas share the same goals as our friends in the hemisphere.

Chairman ROYCE. Well, let me ask a question of Ms. Lynch in terms of the greatest health concerns that are caused by the crisis in Venezuela and by the refugee crisis, and what is being done, for example, to ensure vaccinations and other medicines are made available, because there is widespread shortage throughout Venezuela right now on the vaccinations.

Ms. LYNCH. Right. Thank you for the question. Yes, we are also deeply disturbed by all the images and the news reports coming out of Venezuela. As such, we have been able to identify, as the Ambassador said, several millions of dollars of assistance that is going to the almost 2 million Venezuelans that have fled that country in search of very basic needs like food, medicine, and healthcare. And Colombia, obviously, is taking the brunt of the movement of people. I myself was up on the border not too long ago in Cucuta and witnessed firsthand the Venezuelans crossing the Simon Bolivar Bridge, and it is very disturbing. The bulk of our assistance to the Colombians is in those areas, food, medicine, and healthcare, but also to help them manage the crossing of the great number of people.

We are also assisting Brazil in the region. And in addition, we were able to get an assessment team, USAID assessment team, into Venezuela in order to get the contacts on the ground and do a full assessment, and this was a team that spent nearly 2 weeks there, did not just stay in Caracas, but they went throughout the country and they visited schools, they visited clinics, they talked to NGOs, they talked to the private sector, church they talked to as well as organizations, civil society organizations that could provide humanitarian assistance at scale.

One issue that we found is that they lack capacity. So what USAID is doing to respond right now is training these organizations to be able to provide humanitarian assistance at scale. So to deal with the logistics involved in that kind of effort and to identify the truly at-risk people. So with that, we will be able to address the concerns that you mentioned.

Chairman ROYCE. Thank you. Mr. Engel?

Mr. ENGEL. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. Nothing can quite make people understand the horrors that are occurring in our own coun-

try as a consequence of the President's family separation policy than hearing the individual stories of Central American children.

So I would like to briefly talk about Jose, Olivia, and their sons, Mateo and Andre, who came to the U.S. from El Salvador seeking refuge from gang violence and extortion. A close friend was killed by the same gang threatening Jose and Olivia when he was unable to pay them. So fearing for their lives and the lives of their children, Jose and Olivia joined a caravan of asylum seekers and traveled for a month through Mexico to reach the border.

Upon arrival, they presented their papers and the children's birth certificates, proving their familial relationship to avoid agents' suspicion that Jose was a smuggler paired with children that were not his. Regardless, U.S. authorities separated the family and sent Mateo, only 1 year old at the time, to a facility 1,500 miles away.

Olivia and Andre awaited news of Mateo's status from a migrant shelter in Mexico. When Olivia called the facility where Mateo was being held, she was told he is doing fine with no further information on his well-being, and certainly, they wouldn't allow her to speak with her son. She was reunited with Mateo finally after 85 days. According to her testimony, she said that after reuniting with her toddler, "He continued to cry when we got home and he would hold to know my leg and would not let me go. When I took off his clothes he was full of dirt and lice. It seemed like they had not bathed him in the 85 days he was away from us." And that is a quote. Obviously, this is child abuse. It is unconscionable and should not have happened.

So I recently introduced the Central America Family Protection and Reunification Act with Representatives Torres and Espaillat, who are both members of this committee. And this would require the State Department, through our Embassies in El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras, to play a much more active role in supporting Central American governments and parents on family reunification.

Ambassador Merten, let me ask you: Can you please tell us what our Embassies in these countries are doing to support family reunification, if anything?

Ambassador MERTEN. Thanks for the question, Representative Engel. What we are doing in Central America, we have a Central America strategy which seeks to get at the root causes of migration, to hopefully give people less of a reason to want to leave their country in the first place. And our efforts have been really focused on implementing that strategy, particularly in the Northern Triangle.

We are looking at using tools to eliminate corruption that allow a climate of impunity for those who seek to abuse people. We are supporting law enforcement activities through our partners in the region. We are working to help them improve their judicial systems so that criminals can be put away in a clear and transparent way according to local laws.

We are working to help these countries grow their economies, and we believe that addressing these issues will really obviate the need for these kind of—that drive people to want to leave their countries and force them into situations like you just described.

Mr. ENGEL. But are Embassies specifically—are Embassies helping to reunite families? Are Embassies playing any role in that in the reunification?

Ambassador MERTEN. At the risk of misleading you, I would rather take that question back and get back with an answer to you. I don't want to give you an answer which is incorrect.

Mr. ENGEL. Thank you, because that is what our bill, our legislation does. It involves the Embassies, which makes sense to me, because anything we can do to help expedite this would be good.

Ms. Lynch, our legislation also requires the State Department strategy to address pervasive gender-based violence in the Northern Triangle. Can you please describe the impact of gender-based violence, and specifically, domestic violence on women in El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras?

Ms. LYNCH. Thank you for the question. Yes, all of our activities in the Northern Triangle are based at focusing on the root causes of illegal migration. And certainly, we work on the security front, as well as governance and prosperity. So this would fall into that security front and governance as well, whereby we just find the gender-based violence. The rates that you see in the Northern Triangle are just horrific. So what we do is we incorporate women as well as other marginalized communities that suffer as well at higher rates than others—violence. We incorporate them into all of our programming, and that means on the governance front, making sure there is legislation that addresses these issues; on the citizens front, making sure that there is citizen awareness and that there is the capacity of certain civil society organizations to address those issues. And in addition, prosperity, economic opportunity, is really what gives these women power and control over their lives, so specifically with all of our programming that involves increased jobs and economic growth, we involve women and marginalized communities to the fullest extent.

Mr. ENGEL. Well, thank you. Let me just say that given the pervasiveness of domestic violence in the Northern Triangle and the low rates of prosecution for these horrific crimes, it is really horrifying that Attorney General Sessions says he will no longer allow these crimes to be grounds for asylum. I think that is just a very bad thing.

And finally, let me piggyback on—the chairman has talked a lot about Cuba and our Embassy officials being targeted. One of the things that I have called for is to have the CDC—to involve the CDC, and why has the administration, referring to the health—well, let me just say this, why has the CDC not yet been deployed to Cuba? It certainly seems to me that we should, if we are really going to get to the bottom of it, and I just don't understand why that hasn't happened. Does anyone have any insight into that for me?

Ambassador MERTEN. Thanks very much, yes. One of the things that we have done in the past month or so is Secretary Pompeo has asked that Deputy Secretary Sullivan chair a task force to look at these incidents, both in China and the attacks in Cuba, and this task force is chaired by the Deputy Secretary; he participates in it; I participate in it representing the Bureau of Western Hemisphere Affairs.

We also have, once a week, a meeting of the task force with the interagency community, and in that community, CDC is present, and they are an active member of that community, of the interagency community that participates in this task force. I don't know if they have plans to travel yet, but I think their involvement in this is relatively recent, but I think there is a possibility that they could become more involved. I am not—it wouldn't be appropriate for me to really explain what their plans are to do, but they are participating now in this interagency task force.

So as I said, we remain very concerned about this, and I think we are looking for any tools we can find to really get to the bottom of what is causing this.

Mr. ENGEL. Thank you. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Chairman ROYCE. Yes, and Mr. Engel and I are going to be meeting with Deputy Secretary Sullivan this afternoon at 4 o'clock, so we will raise that issue, Ambassador, with him as well at that time.

We will go now to Ileana Ros-Lehtinen.

Ms. ROS-LEHTINEN. Thank you so much, Chairman Royce. Thank you, Ranking Member Engel, for, once again, holding a hearing on a very timely and important topic. Since widespread protests began on April 18 in Nicaragua, we have seen over 300 people killed under the direction of Daniel Ortega and his henchmen, and Venezuela's Nicolas Maduro continues to rule with impunity ignoring the pleas of the Venezuelan people for new leadership. In my native homeland of Cuba, Raul Castro continues to call the shots as head of the Communist Party, all the while hiding behind the veil of the so-called transition of power. Under Diaz-Canel, nada has changed for the people of Cuba. Activists are still being held for days at a time. Las Damas de Blanco are still being beaten and arrested, and the regime continues to rule with an iron fist.

More worrisome, Mr. Chairman, is that cooperation between these rogue regimes has actually increased. Just last week, there were reports indicating that Maduro has sent a shipment of weapons to Ortega to help him further suppress and silence the Nicaraguan people. Instead of using the country's resources to alleviate the Venezuelan people suffering, suffering he caused for his failed policies, he sends weapons to his cronies making him complicit in the deaths of so many in Nicaragua.

But this U.S. administration has shown a willingness to lead and hold those abusers accountable in stark contrast to the previous administration, and I thank our witnesses here for explaining all that has happened. We have seen a reversal of the disastrous Cuba policy. We have seen a more active use of sanctions, particularly the global Magnitsky sanctions in Nicaragua and targeted sanctions against the Maduro regime in Venezuela.

On two occasions, I have read letters urging sanctions on several Nicaraguan regime officials for their roles in the human rights abuses being perpetrated against the people of Nicaragua. The administration has included most of these individuals on the global Magnitsky list, but I intend on sending another letter shortly with more names. And the administration has begun to provide assistance to Venezuelans who have fled to neighboring countries and has signaled that it will make freedom and democracy in the region

a priority, but more must be done. And you had explained, Ms. Lynch, about what the administration, and specifically, USAID, has been doing to support the Venezuelan refugees who are in Colombia and Brazil.

I wanted to ask you about Ecuador, what help is being given to the Venezuelans there that Vice-President Pence was just there. So what more can be done? And secondly, I worry about China's growing presence and influence in the entire region using its resources to bully nations to further isolate our strong ally, Taiwan, and what is the administration's strategy then to counter Chinese aggression to help Taiwan strengthen its relationship with its partners in the region. Thanks again, Mr. Chairman.

Ms. LYNCH. Thank you, ma'am. Yes, some small scale assistance was requested from Ecuador from the U.S. interagency, and that is being provided. And we stand ready to assist other nations if they are interested in additional assistance. We know this is a horrific regional problem that may impact other nations in the region, other strong partners of ours.

Regarding our perspective on the development side on China, for example, what from AID's vantage point, we believe that our work in building strong institutions in the region, as well as promoting strong economic investments, particularly from the U.S., are good antidotes to the influence of nations that have a different development model than we do.

You know, some of these other donors, as I mentioned in my opening are more—their development model is one more of dependence rather than one of partnership. Ours is of partnership where we look to work with partners who are self-reliant eventually.

Ms. ROS-LEHTINEN. Thank you.

Ms. LYNCH. And we look forward to working with you in that area.

Ms. ROS-LEHTINEN. Thank you, Ms. Lynch. Mr. Ambassador?

Ambassador MERTEN. Just to talk briefly about the influence of China in the hemisphere again, yes, it is something, as I mentioned earlier, that we are concerned about and watching very carefully. We regularly talk to our partners in the region, I have done so myself, to explain what it really means to sign up with—to some of the blandishments of the PRC in terms of loans and other things. These are things that we have seen in the recent past that don't necessarily help these countries out in the long term. They may be quick political fixes, but I think we are trying to explain, in very clear terms, that it makes more sense for long-term development of all our partners in the region to focus on rules-based and normal economic development.

Our assistance programs in the region seek to support rule of law and governance, and to make these countries better places to live, better places to do business, and thus, ultimately reduce migration. But it is an issue that we continue to work very diligently on and are paying close attention to.

Ms. ROS-LEHTINEN. Thank you very much. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Chairman ROYCE. Thank you, Ileana. We go to Brad Sherman of California.

Mr. SHERMAN. Mr. Chairman, we have a knowledgeable witness here, but he is the, as I understand it, Acting Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary. We used to have under secretaries and assistant secretaries come here. They may not have been more knowledgeable, but they were higher ranking in the State Department. The administration took over a year to appoint an Assistant Secretary for the Western Hemisphere, and a Republican Senate still hasn't acted to confirm. The administration is hollowing out the State Department, and I think we as a practice should be compelling the testimony of those at the National Security Adviser's Office and Council if you are going to hollow out the State Department that if we are going to oversee foreign policy, we have to have those witnesses.

I had a chance to visit the kids who are separated by the United States at the border. I want to commend the State Department for its 2018 Trafficking in Persons Report, which identified and condemned foreign governments for separating children from their families, and relate the story of one particular family. Jose and his son, Brian, arrived in California from Honduras, my State, in May. Brian's mother had been raped and brutally murdered. She was 7 months pregnant at the time. Jose and Brian thought that they might face a similar outcome.

Jose was jailed for 20 days and asked to sign papers he couldn't understand because they were in English and deported back to Honduras. This after Brian, the son, had been separated from his father. There are news reports that say that this whole process at least began—it seems now they are walking it back—as an effort to deter immigration from Central America. Has there been any effort at the State Department to try to tell people in Central America, "Don't come to the United States, we will treat you harshly, separate families, deport you," et cetera? Ambassador?

Ambassador MERTEN. Thanks for the question. What we do tell people is to not make a journey that is dangerous or illegal. We always encouraged legal orderly migration of people, legal and orderly travel of people, so that is what we have been focusing on.

Mr. SHERMAN. Okay. I want to move on to one other issue, Ecuador. Julian Assange is in their Embassy in London. He is wanted by law enforcement authorities in both Britain and Sweden. One thing we know about Julian Assange is that he did collude with Russia to use cyber files stolen from the Democratic National Committee to affect the U.S. election. And in 1972, when files were stolen from the Democratic National Committee, Members of Congress from both parties condemned that action. We haven't put any pressure on Ecuador to turn out Mr. Assange, and I understood that to be because we had such respect for Ecuador's sovereignty. And then I find out in The New York Times that we threatened Ecuador with punishing trade measures and a withdrawal of critical military aid if they wouldn't withdraw their support for a World Health Organization resolution encouraging breastfeeding.

Ambassador, can you, on the record, indicate that you know that these reports in The New York Times were false, and that we did not threaten Ecuador on this issue?

Ambassador MERTEN. My understanding from our Ambassador and from my colleagues in the State Department Bureau of West-

ern Hemisphere Affairs that work on this issue, on a regular basis, is that we did not threaten anybody, that the U.S. supports breastfeeding.

Mr. SHERMAN. But we don't support efforts at breastfeeding beyond what the companies that make billions of dollars on the formula industry by discouraging breastfeeding want us to do. We support only mild resolutions, and we force the World Health Organization to back down and adopt a milder resolution. But you are certain now that Ecuador can introduce the stronger resolution, and there will be no diminution of trade or aid. Can Ecuador count on you for that?

Ambassador MERTEN. I can tell you what has happened thus far in my understanding——

Mr. SHERMAN. What is our policy? Is it our policy to threaten Ecuador on this issue or to allow them to go forward?

Ambassador MERTEN. My understanding is that there has been no threatening, and I do not believe that we——

Mr. SHERMAN. So they are free to go forward, you can guarantee it?

Ambassador MERTEN. I am not here to guarantee that going forward.

Mr. SHERMAN. So maybe they will be threatened, maybe they won't, they either have to——

Ambassador MERTEN. They are not going to be threatened, sir, but I will say that this is——

Mr. SHERMAN. They are not going to be threatened?

Ambassador MERTEN. This is a policy that we don't actually own——

Mr. SHERMAN. So The New York Times reports are false?

Ambassador MERTEN. As I understand from our Ambassador and from the folks that work on this in our bureau, that nobody was threatened. We have not threatened to pull trade sanctions or anything else on Ecuador. That is my understanding, sir.

Mr. SHERMAN. Well, a lot of infants are going to get worse nutrition as a result of the successful efforts by the United States at the World Health Organization to water down this resolution, and I yield back.

Chairman ROYCE. Chris Smith of New Jersey.

Mr. SMITH. Thank you, and thank you for your testimony to our two witnesses. On April 27, I chaired a hearing on serious and credible allegations of collusion between CICIG and the Russian Government in the persecution, mistreatment, and incarceration of a Russian family, the Bitkovs, who fled Russia after Putin's cronies threatened their lives, took away their business, and, of course, the young daughter was raped, Anastasia, who obviously is still dealing with the aftermath of that.

Our prime witness was Bill Browder, the main man, whose tenacity, courage, and credibility led to at least an accountability of what happened to Sergei Magnitsky. It is because of Bill Browder that we have the Magnitsky Act. It is because of Bill Browder that we have the Global Magnitsky Act, so when he speaks, everybody should listen and should listen very carefully, and I share his concerns about the Bitkovs.

Let me just say to my colleagues: In 2013, the Bitkovs fled and finally got to Guatemala under an assumed name. They used documents that were not true, but again, for having documents that weren't true—and they are true refugees. The Palermo Protocol says you don't prosecute when somebody is fleeing tyranny and has a well-founded fear of persecution. Igor got 19 years in prison. Irina got 14 years. And Anastasia, 14. Igor spent 3 years in pretrial detention, jail, in a very, very unseemly pattern that CICIG is a part of.

Now my question to our distinguished colleagues today is, one, have you investigated, and has there ever been, is there now any collusion whatsoever between VTB, Gazprombank, Sberbank, or any other person associated with the Russian Government and CICIG, including Ivan Velasquez on any matter relating to the prosecution and incarceration of the Bitkovs?

Second, can you tell us what kind of information do you have? Is there any accountability? I have asked the Secretary General of the United Nations, Antonio Guterres, why aren't you looking into this? He says they have no authority to do so. He told me that just a few weeks ago when I met with him.

I am asking today, and I will do it by way of letter, that the Inspector General investigate the potential of collusion. My hope is that in an answer to my question, you will say that you have thoroughly investigated this, and you either found it or you didn't, or to some degree, there is some collusion. Those are my opening questions, and I do have some further ones, but if you can answer that.

Ambassador MERTEN. Thanks for the question. This is an issue that we follow closely. Our Embassy and the Department have looked into these allegations of collusion. Thus far, have found no evidence that that has occurred.

Mr. SMITH. Could you give us details of what that investigation included? I mean, was it done just asking Mr. Velasquez and a few others, "Hey, is there collusion?" Or did you really dig into documents and look into this? I call your attention to this, and we will give you a copy, an excellent piece that was put together by Mr. Bill Browder—this just reeks of collusion, so I would like to know exactly what that investigation entailed.

Ambassador MERTEN. Sure. I look forward to receiving that document, and I think if you allow us to get back to you with exactly what has been done, I think that would be a more effective way of answering your question.

Mr. SMITH. Is there any mechanism for holding CICIG to account? I mean, there is a hold on their $6 million now that has finally gotten their attention. Two days before I had my hearing, the constitutional court found in their favor. Again, we are talking about 19 years, 14 years, 14 years. People don't get that many years for murder in Guatemala, and CICIG then appealed that ruling and now there is going to be another prosecution of, at least Igor, which is absurd.

I mean, if I was doing that with my family, and I would say the same to you: Wouldn't you use every means possible to get out of a country that is going after you, hurting your daughter, putting you into prison and maybe even killing you? We have learned that

from Sergei Magnitsky, I thought, and many others. We called our hearing the Long Arm of the Russians. Let me ask you again, is there any kind of connection between CICIG and the Russians?

Ambassador MERTEN. Again, thus far in our investigations we have found no collusion between them.

Mr. SMITH. And no contact, no cooperation?

Ambassador MERTEN. The information I have been given we have not received that—we have not seen that. So that is——

Mr. SMITH. Maybe the IG will be able to ferret out that information. Let me ask you about the Guatemalans who are held in pretrial. There is a dual national from Jersey City, Anthony Segura, 3 years in pretrial detention. I know, and I have been in Congress 38 years, Mr. Chairman, and I have been to places like Bolivia where they use prosecution as way of getting political retribution, and certainly, Evo Morales does it better than anybody else on earth. What is your view about these pretrial detentions that go on for years with CICIG's full complicity in that?

Ambassador MERTEN. Well, pretrial detention is a problem in a number of countries throughout the hemisphere. It is something that we work at in our rule of law programs to get countries to establish mechanisms to reduce or eliminate pretrial detention. I think our work in that area is certainly ongoing. So obviously, it is not a situation we like. We are working in a number of countries to help address that.

Mr. SMITH. Let me just ask you, finally, because my time is running out, Mary Anastasia O'Grady from The Wall Street Journal in her piece, and I invite members to read it, "Guatemala, Russia and the Bitkovs, The family remains in jeopardy thanks to a U.S.-funded rogue U.N. agency." She points out immediately after the high court decision, CICIG apologists launched a full scale press on Capitol Hill to cover up the U.N. agencies' many transgressions. How do you respond to that?

Ambassador MERTEN. I am not aware of any such cover-up. If you would like to ask, we can get you more details on what we know on that. I am not aware of that, sir.

Mr. SMITH. So there is no cover-up?

Ambassador MERTEN. I am not aware of a cover-up, sir.

Mr. SMITH. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Chairman ROYCE. Thank you. We share the concerns of Mr. Smith. This committee will continue to work with the Senate, the State Department, the U.S., U.N. on reforms that will preserve the essential functions of CICIG while responding to legitimate criticisms of overreach. All right. We go now to Albio Sires of New Jersey.

Mr. SIRES. Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman, for hosting this full committee hearing on the Western Hemisphere, and I want to thank our panel that is here today. Thank you very much.

I have this issue over the last few years that I have been on the Western Hemisphere Subcommittee that we just don't focus enough on the Western Hemisphere and the Caribbean. I think that while we sleep, there are people out there plotting, and basically I am talking about China, I am talking about Russia, I am talking even about Iran, who is now started with a couple schools now they have over 100 schools throughout the area. And the signs are there. I

mean, even in Venezuela, you have 30,000 Cubans basically running the show there, and Cuba, they started with the national assembly, which basically destroy all sorts of democracy or anything that was there. And then you have, in Venezuela, you have the constituent assembly, which is basically the same thing destroying any signs of democracy. And then you go to Nicaragua, you have the Russians selling them $80 million worth of tanks, and they are asking the people of Nicaragua to contribute more to the Social Security. I mean, the signs are there. And I don't know what we do is basically insult some of these people in Central America, which makes your job a lot harder when you want to talk about democracy and talk about investment. I mean, where do we go from here? We got a new President in Mexico. I don't know how we deal with the new President of Mexico after all the insults that we have laid on the Mexican people. And before we know it, all these people are going to be in our backyard, all these countries that are plotting as we sleep.

So, I am not all that bullish on this area. I see more and more democracies going down in the future. You have Venezuela, and you have Nicaragua. You have to a certain degree Ecuador, some of these other areas.

So where do you see democracy in the area? Can you tell me about that?

Ambassador MERTEN. Thanks for the question.

I think we see the hemisphere largely united behind, as I said in my opening remarks, the Inter-American Democratic Charter. We have been working the OAS. I think we have seen a pretty significant amount of support in the OAS to voice their opposition to undemocratic steps that are taken in countries like you have mentioned.

I think that we continue to do work to promote civil society, to engage with civil society, and to enable opposition parties to have a voice. We have supported those people in Nicaragua who are calling for early elections. We have acknowledged that. So I think we are still working very diligently on this.

But these are countries that, as several members have already noted, are not necessarily going to be—they are not squeamish about using repression as a way to stay in power.

Mr. SIRES. I look at Nicaragua. We have a bill, Ileana Ros-Lehtinen and I, the NICA bill. Basically, it doesn't allow them to take loans from international finance institutions.

Why should we allow them to have loans from financial institutions when they go and spend $80 billion on Russian tanks to oppress their people? And yet some people here don't like to support something like that.

I think we have to bring some sort of pressure on these governments to realize you just can't run over people and just expect us, the United States, to not do anything, especially when it is our Western Hemisphere and our Caribbean. We really have to focus more on those areas.

Ambassador MERTEN. Well, as you know, we have applied individual sanctions on members of the regime in Venezuela. We have applied the Global Magnitsky Act to three people in Nicaragua. We have, as I understand it, revoked 21 visas from government offi-

cials or officials who were responsible for these types of things. I think, you know, there is a possibility we could look at more of those kinds of tools as well.

Mr. SIRES. Okay.

Thank you, Chairman.

Chairman ROYCE. Mr. Dana Rohrabacher of California.

Mr. ROHRABACHER. Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman.

Let me just note from the some of the comments we have had so far that this condemnation of our President for the policies that we now have in terms of people who are coming to our country illegally and separation of families, let us just note that that policy was in place and put in place during the Obama administration. And I consider that singling out our President today is very political, because I didn't hear any of the complaints coming from that side of the aisle during the Obama administration when the policies were exactly the same.

With that said, I have somewhat of a disagreement over the idea of using the word "migration." Maybe you could tell me, what is the population of Latin America?

Ambassador MERTEN. I don't know off the top of my head, sir.

Mr. ROHRABACHER. Do you know what the population of Latin America is?

Ms. LYNCH. We can get that for the record.

Mr. ROHRABACHER. Okay. Well, I think these are fundamentals that people need to know when they are talking about migration. We are not talking about 10 million people. We are not talking about 50 million people. We are talking about hundreds of millions of people, are we not?

And when you have societies like we see in Latin America—and elsewhere in the world, I might add, but now we are focused on Latin America—where you have millions and millions of people living in countries that are somewhat chaotic and very clearly repressive—and let me identify myself with the remarks of Ileana Ros-Lehtinen and her concerns about Nicaragua and Venezuela, but those same types of repression can be found in other countries, Latin America as well.

We do not have a policy—or do you believe that we should have a policy in labeling those people migrants, thus giving them some other definition rather than illegal entries or illegal immigrants into our country? You think that that should be open to hundreds of millions of people when they end up suffering under their own government?

Ambassador MERTEN. Well, sir, our policy with Central America is to address the root causes that drive people out of——

Mr. ROHRABACHER. I understand that. That is not my question. Because I understand—that is a good point. I voted for NAFTA for that reason, because I felt making sure Mexico had a very good economy would take the pressure off of people coming here illegally.

Okay, let me ask you this: How many people are permitted to legally immigrate from those countries into the United States every year?

Ambassador MERTEN. Sir, I don't have those figures. That is a DHS, Department of Homeland Security, function.

Mr. ROHRABACHER. Okay. So already we have, however—you can correct me if I am wrong. I am assuming we are talking about millions of people over a 10-year period coming from that area legally into our country. Over a 10-year period, we permit more legal immigration into our country than all the rest of the countries of the world combined.

But what I am worried about, after hearing your testimony today and the use of the word "migration," is that that in some way gives credence that the United States has to accept millions of more people into our country over and above the million that we allow in already legally, which, as I say, is more than the rest of the world combined.

Now, is there a limit that you think that we should have on people who are—you call it migration. Is there a limit on migration into our country?

Ambassador MERTEN. My understanding—again, this is not an area of expertise for me; this is really a Department of Homeland Security issue—is that there are rules established for this that the administration has established. There are rules for people, for example, who can apply for asylum——

Mr. ROHRABACHER. Okay. Well, let me just say I disagree with you totally. I think members of our State Department should be concerned about massive flows of people coming into our country illegally.

And I think the use of the word "migrant" in some way adds some kind of problem with us for not accepting migrants, as compared to people who have come here illegally, when we have a very robust legal immigration system. Our legal immigration, as I say, it is the best in the whole world. No one comes close to us on letting—and now we are supposed to feel guilty about not permitting a more massive flow? Which basically would change the nature of our society, as it has.

And let me just note, Daniel Ortega and these folks and the Nicaragua—when they were removed from power, there was a relatively free system established in those countries. And when they left, came back into power, Mr. Ortega, all of a sudden people began being murdered. And that is something—I am very proud that the Reagan administration did take the moves to make sure that Mr. Ortega and his communist dictatorship was removed and replaced by a democracy.

With that said, thank you very much for your service.

And I do not believe that the President—again, the criticism that the President is hollowing out the State Department is ridiculous. The fact is that if he was hollowing it out we would be complaining that he is putting his own people in. Well, when you have people with the expertise, like yourselves, who are still in position that the President hasn't replaced yet, that is not something people with an open mind should complain about.

Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman.

Chairman ROYCE. Thank you.

We will go to Karen Bass of California.

Ms. BASS. Once again, thank you, Mr. Chair and Ranking Member, for holding this hearing.

I wanted to talk about the situation in Central America and specifically would like to focus on El Salvador.

I was listening to your responses, Mr. Ambassador, about what we are doing to address the root causes, and it seemed as though your focus was a little bit on law enforcement. And we have spent a lot of time trying to address violence and crime-related issues with a strictly law enforcement strategy in the United States, and it hasn't fared very well, so I wanted to know what you have done beyond law enforcement.

And I focus on El Salvador because there is a lot of discussion about MS-13, Mara Salvatrucha, which is a gang that started in my city, Los Angeles, and we exported this problem to El Salvador. And so I want to know what responsibility we are taking for our contribution to the problem in El Salvador.

Ambassador MERTEN. Thanks for the question. And I think an element of this here should be fielded by my colleague from USAID.

Our Central America strategy, yes, it has a component of law enforcement to it, but it is also designed to address the root causes of why people are leaving these countries and—or why they seek to leave.

And this involves working with governments to improve the business climate, the investment climate, to create economic opportunity. My colleagues at USAID and at our economic sections in our Embassies are working to help these countries attract investment, attract and grow their economies so that people have less reason to have to leave.

Ms. BASS. Right, which is a catch-22, because it is hard to do that with the gang violence.

So I want to know, since we exported the problem to El Salvador, I was wondering if we also exported some of our best practices. We actually do have best practices, in the United States, of how to address gang violence. There are a lot of examples of gang violence being reduced in a number of communities. Unfortunately, we have not really taken a sustained investment in communities, which is why we still have the problem.

So my question is: Are we exporting also some of our best practices in how to reduce gang violence?

Ambassador MERTEN. Well, one of my colleagues from the Bureau of International Narcotics and Law Enforcement would be better equipped to answer that. We can take that back and get you an answer as to what specifically we are doing regarding gang violence in El Salvador, but——

Ms. BASS. Okay. That is great. I would appreciate that.

Let me move on to another subject, because, like all of my colleagues—and I am sure all of us in Congress are deeply concerned about these children. And I am concerned that many of these children will never be reunited with their parents again. And so there is a number of examples of parents who are deported and then not being able to find their children since we did this in such a haphazard way.

And my colleague over there, Mr. Rohrabacher, when the Obama administration had the problem of unaccompanied minors, which is

different than taking children away at the border, there was a big outcry about that and what was happening with those children.

But my question is, I have heard of numerous examples of, when the parents are deported, number one, if they are fortunate enough to find their children, then what we are saying is now you have to pay $1,500 to transport your child and a guardian to get your children back.

And so I want to know if, in the budget of USAID, the State Department, somewhere—it seems as though if we take the children away, then our government should be responsible for reuniting those families. So I am introducing legislation that makes our government responsible.

I am also very concerned that the children that are put in is time-limited. And so, if you languish in foster care for more than 18 months, parental rights can be terminated, which is why I am worried that some of these children may never find their parents again.

And so I want to know if, within the budget of USAID, you are considering setting money aside to help facilitate the reuniting of these children that we took away.

Ms. LYNCH. Great. Thank you.

All of our funding is dedicated to working in the countries of the Northern Triangle on this issue——

Ms. BASS. Right. So the question is, are we setting aside money so that we don't charge the parents? We took the children away, and now we are charging them to get their own children back.

You also mentioned, Mr. Ambassador, an information campaign to let people know not to come over here because we take their children. And I am wondering if that is a massive PR campaign on radio, on TV, social media, or are we just doing it one by one?

Ambassador MERTEN. I think what I said or certainly what I meant to say was that our public diplomacy in all countries is to encourage people to travel to the United States, whether that is as a tourist, as a student, or as a legal migrant, to come and travel, to use legal methods to do so. We——

Ms. BASS. Are we telling them that we are going to take their children?

Ambassador MERTEN. I don't believe we are telling them that.

Ms. BASS. Yeah.

Ambassador MERTEN. We are telling them that they need to avail themselves of legal routes of travel and legal routes—should they qualify as immigrants, that they should pursue legal ways to do that.

Ms. BASS. This is going to go down in our history as a real moment of shame.

Thank you. I yield back my time.

Chairman ROYCE. We go to Joe Wilson of South Carolina.

Mr. WILSON. And thank you, Mr. Chairman.

And, as I begin, I want to thank the statements of Congressman Albio Sires. His thoughtful observations are a fulfilment of the bipartisan promotion of democracy in the Western Hemisphere, which really reflects the bipartisanship—usually, not always, as we just saw—of this committee. So thank you very much for your service.

Sadly, American diplomats, in 2016, were subject to unexplained sonic attacks in Cuba. The Cuban dictatorship continues to deny knowledge or involvement in the attacks, but it is in a totalitarian regime with heavy static surveillance.

What is the status of the investigation? Have we been able to determine the cause and source of the attacks? When can Congress expect a thorough report on the cause of these attacks?

Ambassador MERTEN. Thanks for the question. As I mentioned earlier, this is something we find very troublesome at the State Department.

The Deputy Secretary chairs a task force which is made up of various elements of the State Department but also has an interagency component as well. We have ongoing FBI investigations. FBI has traveled on a number of occasions to Cuba to investigate the sites where this has happened. Our Diplomatic Security agents in the State Department are investigating. We have other elements who are participating now in this task force, like CDC and others, who are really examining all the data that we have thus far been able to bring together.

But, as of today, we still do not know what the cause of this is nor who is responsible.

Mr. WILSON. And I would tell you, with the technology we have today, Ambassador, this should be determined. And so I hope you will make every effort to proceed.

The next question: I am grateful to have been co-chair of the Partners of the Americas program with the nation of Colombia from South Carolina. And we have hosted students from Colombia to live with us. Two of my sons were in an exchange program to a high school in Colombia. What an extraordinary country it is.

I know that we are assisting Colombia in achieving lasting peace while also combating criminality and narcotics trafficking. The election of Ivan Duque gives the U.S. a reliable partner in combating cocaine production and a modified approach to the peace process.

What do you see USAID or the State Department doing to promote peace and security for the people of Colombia?

Ms. LYNCH. Yeah. USAID's program is focused very much on peace. And, in fact, we work predominantly in helping the Colombians and supporting their efforts to extend State presence in some of the areas that have not seen a government in sometimes decades. So we are actually working in over 50 of the hardest-hit communities in Colombia to help the Colombians provide the local institutions that can provide basic services to people as well as improve the environment to improve the rural economy.

Specifically, when we work jointly with State Department INL, they on eradication and us on alternative development, it works extremely well, where the coca crop is eradicated, and then we come in with opportunities and an enabling environment, again, to have solid economic opportunities, jobs for people in the licit economy.

Mr. WILSON. Well, again, thank you. And what an extraordinary nation of 40 million people in Colombia.

And then, sadly, another country that was dynamic, was democratic is Venezuela. And we now see the consequence of what Margaret Thatcher said, and that is that socialism will work until you

run out of spending other people's money. And so now they have converted one of the wealthiest countries, one of the most dynamic in South America into a destitute, poverty-stricken, authoritarian regime.

And so I am really grateful for the sanctions by the President. What more can be done to try to help the people of Venezuela?

Ambassador MERTEN. Well, as we talked earlier, we are, with colleagues at USAID and the State Department Bureau of Population, Refugees, and Migration, providing humanitarian assistance to those people who have been driven out of Venezuela. We have regular outreach at the Embassy with the opposition parties, encouraging them to get unified and form a unified opposition to the Maduro government. You know, we have applied targeted sanctions to government officials and to Venezuela.

And we are working with our partners in the region. We have pretty much, I would say, unprecedented support of other countries in the region who really share our concern at what they see is a rich and democratic country descending into abject poverty and to effective dictatorship.

Mr. WILSON. Well, thank you again. And working on behalf of the people of Venezuela, mutual benefit to the hemisphere. Thank you.

Chairman ROYCE. Mr. Bill Keating of Massachusetts.

Mr. KEATING. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

The President has made it very clear and the administration has made it clear, the threat of MS-13 and the gang violence that is present in countries like El Salvador. This has been echoed in Homeland Security, of which I am also a member, where the administration officials have clearly said how dangerous and violent it is there and what danger it represents.

So I am going to just address—a couple of the administration's responses to this simply don't make sense.

For instance, when it comes to the parents and their children fleeing this terrific violence in El Salvador, the President's response was to separate the children from their parents, traumatizing them, deporting them back to the crisis that they fled from.

One of these people, Jessica, had two sons taken from her when she crossed in Texas in March. They were separated for 3 whole months. Jessica fled the brutal violence of El Salvador. She and her sons received death threats from MS-13, and she herself was beaten in front of her children by gang members. Yet that is one response, is to separate the children.

The other one that just does not have any semblance of consistency is to move forward on ending the TPS program for those countries like El Salvador that have—those countries have hundreds of thousands of people here legally. And they are being sent back because it is safer now?

There is a definite contradiction with sending these people—many of them have been here for years legally to escape that violence—sending them back because now it is safer, yet at the same time the administration is saying what an enormous threat it now is becoming.

How can you reconcile such contradictions? These things simply don't make sense. They contradict each other, by their own definition.

Ambassador MERTEN. Thanks for the question.

As I mentioned earlier, what our goal at the State Department is, in our view, is that we need to help these countries address the root causes of these problems. In that analysis, the root causes are corruption, impunity, lack of economic opportunity for people, lack of effective judicial systems, lack of effective law enforcement.

Our Central America strategy, for which Congress was generous enough to give us $2.6 billion from 2015 to 2018, is working in all these areas in those countries——

Mr. KEATING. Okay. I apologize for interrupting, but where you are going is to the root causes. That is great. But there are present dangers. Well, we could deal with the root causes of MS-13, but the President and the administration, they are not talking about the root causes of MS-13; they are talking about the present danger. The same kind of timeline should be used when you are looking at the present danger of these people.

So I know what you are saying in terms of root causes, but you are avoiding the contradiction that is quite clear, that one, these two instances of the response to this kind of violence contradict the fact that the violence is there that they are escaping from. You can't have it both ways. So I want you to address not just the root cause but the present danger in that contradiction.

Ambassador MERTEN. Again, we work with the tools that we have, both in USAID and the State Department, and these are the tools that we have to address these issues. If you are talking about other issues such as TPS, that is a decision that is taken by the Department of Homeland Security. They have made that determination.

Mr. KEATING. Well, I just think there should be better coordination. And I sort of echo, actually, the gentleman from California who said those are issues for Homeland Security, sure; they are also issues for Foreign Affairs, and they are also issues for State.

Just quickly, I would like to echo the concerns in terms of the violence in Nicaragua as well. People like Father Jose Alberto Idiaquez has had his life threatened. He has been targeted because of his work through the Jesuits and through education. And I want to make sure people that have been targeted, that that be known to everyone.

With that, I would like to yield 40 seconds to my colleague from California, Mrs. Torres. Thank you.

Chairman ROYCE. We go to Mr. Ted Poe of Texas.

Mr. KEATING. No, no——

Mrs. TORRES. He yielded me 40 seconds that he had.

Chairman ROYCE. Oh, yeah, that is right. Somebody was going to give you extra time. Norma Torres of California.

Mrs. TORRES. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I have to be on the floor at 12 noon to present on a rule.

I want to thank the Department of State and specifically the White House in continuing to support CICIG in Guatemala specifically.

While I agree that we should demand fair treatment for all refugees in Guatemala and here in the U.S., too, I hope that we don't lose sight of the significant progress that CICIG has made, not just carrying out investigations but also helping to bring about important reforms and strengthening Guatemala's institutions. That progress is real, and turning back that progress, in my view, is a big mistake.

Ambassador Merten, I had nine questions—they were "yes" or "no" questions—for you regarding how the State Department—which I have accused in the past of head in the sand with the certification process in Honduras and now in Guatemala. Because of the lack of time that I have, I will submit them for the record, as well as a longer statement on CICIG.

I do hope that you will respond to me. The certification of Guatemala after the ongoing problems with the Congress trying to impugn themselves for their criminal behavior in stealing the purse of the people, to me, is something that we should be more careful about in how we go about. At the end of the day, us here in Congress have to be accountable, and we have to have a transparent process on how taxpayers' dollars are being spent.

And, with that, Mr. Chairman, I yield back.

Chairman ROYCE. Would the gentlelady yield?

Mrs. TORRES. Yes.

Chairman ROYCE. Because I would like to add a quick observation here as well. Because, as our witness stated today—and I think Ambassador Nikki Haley reinforced this during her trip to Guatemala in February—CICIG is providing critical assistance to advance justice, accountability, and stability in the region. That is not an easy task. It is bound to be controversial. But CICIG is successfully chipping away at the culture of corruption.

That said, there was an issue that was raised here by Mr. Smith. And, as we know, the consequence of that has been adjudicated through the courts there in Guatemala, and that family is freed.

This committee will continue to work, as I said, with the Senate, with the State Department, with the USUN on reforms that will preserve the essential functions of CICIG while responding to legitimate criticisms of overreach.

And, with that, I think, without objection, the gentlelady's questions are going to be submitted to our witnesses, and we will go to Ted Poe of Texas. Thank you.

Mr. POE. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Thank you all for being here.

As the chairman mentioned, I am from Texas. We have a very strong and longtime history with Mexico, back even to the days of the 1500s when Mexico and Texas were part of Spain, or at least Spain claimed the territory. I am a great believer in trading with Mexico. Ten thousand 18-wheelers a day cross back and forth on our southern border. Thousands of people from both countries cross the border.

And I think that the United States, as a Nation, needs to refocus our attention to our next-door neighbors. I mean, we are all over the world. There are 190-something countries, and we are in most of them. I am not saying that is a bad idea. I am saying that we

need to focus on our next-door neighbors—Mexico, Canada—and then, of course, all of Latin America.

I see, as many Members of Congress have pointed out, that things are not good in the hemisphere from Mexico south: Corruption, incompetence, violence, and humanitarian problems with the nations. And, as Mr. Sires pointed out, I think things are getting worse. I don't think they are getting better. I think they are getting worse.

So, I mean, that is my position. As some other Members pointed out, I am a believer in NAFTA. But let's talk about some of the issues specifically with Mexico. There are a lot of foreign workers in the United States from Mexico.

Going back to 2003, when Vicente Fox was President, he made this comment that was recorded in the San Diego Tribune: "Twenty million Mexicans in the United States generate a gross product that is slightly higher than the $600 billion generated by Mexicans in Mexico. Remittances are our biggest source of foreign income—bigger than oil, tourism, or foreign investment." That was in 2003.

Most recently, the Pew Research organization has listed how much remittances from the United States go to other countries—in other words, foreign nationals working in the U.S. sending money back home. No surprise, Mexico is the number-one country that receives remittances from their workers in the United States back to their country, $28.1 billion, according to the Pew Research organization.

Surprising to me—another issue—China is number two as far as remittances go.

So we are talking about $28.1 billion for Mexico. Total amount, $138 billion a year of remittances go back to foreign countries by their workers working in the United States. And my understanding is, today, remittances are the number-one source of revenue to Mexico except maybe for the sale of autos. So tourism and sale of oil is still behind remittances.

So we are sending a lot of money, economic development money, from the United States to Mexico and a lot of other countries. It is no surprise that the Mexican Government has long supported more people coming to the United States by any means so that remittances can go back to their nation.

So my question is—and this has been brought out by the administration as well. If we just think this through, if we can use the phrase "subsidize" these countries all over the world, shouldn't the United States charge a fee, 1 percent, for these transactions to occur—specifically, foreign workers in the U.S. sending money back to Mexico and any other country where those remittances go each year. So that part of that income generated in the United States stays in the United States, that the taxpayers don't have to pick up the difference of that $138 billion, with a small fee—1 percent, 2? It makes, to me, no difference.

My question is, what is your opinion of that, Ambassador?

And then I will ask Ms. Lynch what your opinion is.

Ambassador MERTEN. Well, I think that is an interesting thought. I don't think it is—I think that could be potentially a subject for legislation should you decide to go that route.

I will say, there are other countries in the hemisphere that do tax remittances as they come in. Haiti is an example of that in the case that I know of. Beyond that, I don't think I would choose to comment.

Mr. POE. Okay.

Ms. Lynch, have you got an opinion? I am about out of time—I am out of time.

Ms. LYNCH. I also think it is very interesting. I think we would have to do further analysis. I know sometimes remittances are something that we look at as a way that we reduce foreign assistance. But we would be happy to look into this and analyze it.

Mr. POE. All right. I think Congress ought to consider that strongly so we can keep some of that money in the United States. One hundred thirty eight billion dollars, that is a lot of money even for us, you know.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Chairman ROYCE. Thank you.

We go to Greg Meeks of New York.

Mr. MEEKS. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

There was this—I found out about a Mr. Nazario Jacinto-Carrillo and his daughter, Filemona. His daughter was 5 years old. They fled to California from their village in the western highlands of Guatemala. Nazario was fleeing a local gang that had threatened to kill him.

Nazario and his daughter encountered a Border Patrol agent and were promptly arrested at a Border Patrol station in Campo, California, and Nazario was told that he would be sent to jail.

Filemona, his 5-year-old daughter, was taken by Border Patrol agents. Nazario said, "My daughter was screaming and crying, and so was I." Filemona was put in custody of the Office of Refugee Settlement, and she was transferred to my State, New York.

Nazario subsequently abandoned his asylum claim and was flown back to Guatemala. And in the 5 weeks he spent in U.S. custody, he was never once able to speak to his daughter.

Now, I visited a facility in New York, and one of the things that was noted to me, that each and every one of the children that they had there also had their birth certificate, which tells me that they were not just trying to sneak in, they were truly trying to seek an asylum so they could have a hearing because they were running from danger. They wanted to stop to see a Border Patrol so that they could go through a hearing. They had some evidence of who their kids were. But they were treated like criminals.

In fact, one of the children that was examined by the doctor, we were told, thought they had a toothache, but, upon further examination, what was in the child's mouth was pellets from a bullet. That is what they were fleeing from.

So sometimes I do feel inappropriate asking you questions, because I really do acknowledge you and the service you have given our Nation in the State Department and the diplomacy. And watching you—and I know you have to answer some of these difficult questions.

The problem is I think that the President of the United States doesn't understand diplomacy and the value of the State Department. In fact, I was looking at him today when he was—and inter-

national organizations—when he was over talking to NATO, making all kinds of horrendous statements and separating us from our allies there. I couldn't help but see the pain on Ambassador Kay Bailey Hutchison when she had to admit this was right up Putin's alley, what was going on, and looking at General Kelly as he was looking away and drinking water and drinking water and drinking water as the President was making his statement.

I say all that because my question to you is going to be about the United States and our affiliation with the OAS and the terms of the international American Declaration of the Rights and Duties of Man, which obligates the states of the Americas to protect the right to life, liberty, and security for every human being and to give protection to families and to grant all children the right to special protection, and, we know, where a member of the OAS has filed a complaint to the OAS's Inter-American Commission of Human Rights concerning this administration's zero-tolerance immigration policy.

So my question to you—and I know sometimes the President doesn't believe in multilateral and international organizations—does the Trump administration plan to respond to the OAS member's complaint to the OAS? Do you know?

Ambassador MERTEN. Sir, I am unfamiliar with that specific issue. I am happy to take that back to my colleagues and get back to you with an answer on that.

Mr. MEEKS. Okay. Thank you. And that is probably something that might be—again, as I said, it is difficult for me to question you because I know of your work. And some of it may be more appropriate for some other members of the administration.

I think we touched on this—and, again, to Ms. Lynch, who is the Senior Deputy Assistant Administrator, I agree with you and the work that Administrator Green is doing and what the USAID does all over the region, and you are addressing the root cause of the problem.

But these deportation—whether it is DACA or TPS, sending a lot of these folks, DACA kids who have never been there before, sending them back, does that help our relationship and the work that you are doing in trying to deal with the root causes of the immigration problem that we have at the border now?

Ms. LYNCH. Thank you for the question.

We work very much within those countries, so within the Northern Triangle, in partnership with the interagency and also the host countries. So our role is really to support the host country and their efforts in receiving some of these folks.

And so we have worked in the reception centers and through the International Organization of Migration, IOM, and working with them to refurbish those centers and also make sure basic services are available to folks, with the ultimate goal that they would return to their host and home communities and there would be institutions there that would be stood up to also provide basic services and economic opportunities.

Mr. MEEKS. I thank you for your service.

Chairman ROYCE. Ted Yoho of Florida.

Mr. YOHO. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

And I appreciate both of you being here.

This is a timely hearing on the Western Hemisphere. I think we have pivoted away from not just the last administration but the last 15, 20 years, and it is time that we really put an emphasis on there, whether it is energy security for our Caribbean nations like Puerto Rico, our territory, or the U.S. Virgin Islands or other Caribbean nations. Instead of them getting their energy from Venezuela, we are implementing energy from North America and allowing us to break the ties from Venezuela. And I think this is something that is imperative that we do.

But I hear over and over again—and, Ambassador Merten, you were talking about better governance. We have to do more. Ms. Lynch, you were talking about we have to do more and help these economies in that.

The numbers I have pulled up, Central America, from Mexico down to Panama, there is roughly 171 million people. Over the course of the last 10 years, we have given $5.746 billion in foreign aid to El Salvador, Nicaragua, Guatemala, Honduras, Mexico, and Panama—$5.746 billion.

People are leaving the Northern Triangle because of poor governance. We are putting money into our aid programs—USAID, MCC, OPIC, other organizations—to get good governance, to get economic development in those countries, yet we are not getting the return on that.

I would like to hear from both of you, what would you do—we have to do something different. We can't do the same thing over and over again. And if I throw in the war on drugs, we have spent over $2 trillion since the 1970s on the war on drugs. And I think we are all convinced we are not winning the war on drugs, especially when you have Mexico with 72,000-plus acres of poppy fields, which goes right into heroin, which comes right into my country. And then you look at Colombia has more coca planted today than we did with the drug cartels.

And so I want to know from you, what do we need to do as a Nation, more specifically this committee, to direct foreign policy so we get good governance, we get a better economy, and we get allies that are on board with us that seriously want to fix this problem?

Ambassador Merten?

Ambassador MERTEN. Thanks for the question.

And we certainly share your concern about all of the above, I think particularly the concern about the drug issue, which I will briefly talk to.

We have developed a good level of cooperation with Mexico, and one of the things that Secretary Tillerson started was discussions with Mexico on how we can work together to stop these transnational criminal organizations——

Mr. YOHO. Let me ask you that, because we were down there with the chairman a couple years ago, and we want them to get better on their drug cartel and the drug production, but I didn't see the want and the desire there as much as we did. How do we get the desire with them? Do we pull money back? Do we threaten that? Do we threaten to block trade?

Because we are not getting the results. And I hear what you are saying. Yeah, we want them to do this.

Ambassador MERTEN. Yep. We have a new government coming in Mexico in 5 months, a new President who has just been elected who will take over. Secretary Pompeo will be traveling there in the coming days, along with Secretary Mnuchin and Secretary Nielsen. We are going to start up those discussions again with this new government——

Mr. YOHO. What is going to be different about those discussions?

Ambassador MERTEN. Well, I think we have a new government to work with. We have to see where we can have leverage with them and what their interests are.

Mr. YOHO. I feel like we have the cookie that they want. You know, they want to trade, they want the access to our markets. I think we need to play hardball different than we have.

Ms. Lynch, what are your recommendations?

Ms. LYNCH. Right. I do think we have considerable successes in the region, specifically I will talk about in Central America, where we see on the governance side, for example, we see the governments of these countries putting their own resources against some of the objectives and goals that we mentioned at the outset——

Mr. YOHO. Define "success."

Ms. LYNCH. Success is when a government—I would say it is three things: When a government puts its own resources to these issues, when the private sector invests, and when civil society acts as a watchdog and can hold their government accountable.

Mr. YOHO. Which countries are you talking about?

Ms. LYNCH. I think we are seeing some of these successes in all of the Northern Triangle countries, whereby with our U.S. Central America strategy, they proposed a similar strategy, the Alliance for Prosperity, which aligns very well with ours.

Mr. YOHO. Are we seeing a decrease in crime, a decrease in migration to our country?

Ms. LYNCH. Honduras is a good example, again, where we work very closely with the interagency and with the Government of Honduras. In one area, the Riviera area of San Pedro Sula is a good example where INL works on the law enforcement side, we work on citizen security side, and, together, yes, we have seen in past years the homicides reduced by over 60 percent there. So that is——

Mr. YOHO. I am out of time. I wish we had more time to talk to you. I appreciate both you being here. I hate to be so abrupt, but limited time. I would like to talk to you further.

Mr. Chairman, I yield back.

Chairman ROYCE. Lois Frankel of Florida.

Ms. FRANKEL. Thank you, Mr. Chair.

First, I want to thank both our witnesses for being here, and thank you so much for your service. And, please, my comments are not really directed at you, and I have a lot of respect for what USAID does and the development that the State Department takes part in.

So, first, I want to start with, I guess, sometimes I think I am just living totally in a bad episode of "Saturday Night Live." I happen to represent beautiful Palm Beach, where Mar-a-Lago sits. And very interesting: Donald Trump asked permission to hire 78 foreign workers at Mar-a-Lago for the season. Doesn't he think there were

American workers who could take those jobs? Oh, well. I thought that was very interesting.

Anyway, on to another point which I think is actually much more important, which is the fact that we are witnessing what I call a Trump-induced crisis at our Mexican border. We have heard many people comment on this, but I am going to say it again, because until these families are united I am not going to shut up about this.

Mothers and fathers who are seeking refuge from extreme danger and persecution, they finally think they come for refuge, and what do they do? They get to our border and this government steals their children right out of their arms.

And you know what is happening now? Our government is so incompetent and so uncaring that they can't even match up most of these children. This is going to be a dark stain on this country, with what is going on here.

I went to the border a couple weeks ago with some other Members. And look, I am the granddaughter of an immigrant. Probably everybody here is either the granddaughter or the grandson of an immigrant, right? And what I saw was heartbreaking.

And I am just going to talk about meeting with the mothers, listening to their excruciating crying because their children were taken from them, they hadn't seen them, didn't know where they were. And one woman told me that she was told she was going to go to court for 48 hours, and then it is a month later and she didn't even know where her child was.

The other day, I had a little roundtable at the Guatemala center where I live. And they do wonderful work there. And I heard from a young woman who told me that her cousin came over, fleeing from gangs and violence in Guatemala, got to the border with her 10-year-old son. The 10-year-old son is now in Homestead, in Florida, and guess where the mother is? She was deported back to Guatemala.

Now, I just got a little—you know, it is a good thing you get these little alerts from your phone. This is what is happening now. Listen to this one. One mother had waited 4 months to wrap her arms around her little boy. Another had waited 3 months to see her little girl again. And when it finally happened Tuesday in Phoenix, the mothers were met with cries of rejection from their children. The children didn't even recognize the mothers. They were screaming for the caseworkers.

And what I heard yesterday at this roundtable from child professionals, psychologists, was the trauma that these children—toxic trauma that these children are experiencing. Well, we can see that right now. Could you imagine? They don't even know who their parents are.

So here is what I want to say. I mean, a lot of the questions I was going to ask have been asked and answered. I want to thank you for that. But I think there is no question—and I want to say this—building a wall is not going to solve the problem. Separating children inhumanely from their parents is not going to solve this problem. We have got to get into these countries and do the work.

And I just saw that there is a proposal now to cut $180 million in funding for Central America. To me, that is just dumb, all right? That is really dumb.

I don't have to ask you what you think about it. You are good people. I am not going to force you to answer that.

But, Mr. Chair, I just want to conclude by saying that we have to step up our efforts to try to get to the root causes. And we need immigration reform that the Congress is responsible for, and we should do that as soon as we can.

And thank you for patiently being here with us today.

Chairman ROYCE. Thank you, Congresswoman Frankel.

We go now to Adam Kinzinger of Illinois.

Mr. KINZINGER. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

This is an important hearing. And I am sure there are other hearings where my colleagues on the other side of the aisle can discuss their desire to abolish ICE, but this is very important issues on the Western Hemisphere.

With a lot of the issues we are seeing on the border, I think it drives home the importance of motivating people to fix their own countries and live in a better situation. If you look at our friends in Colombia, for instance, they went through decades of very difficult times and, with a little help from the United States and a lot of desire from their internal community, have really been able to not only just overcome their problems but also be a refuge for people in tough areas like Venezuela.

That is a good example of how we should be handling this issue so that the issue on the southern border does not continue to haunt us, and, frankly, we don't have to abolish ICE in the process as some of my friends want.

Since September 11th, our security focus has been primarily geared toward the Middle East, where we have spent the past 17 years combating Islamic extremism. And, during these years, many of our neighboring countries have faced political and economic instability and domestic insecurity. As a result of this instability and insecurity, thousands of people have migrated north and have arrived at our doorstep.

And, as I have mentioned before, I have worked with ICE, as a member of the Air National Guard, as well as Customs and Border Protection officers on our southwest border, and I know firsthand how those insecurities not only affect our Nation's security but also how they endanger the lives of those traveling north in search of freedom. And that is why it is imperative we regain focus on our own hemisphere.

And I believe if we can establish a more stable and secure Western Hemisphere we can usher in an era of prosperity that has never been seen before. And I would like to briefly touch on a few of those countries.

We have talked a lot about Venezuela. It has been the problem child of our region for the past two decades. In May, we watched as the corrupt Maduro regime swept the country's Presidential election, which had been called fraudulent by the U.S. and our global partners.

Last Congress, I introduced legislation that passed in the NDAA and would enhance the State Department's capabilities through the

Global Engagement Center to identify and respond to propaganda and disinformation.

So, Mr. Merten, given Venezuela's prosecution of political opponents and restriction of freedom of expression, can the GEC be used to amplify peaceful protests while highlighting the mass human rights abuses occurring in Venezuela? And what other tools do you have to handle that?

Ambassador MERTEN. Thanks so much for the question.

We have not been at all shy about calling out the Venezuelans and drawing attention to their abuse of the regime's abuse of its own people. And we have done that in various fora, not least in the Organization of American States. And just at the recent summit here in Washington at the OAS, we were able to get an unprecedented resolution in support of members of the OAS condemning Venezuela and putting them on a path to, perhaps, eventual suspension from that organization.

Again, we will not be shy. We have used targeted sanctions to focus on those people who are responsible for tormenting the Venezuelan people and——

Mr. KINZINGER. Can you answer, though, specifically about if you see a role for the Global Engagement Center in this area?

Ambassador MERTEN. I am not an expert in that particular thing, and I will be happy to take that back and get you an answer on that.

Mr. KINZINGER. And when you talk about what has been done in OAS, can you talk about the benefits of removing Venezuela from the OAS that you see?

Ambassador MERTEN. We have discussed that, as I said, in the resolution, that was passed by unprecedented support of countries representing over 90 percent of the population of the hemisphere, that puts us on a path to consider suspending Venezuela from the OAS.

Mr. KINZINGER. And after Argentina's economic collapse in 2001, we saw anti-American administrations, led by populist regimes, drive the country in and out of economic despair. However, in 2015, under the new leadership of a pro-West, pro-business President, the Argentinian Government settled their debts and opened Latin America's third-largest economy for business. There is still a lot of work to do, specifically in helping the country's poor and combating a growing narcotrafficking network, but Argentina is showing a lot of promise.

Supporting governments in Latin America that shun socialist and repressive policies and support Western values should be one of our top priorities. But what concerns me is that, in the past, Argentina has clawed out of an economic collapse only to spend more money than they are able to collect through taxes and trade, resulting in new depressions.

So does State or USAID have any programs geared toward economic growth or making that government more efficient in how they spend their money?

Ambassador MERTEN. Well Argentina has a relatively new President that we have engaged with, and we are very supportive of his market-oriented reforms.

I think, in our analysis, that, absent reforms generated from inside the country, that realizing their own shortcomings in previous legislation and mistakes that they have made in the past is the way that they are going to find the proper way forward. So we are very optimistic about their approach to resolving their own problems.

Mr. KINZINGER. Thank you.

I yield back.

Chairman ROYCE. Mr. Castro.

Mr. CASTRO. Thank you, Chairman.

Thank you both for your testimony today.

Many Americans and many around the world have been shocked by the Trump administration's use of family separation, separating young kids from their parents, as a deterrent—what the administration would consider a deterrent to having people attempt to come here, including those who are seeking asylum, legally, to the United States.

And a few weeks ago now, I was one of the Members of Congress who went down and visited two of the centers who are keeping these kids. One of them is what is called a tender-age shelter, and it is called Casa Presidente in Brownsville, Texas. And myself and Sheila Jackson-Lee and a few others held an 8-month-old named Roger who had been separated from his family, and the staff told us they believed that he came with his sister because his mother had died. There was a 1-year-old girl named Leah who was also in the room with us.

What role does the State Department play in the reunification of these young children?

Ambassador MERTEN. Sir, thanks for the question.

And as I believe I have said in earlier questions similar to this, we work in countries with our host governments, we work in places like Central America to try and eliminate the root causes of this. In terms of——

Mr. CASTRO. Well, but I mean specifically when parents—some of these parents have been deported now. Is the State Department involved, if they are back in the Northern Triangle countries, in trying to get their kids back? Is the State Department involved at all? Because HHS is not in Guatemala or Honduras or El Salvador.

Ambassador MERTEN. I will be honest with you, I am not sure that our consular officials are involved in that process. I can take that back and get you a clearer answer on that, but I am unaware of that.

Mr. CASTRO. I hope that you will. And I will submit my question for the record, because I would like to know if the State Department that deals with other nations and, of course, our domestic agencies here, whether they can represent to the American people that none of these children has died or been severely injured while in the custody of the United States Government. That is my question.

I would also like to echo the comments by Ranking Member Engel and also my colleague Congresswoman Torres about CICIG and the work that it is doing to fight corruption in Guatemala. And although I think it is fair to always be critical of any organization and take a critical look, I think it is important, when we think

about helping these countries get back on their feet, to make sure that we have an organization that is trying to root out corruption and really restore the rule of law.

Let me ask you this, because Congressman Kinzinger spoke a minute ago about making sure that countries fix the things that are wrong with themselves. And I agree. I think that the best antidote to having many people want to come to the United States who are undocumented is to make sure that the economies—to work with the nations to the south to make sure that the economies there are strong.

But let me ask you, if you are Mexico and there is the United States and an incredible demand for drugs coming from the United States, what strategy is going to be successful to completely root out the trafficking of drugs to the United States, where you have a huge demand for it?

And because Mexico is not Colombia, which, obviously, is in South America, but has basically got a 2,000-mile border with the United States, so, in other words, geographically, it is a central country for drug trafficking routes, how do they combat that?

Ambassador MERTEN. This is not exactly an area that I have expertise in the terms of domestic demand. My understanding is that the administration is putting together policies to look at fentanyl and look at ways that we can reduce people's use of these drugs.

In terms of working with other countries, which is where we operate, the State Department, we have excellent cooperation with Mexico and with other countries in the region, including Colombia, to work with them, to reduce the amount of these things that they produce, that they prosecute those who are responsible. As I mentioned earlier, we have this working group with the Mexicans on combating and Central Americans combating transnational criminal organizations. This is ongoing work. It is important work, and we believe we are hopeful that it will ultimately be successful.

Mr. CASTRO. And my last comment, and the reason I pose that question is because as we try to help them figure this out, I think for them, if you are a relatively poor nation where the rule of law is not what it should be and there is incredible corruption, and you have got people who are not making much money, very poor who are basically tempted to go into the drug trade, or be part of the drug trade, and there is an incredible demand right up north for those drugs, the challenge of rooting that out is gigantic. I yield back.

Chairman ROYCE. Mr. Garrett, Tom Garrett, Virginia.

Mr. GARRETT. Thank you, Mr. Chairman, and thanks to the witnesses. I want to ask a series of very brief questions because I have a finite amount of time. I want to start with your understanding of the nature of the hearing today. The hearing that I was briefed on was entitled, "Advancing U.S. Interests in the Western Hemisphere." Is that your understanding, as well?

Ambassador MERTEN. That is my understanding.

Mr. GARRETT. And you all are from the U.S. Department of State, correct?

Ambassador MERTEN. [No verbal response.]

Mr. GARRETT. And yet it seems about half the room is focused primarily almost exclusively on separations at the border. Is that correct?

Ambassador MERTEN. We have got a lot of questions on that.

Mr. GARRETT. A lot of questions on that. And so, in the Department of State, do you all have oversight of HHS?

Ambassador MERTEN. We do not.

Mr. GARRETT. Okay. Do you have oversight of DHS?

Ambassador MERTEN. We do not.

Mr. GARRETT. How about USCIS?

Ambassador MERTEN. No.

Mr. GARRETT. How about USCBP?

Ambassador MERTEN. We do not.

Mr. GARRETT. How about Customs and Border Patrol—I'm sorry, how about ICE?

Ambassador MERTEN. We do not.

Mr. GARRETT. So none of those are within your purview and yet, you have "gotten a lot of questions on that subject matter." It is amazing to me how well some people talk off of talking points. In fact, right now, the number of people under the age of 5 who we think are separated from their families is just over 100, and yet quite candidly, just off of the preplanned talking points, we have covered about 14 percent of their cases in this committee hearing today. That is amazing.

But what we have covered zero percent of, and pardon me while I go on a little bit of a discourse here, are the roughly 4,000 Americans killed every year by unlicensed drivers who are here illegally. In other words, mathematically speaking, and we can't quantify these numbers because while we know about 13 percent of all highway fatalities nationally are caused by people who are here illegally, we don't quantify fatalities specifically by immigration status, however, what we do know is in the 10 States where you are licensed to drive, regardless of your legal status, Maryland, California, et cetera, the number of highway deaths caused by people here illegally is closer to 14.5 percent.

And so I guess if we looked at the numbers and we compared the number of people who are under the age of 5 who we think are currently separated from their families, there would be about 40 Americans permanently separated from their families every single year for every one of them, but nobody has talked about that. And you all from the State Department and again, my condolences and gratefulness for you being here, but we have just determined, and I wish that I had gone earlier in the hearing because maybe we could have saved some time, that you are not responsible for HHS, DHS, USCIS, USCBP or ICE, which a lot of my friends across the aisle seem to want to abolish.

So I apologize vicariously for the waste of your time, and I want to cover another thing real quickly that might be further within your purview. My good and distinguished colleagues and friends across the aisle to include Mr. Meeks, Mr. Keating, Mr. Engel, Mr. Sherman, Ms. Bass, and Ms. Frankel all have talked about horrific occurrences of gang violence in Honduras and Guatemala and El Salvador and Mexico, and it really gives me pause because I don't think that everyone in these countries are violent gang members,

do you all, based on your experience? The Northern Triangle has lots of good people, right? They are not all gang members, right?

Ambassador MERTEN. Of course.

Mr. GARRETT. And yet, we have heard horrible stories, in fact, we heard about Jose and Brian, whose mom was raped and murdered, and they came to this country because they were afraid, and I quote, "the same thing might happen to them." But all people in those countries, they are not bad people, right?

Ambassador MERTEN. [No verbal response.]

Mr. GARRETT. There are some gang members in those countries, right? And some of the people who are there are good people, right? Likewise, what we haven't heard of is that any gang members might ever leave those countries and come here. Now I understand it is somewhat beyond the scope and purview of the responsibilities of the Department of State, but do we have reason to believe that some of the people who might come into this country illegally could also be gang members? Could that be? I mean, mathematically speaking, just give me a wild guess.

Ambassador MERTEN. I mean, I don't think—certainly, we at the State Department don't know.

Mr. GARRETT. Do you think it is possible? I mean, you have risen to the level of Ambassador. I am just asking you to posit.

Ambassador MERTEN. I mean, in the realm of possibility, a lot of things are possible.

Mr. GARRETT. Right. Okay. And we have heard that a wall is not the solution, but just like a door being closed and locked might prevent someone from coming in a room, but doesn't always prevent someone from coming in a room, it might also be part of a solution while it is not panacea.

So I continue that it is remarkable to see this concern for these just over 100 people under the age of 5, but not within the purview of the Department of State, nor the scope of identifying and addressing, let me see, U.S. interests in the Western Hemisphere. What is it that you would like to have been asked about today very quickly that you haven't been asked about because nobody in this room seems to want to talk about the subject matter and why you are here, Mr. Merten, Ambassador.

Ambassador MERTEN. Sir, I think the questions we have got today are relevant to——

Mr. GARRETT. What is it that you would have like to have been asked about, what question would you like me to ask you?

Ambassador MERTEN. Well, I would like you to ask me about the situation in Haiti, that I know reasonably well.

Mr. GARRETT. Outstanding. I have got 20 seconds. Please go over the situation in Haiti, and I apologize for having been distracted there. People are running for election. They have got goals here, things they want to do.

Ambassador MERTEN. Sure. Very quickly, we are very disturbed by the recent unrest in Haiti. We are happy to see that the Haitian police and the Haitian Government have been able to reclaim control of the streets. We hope that the Haitian Government continues to work to pacify the situation, the political situation in the country. And in Haiti, we really see that the answer to why people are out on the streets upset rioting is because there is a lack of eco-

nomic opportunity. And this is something we drive home with them at every possible opportunity, they need to attract investors who want to come to Haiti, and there are investors who want to come to Haiti, and I will leave it there.

Mr. GARRETT. Thank you so much, Ambassador. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I yield back.

Chairman ROYCE. We appreciate the State Department. Myself and another colleague here was on the phone over the weekend with the situation room there dealing with some of our constituents who were in harm's way in Haiti, and we appreciate the State Department's efforts to get that resolved. And we also, Ambassador, appreciate very much your expertise in Haiti and all the time you spent there.

We are going to go to Robin Kelly of Illinois.

Ms. KELLY. Thank you, Mr. Chair, and I hope you don't find my question a waste of time, but thank you for being here, and I would just say there is a lot of things—a lot of ways people get killed that we don't talk about here, like gun violence prevention. I just had to say that.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman, I think it is important as we hold these hearings to remember the young families who are escaping violence in Latin America and traveling to the land of opportunity. A young 14-year old girl from El Salvador identified by her initials, VFB, arrived in the United States in May with her mother fleeing violence after her stepfather was murdered in a church. The two of them fled to save their lives.

At the time of their arrival, our government announced the implementation of a zero tolerance policy. As we watched the consequences of this policy unfold, we saw thousands of children, as we have talked about, being separated from their parents, and she being one of them. Believing that she was being taken to give a bath, VFB was instead being lured away from her mom, not aware that she would not see her mom again.

After being transferred to a shelter in Connecticut, the girl's mother remained detained in Encino, Texas. Finally, after 39 days, the young lady could hear the comfort of her mother's voice when she was finally allowed a 10-minute phone call. And now in July, VFB and her mother are still separated. We must get to the root problems that are causing increased migration with families giving up everything for the chance of a better life, just like you talked about what we need to do in Haiti. The United States must do more to push for change on the ground in these countries. That is why I was so disappointed by the State Department's decision last year surrounding the Honduran election.

In November, the State Department chose to certify Honduras' conditional funding, meaning you provided the Honduran Government with direct U.S. funding just days after a disputed election with the Organization of American State Secretary General Luis Almagro eventually concluded was characterized by irregularities and deficiencies with very low technical quality and lacking integrity. President Hernandez said he would move forward with electoral reform, yet he has done very little to date. In the past, he has also said he would remove the military police on the streets, yet there is still no timeline to do so.

What is the State Department doing to pressure the Honduran Government to make electoral reforms and to take the military police off the streets? And also, what leverage do you have given how quickly you certified the Honduran Government after its disputed election? Thank you.

Ambassador MERTEN. On the Honduran certification, my understanding is that that is a process that takes some time to do. I know we do certifications for Haiti and other countries. The determination was made in our—in the building in the State Department, ultimately by the Secretary of State, that they had met the criteria for certification, and that is why we recommended that.

Ms. KELLY. Can you share some of the criteria that they——

Ambassador MERTEN. I can't speak to the exact criteria for Honduras. That is not an area I work with on a daily or weekly basis. Regarding the idea of military servicing as police, it is unfortunate, like you see in many countries in the hemisphere, where military perform police functions. In general, our view is that is not a good thing, that there is a role for military and there is role for police, and we believe that those two should be separated.

Ms. KELLY. And do you know if there is a timeline to do something about the police on—or the military on the street?

Ambassador MERTEN. I don't know that there is a timeline no, ma'am, sorry.

Ms. KELLY. And also, is there a general certification criteria, or is this something different for every——

Ambassador MERTEN. My understanding is that for every country there are—and maybe this is something you can speak to—there are different criteria that are established, usually by the appropriators.

Ms. LYNCH. Yes, and we can get the specific criteria for you, if you would like.

Ms. KELLY. I would appreciate that.

Ms. LYNCH. Absolutely.

Ms. KELLY. Believe it or not, I yield back early.

Chairman ROYCE. Thank you. We go to Paul Cook from California.

Mr. COOK. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I want to apologize for being late to the committee. I had a markup in Natural Resources. I want to thank you for being here today.

Ms. Lynch, it is good to see you again. Our committee had nine members that went to the Summit of the Americas, and you spent a lot of time with us, and I am really, really impressed with what you are doing in many of the countries, and also saw some of your work in Egypt. So thank you for being here.

My questions, Mr. Ambassador, I did want to address the Peruvian agrarian bonds, and this is something that has been bouncing around for a while. It affects San Bernardino County. This is to resolve the claims of many of my constituents. These are land bonds as they are known in the—they have been floating around for long years, and directly affected many of the pension plans in San Bernardino.

The role of the government right now is they don't want to address it. They think that this happened 50 years ago, and that this was under a different regime, and they are not—they just don't

want to address it. And I keep pushing it on them, and I get some pushback. So I am hoping you can kind of help me out with that. Are you familiar with it at all?

Ambassador MERTEN. I am generally familiar with the case, yes, not with the specifics, however.

Mr. COOK. Okay. The other thing I wanted to talk about, when we were down there, we had a weekend trip, as I said it was a great codel. It was short-lived. It was only a weekend basically, a Friday and came back on a Monday, and we met with 21 countries. And I got to be honest with you, I came back just exhausted, but never learned so much in my life.

But one of the things on the tail end of it, we met with nine of the Caribbean countries. And you hear the same theme over and over and over again, that the United States has kind of forgotten or ignored the Western Hemisphere, same thing. And even more so, in the Caribbean, and even more so with some of these smaller countries. And it is no wonder that some of the very small ones, and not just Caribbean countries, they are susceptible to some of the economic manipulations that the Venezuelan Government is making in returns for rebates on oil, and this is going to be a continuing problem. And you have to do the math in regards to the OAS. Each one of these countries has one vote, same as the United States. You add them together, and whatever changes you want to do in the OAS that is going to affect it, it ain't gonna happen. At least, I am not very good at math. I am not very good in a lot of things, but something we have got to talk to these countries in the Caribbean.

One of the big concerns, hurricanes coming. Every year, we are going to have a hurricane, we are going to have one, two, three, four, five, and here we go again trying to get aid down there, whether it is—Puerto Rico isn't a country, it is a territory, as you know.

But here we go again. Now I am from the military. I know how successful prepositioning equipment is, and we had talked about this prepositioning many of these supplies, have command post exercises where we go through the drill when it happens, whether it is in our own southern states or in the Caribbean, so we don't start from scratch like this because we know it is going to happen. So I would hope that we agendasize that, and I think my staff has kind of mentioned that to you, that this was a big, big issue with our committee, and just don't—we are going to keep pushing that at all.

The other thing I wanted to just to ask you in terms of—I know that Secretary Pompeo is interested in Mexico and everything else, but do you get that same feeling that, Hey, we got to—we have to start paying more and more attention because there is a lot of countries down there. We have got China, we got Iran. Ambassador, I didn't mean to talk so much, but if you can kind of address that absence of attention to the area.

Ambassador MERTEN. Yes, thanks for your comment and question, sir. I would respectfully disagree that we have been neglectful of our neighbors in the hemisphere. We have a whole bureau of people that work on a daily basis with this. USAID has large bureau that works with them on a daily basis. We have had the Vice-

President who has traveled to the region several times already. We have, regarding the Caribbean, H.R. 4939, which has been the guiding light.

Mr. COOK. I don't mean to cut you off, but the chairman is going cut me off anyway. The only thing I want to say is perception is reality.

Ambassador MERTEN. Understood.

Mr. COOK. And if you poll those countries down there, their perception is they have been ignored, and that is all I am going to say there, and I yield back.

Chairman ROYCE. Thank you, Congressman Cook. We go to Dina Titus of Nevada.

Ms. TITUS. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I am going to have to agree with Mr. Cook. I appreciate your optimism, Mr. Merten. You have said it in your opening statement, and now that we have these great bonds and that nothing is more important than our relationship down there, but actually, history tells a very different story. Our relations with Latin America over the years, at best, have been benign neglect, and at worst have been shoring up either with troops or resources, governments that practice state terrorism. Now we are ripping children from the arms of their parents, and current policy is so bad and relations so abominable that the OAS recently unanimously passed a resolution condemning our behavior. So I don't really think that is anything to brag about.

I would go back to something, though, that was discussed hours ago, you brought it up, Ms. Lynch, that we have a policy that tends toward self-sufficiency, but there are other players in the region who have a policy that is more about dependency. This worries me because I have seen it all over the world. We have seen it in Southeast Asia, we see it in Africa. We see it in Eastern Europe. The U.S. pulls back. We create a power vacuum. In moves Russia. In moves China. And now, certainly, there are examples of that in Latin America. We heard about the tanks that Russia is selling in Latin America. We know that they are increasingly meddling politically and economically through propaganda. I wonder, have you asked the President if he is going to bring this up with Mr. Putin when he meets with him next week, that this could be causing a problem, the tanks and the other activities? They have supplied global navigation satellite system in Managua. They have got a joint counternarcotics center there. I mean, they are moving in when we are not doing much.

Also, let's be specific about China. Latin America is now their second largest destination for Chinese investment, and they are the largest trading partner for Argentina Brazil, Chile, and Peru, so this is not something minor. They are putting $2 billion into the ports in Peru as part of a $10 billion Chinese investment in energy, mining, and shipping, and telecommunications. So even if it is creating dependency when they are offering those kind of things, it is kind of hard for us to compete with it or counter it with the policy as you described, Mr. Merten, of telling them it is not a good idea to do this in the long run. Well, they are interested in the short run.

So I would say, in addition to having talked to the President about Russia's involvement, how can we possibly compete when we

have a diminishing budget at USAID, they want to cut that back all the time. It is already very small. We have got kind of a demoralized, understaffed State Department. You have got a President who insults our allies. You have got a policy of zero tolerance at the border. How can we compete with the competition down there to build those strong relations that we need?

Ambassador MERTEN. Well, I do think we do have strong relations, and we have a history of engagement, we have a history of shared values with all the countries in the hemisphere, and particularly, our close neighbors Canada, Mexico, Caribbean countries. We have diaspora communities here in this country who contribute to our national well-being.

So I think that we have a lot to offer. We also have aside from all the good things that our colleagues at USAID are doing throughout the hemisphere and our colleagues from the state INL are doing, we also have a very vibrant private sector, and I think that while our private sector does well exporting and trading with Latin America, we also have a lot of investment there. And I think that is a good vector of bringing economic opportunity, and hopefully, hope to these places.

Ms. TITUS. Well, I agree with that, and I think the USAID does a wonderful job. I think they are one of the best agencies. We get more from them by giving them less than any agency I can think of, but as far as the commercial aspect, we are not even being very helpful there because the one party in this Congress doesn't even support the Export-Import Bank, which would help with some of the investment there. So I just—on what front are we really being successful? And I know you have to answer that in a positive way, and I appreciate that, and I would like to be optimistic, too, but I think we need to be realistic, as well. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I yield back.

Chairman ROYCE. Thank you. We go to Mr. Chris Smith of New Jersey.

Mr. SMITH. Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman. Let me just make clear for the record that after being unjustly jailed for 3 years, Igor Bitkov and his wife Irina, who spent 3 months unjustly jailed, and their daughter Anastasia, another 3 months for being unjustly jailed, Igor got out on bail, but they were told they are not free. They are under house arrest. I just confirmed it again within the last couple of minutes with their attorney that they are under house arrest. Significantly, on May 23—and I mentioned earlier before in terms of the chronology—2 days before my hearing, which was in this room, the court ruled and allowed them out of jail. That was the constitutional court.

That wasn't enough for CICIG however. On May 23, CICIG went back to the constitutional court—yet another action against the Bitkovs.

Chairman ROYCE. This would be the third time.

Mr. SMITH. Yes. And so there is a pattern, I think, here. On June 21, the constitutional court, in contrast to its previous decisions, exonerated the Bitkovs under the Palermo Protocol. I remind my colleagues that under Palermo—I mean, we are talking about migrants, these are asylum seekers, a family that was escaping the impunity of Vladimir Putin and his cronies. Article 5 makes clear

that migrants shall not become liable to criminal prosecution under the protocol for the fact of having been the object of conduct set forth in Article 6 of the protocol. And then it is clearly pointed out that producing a fraudulent travel or identity document procuring or providing or possessing such a document. So the Palermo Protocol couldn't be clearer, and anyone who doubts that they were escaping a tyrannical action against them just look at the record, it couldn't be more clear.

So the constitutional court now has allowed a CICIG action because the Bitkovs got false drivers' licenses and credit cards. Again, they wanted to change their identity. We have witness protection in this country when someone wants to change their identity in order to escape the mob or the Mafia, in this case the Russian Mafia, and now they are bringing another action. And what is it—I want to ask with respect, what is the driving force behind CICIG after first being part of an action that got 19 years for Igor, 14 years in prison for his wife, and 14 years in prison for their daughter? I mean, that is what the judge found. That is what the court found. What is the driving obsession here? When you say there has been an investigation and you found no evidence, how deep was that investigation? How much was looked into the Russian connection here?

We know for a fact that thousands of businesswomen and men in Russia routinely have their businesses taken away from them. I cut my eye teeth on Russian human rights issues in 1982 in my first term on a trip to the Soviet Union on behalf of Soviet Refusniks—Jews who wanted to emigrate—including people like Yuli Koshirovsky, great people, who then had all these false charges brought against them and often were sent to psychiatric prisons, or places like Perm Camp 35. I actually visited Perm Camp 35 in the Ural Mountains just a few years later, and heard horror tales of men who had been taken and tortured by the Russians, in that case the Soviets, but now we have a continuation of that, and again, the Russians went looking for the Bitkovs, took them several years, and then they found them, and had a willing partner called CICIG to join in the efforts. It is all laid out in nauseating detail unfortunately, and yet, there are people who suggest that this is an overreach on our part trying to raise these issues.

And I said it before, Bill Browder—he is the subject of unrelenting attacks by the Russian Government, unrelenting. I was in a bilateral at the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly as head of the United States delegation these last 5 days in Germany, and at that meeting that was chaired by Pyotr Tolstoy from the Russian side from the Duma was some of the people who had been held to account under the Magnitsky Act in terms of their wrongdoing. They were sitting right at the table and took great umbrage of the Magnitsky Act. They don't like it. We believe in sanctions. We believe in personalizing them as a way of really trying to inhibit bad behavior and hold to account. But now we have a situation where a family, who is at grave risk in my opinion—their physical safety is my overriding concern. I want to keep them out of prison because I think they have done no wrong. They have done what any of us would do for our families if a gangster group came after us, and certainly changing a passport to a new name, certainly having a

driver's license with a different name, and now CICIG is going after them because of their driver's license. It begs credulity. It is beyond the pale as to why. Can you tell us why?

Ambassador MERTEN. Sir, I can't speak to the particularities of how CICIG works internally. I will say in terms of beyond what I told you about the Bitkovs before, our Embassy has engaged with the Guatemalan Government. We have got assurances from them that they will not send the Bitkovs back to Russia.

Chairman ROYCE. If I could interrupt, would the gentleman yield?

Mr. SMITH. There is no extradition.

Chairman ROYCE. How about the son? Since the Russian banks are now asking that the young son, who is maybe under 3 years of age, be returned from Guatemala to Russia, do you have assurances of that, too?

Ambassador MERTEN. I hate to admit this, but you have exhausted my expertise in this subject, and rather than mislead you, I would rather get back to you.

Chairman ROYCE. If the gentleman would yield, Ambassador, I would suggest in a situation where you are looking at, in sentences of 17 years, 14 years for the wife, 14 years for the daughter, who had been, after the bank tried to—after certain individuals in the bank tried to take control of the company, had been abducted and raped in St. Petersburg for 3 days, for her to get 14 years, for the younger son to be in a situation where the Russian Government is trying to have him returned to Russia, and given the past pattern of behavior, you would have to ask yourself when these sentences are longer than sentences for drug trafficking, for murder, for even terrorism in country, there is something a little unusual about the particulars of this case, and that is why, when I said earlier, we are going to work with U.S. U.N. on investigations here in terms of this set of circumstances, it is, I think, incumbent upon all of us to dig a little deeper and get a little bit more understanding of this case.

And I would ask you to do that and then get back in touch with Chairman Smith and myself and other members of this committee that are interested because at the end of the day, our goal is to have CICIG work effectively. They are in an environment where they are taking on corruption. But the one thing you and I know is that the Russians try to influence the outcome in any case where they go after anyone who tries to flee their government's control. And if you ask yourself how far will they go, apparently poison by radiation is not out of bounds. We know of two cases where that was done in the U.K.

So when you have an arm of the state, a state bank bringing a case in Guatemala after bringing a case where they had previously—anyway, I have exhausted our time, but I think Chairman Smith made the point, and I would just reiterate it.

At the end of the day, we want CICIG to be effective. For that to happen, we need the reforms in place, but again—and I see Mr. Cook here. Were you seeking time?

Mr. COOK. I came back in because we are planning a trip, as part of my committee, to Guatemala, and obviously this is a huge, huge issue. We are all concerned about it. I know Mrs. Torres, it is some-

thing that we are concerned and I share the chairman's feelings about Russia and their history, and, so, this is something that is not going to go away and obviously this is going to be our top agenda when we go down there. Thank you.

Mr. SMITH. If I can just conclude, Mr. Chairman, and I thank you for——

Chairman ROYCE. I yield back.

Mr. SMITH [continuing]. Your comments. To the Bitkovs, they live with the Sword of Damocles hanging over their head every single day. I mean, they have got very poor treatment in prison. They had a huge, huge SWAT-like team take them to prison in the first place, totally beyond all reason. And what that has done—especially to Anastasia, who was abducted, and this is the way the Russian oligarchy, the Russian leadership works. They go after businessmen and women who are successful to fleece them, and if you don't play ball, they set examples for certain people. To think that CICIG has anything to do with that absolutely undermines their mandate. Who doesn't want to get rid of corruption? Every single one of us. But if personnel is policy, which I think it is, and there are any corrupt people within the organization called CICIG, that needs to be weeded out and beyond that, not just weeded out—anyone who is complicit in any of this, that is why I have asked very specific questions about collusion, they need to be prosecuted. And no games. I thank you.

Chairman ROYCE. Okay. With that we thank the witnesses for being with us today, and we stand adjourned.

[Whereupon, at 12:40 p.m., the committee was adjourned.]

APPENDIX

Material Submitted for the Record

FULL COMMITTEE HEARING NOTICE
COMMITTEE ON FOREIGN AFFAIRS
U.S. HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES
WASHINGTON, DC 20515-6128

Edward R. Royce (R-CA), Chairman

July 11, 2018

TO: MEMBERS OF THE COMMITTEE ON FOREIGN AFFAIRS

You are respectfully requested to attend an OPEN hearing of the Committee on Foreign Affairs to be held in Room 2172 of the Rayburn House Office Building (and available live on the Committee website at http://www.ForeignAffairs.house.gov):

DATE: Wednesday, July 11, 2018

TIME: 10:00 a.m.

SUBJECT: Advancing U.S. Interests in the Western Hemisphere

WITNESSES: The Honorable Kenneth H. Merten
Acting Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary
Bureau of Western Hemisphere Affairs
U.S. Department of State

Ms. Sarah-Ann Lynch
Senior Deputy Assistant Administrator
Bureau for Latin America and the Caribbean
U.S. Agency for International Development

By Direction of the Chairman

The Committee on Foreign Affairs seeks to make its facilities accessible to persons with disabilities. If you are in need of special accommodations, please call 202/225-5021 at least four business days in advance of the event, whenever practicable. Questions with regard to special accommodations in general (including availability of Committee materials in alternative formats and assistive listening devices) may be directed to the Committee.

COMMITTEE ON FOREIGN AFFAIRS

MINUTES OF FULL COMMITTEE HEARING

Day *Wednesday* Date *07/11/2018* Room *2172*

Starting Time *10:05AM* Ending Time *12:40PM*

Recesses *0* (____to ____) (____to ____) (____to ____) (____to ____) (____to ____) (____to ____)

Presiding Member(s)

Chairman Edward R. Royce

Check all of the following that apply:

Open Session ☑
Executive (closed) Session ☐
Televised ☑

Electronically Recorded (taped) ☑
Stenographic Record ☑

TITLE OF HEARING:

Advancing U.S. Interests in the Western Hemisphere

COMMITTEE MEMBERS PRESENT:

See attached.

NON-COMMITTEE MEMBERS PRESENT:

N/A

HEARING WITNESSES: Same as meeting notice attached? Yes ☑ **No** ☐
(If "no", please list below and include title, agency, department, or organization.)

STATEMENTS FOR THE RECORD: *(List any statements submitted for the record.)*

IFR - Ranking Member Eliot Engel (3) and Reprentative Albio Sires
SFR - Representatives Gerry Connolly and Norma Torres
QFR - Chairman Edward R. Royce, Ranking Member Eliot Engel, and Representatives Paul Cook, Brad Sherman, Jim Sensenbrenner, Joaquin Castro, and Norma Torres

TIME SCHEDULED TO RECONVENE _____
or
TIME ADJOURNED *12:40PM*

Full Committee Hearing Coordinator

HOUSE COMMITTEE ON FOREIGN AFFAIRS

FULL COMMITTEE HEARING

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	Tom Suozzi, NY
X	Adriano Espaillat, NY
X	Ted Lieu, CA

MATERIAL SUBMITTED FOR THE RECORD BY THE HONORABLE ELIOT L. ENGEL, A REPRESENTATIVE IN CONGRESS FROM THE STATE OF NEW YORK

Washington Post: Trump is set to separate more than 200,000 U.S.-born children from their parents

By Mark L. Schneider
July 6, 2018

If you think the last few weeks of separating 2,300 children from their migrant parents along the southern border were heart-wrenching, imagine if 273,000 American-born children are separated from parents whose temporary protected status (TPS) is terminated. That is what could happen if the Trump administration's decision to revoke TPS for Haitians, Salvadorans and Hondurans is allowed to take effect.

Despite President Trump's executive order reversing his policy of separating migrant families, most of those 2,300 children have not been returned to their parents. That is truly unconscionable.

More than 100 times that number of children — all U.S. citizens — will be placed in similar jeopardy if the Department of Homeland Security begins programs to deport more than 58,000 Haitians on July 22, 2019, more than 262,000 Salvadorans on Sept. 9, 2019, and 86,000 Hondurans on Jan. 5, 2020. Parents will be faced with the decision of whether to take their children — most of whom speak mainly English and know only life in this country — back to countries deemed by the State Department as not safe for travel, some with the highest homicide rates in the hemisphere.

Otherwise, parents will have to leave their children alone in the United States or, if they're lucky, with relatives, or foster parents who they may or may not know, or some with "adult sponsors" chosen by federal agencies. The only other choice available to those parents would be to hide in the shadows as undocumented aliens. And that is what the ambassadors to the United States from El Salvador and Honduras, during an event at the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), predicted that most families would attempt. And DHS would undoubtedly begin a massive hunt for them.

The TPS provision in the Immigration Act of 1990 states that after each 18-month review, if conditions have changed — and governments can adequately handle the return of their citizens, and the returnees can return in safety — then it can be terminated. It does not say it is okay to deport them even as governments say they would still be overwhelmed or that it is still unsafe.

The Trump administration's TPS termination decision reversed the findings of Presidents George W. Bush and Barack Obama, their secretaries of state and secretaries of homeland security, and their legal advisers. They found conditions justified legally extending the temporary protected status after each of 14 reviews for Honduras since it was granted following Hurricane Mitch in 1999, each of 13 reviews for El Salvador following two earthquakes in 2001, and each of four reviews for Haiti following the worst earthquake in the region's history in 2010.

The decision to terminate the temporary protected status appears blatantly political since it contradicted the evaluation of U.S. diplomats in each of the countries who sent cables urging extension of TPS. They wrote that deportation of TPS holders and their children would endanger the fragile economies in those countries, overwhelm the countries' abilities to provide services, lead to more violence, and prompt new flows of migrants to our borders, thus undermining U.S.

national security interests. The U.S. Southern Command, which covers Central and South America, came to the same conclusion.

The Department of Homeland Security also ignored these State Department travel advisories in January warning U.S. travelers to "Reconsider Travel" to those countries:

• **El Salvador:** Violent crime, such as murder, assault, rape, and armed robbery, is common. Gang activity, such as extortion, violent street crime, and narcotics and arms trafficking, is widespread. Local police may lack the resources to respond effectively to serious criminal incidents.

• **Honduras**: Violent crime, such as homicide and armed robbery, is common. Violent gang activity, such as extortion, violent street crime, rape, and narcotics and human trafficking, is widespread. Local police and emergency services lack the resources to respond effectively to serious crime.

• **Haiti:** Reconsider travel to Haiti due to crime and civil unrest. Violent crime, such as armed robbery, is common. Local police may lack the resources to respond effectively to serious criminal incidents or emergencies. Protests, tire burning, and road blockages are frequent and often spontaneous.

Various studies show that more than 80 percent of TPS beneficiaries work, pay taxes, and contribute an estimated $690 million each year into Social Security. It would cost an estimated $3 billion to deport them and the U.S. economy would lose about $4.5 billion each year in gross domestic product.

Finally, U.S. policy, begun under Obama and a Republican Congress, and continued, according to Vice President Pence, in the Trump administration, sees the best way to reduce the "push" factors on illegal migration is to assist Central America to strengthen their economies, democratic institutions and law enforcement.

Sending back hundreds of thousands of people to those countries, when the governments themselves have said they cannot handle it, undermines that policy. And placing at risk 273,000 U.S. citizen children — some still being nursed — undermines our values.

The immediate answer is for the president to reverse the DHS termination decisions. The best answer for those U.S. citizen children is for Congress to authorize permanent residency for their parents now and a pathway to citizenship — they have been here for as long as two decades and have demonstrated they can contribute to our future — as immigrant parents in this country have done for almost 250 years.

Mark L. Schneider is a senior adviser at the Center for Strategic and International Studies, former director of the U.S. Peace Corps, and former head of Latin America and the Caribbean at USAID.

MATERIAL SUBMITTED FOR THE RECORD BY THE HONORABLE ELIOT L. ENGEL, A REPRESENTATIVE IN CONGRESS FROM THE STATE OF NEW YORK

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December 4, 2017

Dr. Brenda Fitzgerald
Director
Centers for Disease Control and Prevention

Dr. Francis Collins
Director
National Institutes of Health

Dear Dr. Fitzgerald and Dr. Collins,

As the Committee awaits an update from the State Department on the investigation into sonic attacks on personnel working at the U.S. Embassy in Havana, Cuba, we write to urge the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) and the National Institutes of Health (NIH) to offer to take a leading role in investigating the medical effects of these incidents and their potential cause.

According to the State Department, as of October 20th, 24 individuals serving at the U.S. Embassy in Havana were confirmed to have experienced health effects due to the alleged attacks. Since the incidents were first made public by the State Department in August, numerous press reports have indicated that the health effects were caused by some type of a sonic device. Yet, a State Department official in September said that "we still do not have definitive answers on the source or cause of the attacks."

We need to use all available resources to discover the medical cause and impact of what happened to our embassy personnel in Cuba. As noted in your mission statements, "CDC saves lives and protects people from health threats" and NIH applies "knowledge to enhance health, lengthen life, and reduce illness and disability." Your expertise is needed now more than ever in determining what precisely happened to U.S. personnel in Cuba.

For the health and safety of Americans serving abroad–not only in Havana but around the world–we urge you to offer to take a leading role in investigating these incidents. Thank you very much for your attention to this urgent matter.

Sincerely,

Eliot L. Engel

ELIOT L. ENGEL
Ranking Member
Foreign Affairs Committee

Ed Royce

EDWARD R. ROYCE
Chairman
Foreign Affairs Committee

MATERIAL SUBMITTED FOR THE RECORD BY THE HONORABLE ELIOT L. ENGEL, A REPRESENTATIVE IN CONGRESS FROM THE STATE OF NEW YORK

The Washington Post

Letters to the Editor Opinion

Treating similar events similarly

Regarding the June 24 editorial "No time for waiting":

I and my Republican counterpart, Foreign Affairs Committee Chairman Edward R. Royce (Calif.), urged the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention to take a leading role in investigating the health incidents that affected U.S. personnel in Cuba. As our nation's top experts on health threats, the CDC should be at the forefront of this investigation with the appropriate experts deployed to Havana.

Unfortunately, to date, the Trump administration has not sent the CDC to Havana, where a reported 25 U.S. officials and family members have been affected. Yet, when one U.S. official at our consulate in Guangzhou, China, had a similar incident, the CDC was immediately deployed. In the same vein, without knowing the cause of these incidents, the Trump administration has referred to them as "attacks" in Cuba while not using the same terminology for China.

We need to get to the bottom of what happened, and that begins by treating similar health incidents in Cuba and China in a similar fashion and not playing politics with the health of our citizens.

Eliot L. Engel, Washington

The Washington Post

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Statement for the Record from Representative Gerry Connolly
Advancing U.S. Interests in the Western Hemisphere
July 11, 2018

Latin America and the Caribbean are home to 43 of the world's top 50 most murderous cities, including San Salvador, the murder capital of the world. In the rural Northern Triangle, which encompasses El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras, 60 percent of people live in poverty and 95 percent of crimes go unpunished. A new case of sexual violence is reported every 46 minutes in Guatemala, but many more remain unrecorded. Citizens of the Northern Triangle pay an estimated $661 million annually in extortion fees to street gangs and other criminals.

Given these dire conditions, it is no wonder that the number of asylum seekers worldwide originating from the Northern Triangle increased by five-fold from 2012 to 2015. More than half of Salvadorans entering Mexico have lost a family member within two years before migrating. Sixty-two percent of women crossing the U.S. border reported seeing dead bodies in their neighborhoods and many mentioned that their children saw dead bodies weekly.

After summoning the strength to flee this suffocating violence and surviving a treacherous journey to seek asylum in the United States, an internationally recognized human right, many of these migrants have faced further abuses at the hands of the Trump Administration. The inhumane and morally repugnant "zero-tolerance policy" seeks to separate families at the border in order to deter further migration. As a result, the Administration has forcibly separated nearly 3,000 children from their parents in the past couple months.

Despite the Administration's relentless Orwellian attempts to blame non-existent laws for Trump's own actions, the reality is that this is a humanitarian crisis of Trump's own making. I have offered multiple amendments aimed at forbidding this shameful policy, and have cosponsored the Keep Families Together Act (H.R. 6135). Along with my colleagues, I have also requested that the appropriations committee prohibit funding for the implementation of this family separation policy.

For a president who launched his campaign by vilifying Mexicans, used reprehensible language to characterize El Salvador and Haiti, became the first President to neglect the Summit of the Americas since it started in 1994, and cannot maintain a positive rapport with Canada, it should come as no surprise that U.S. influence in the hemisphere is in a free fall. As the Administration seeks to address the ongoing crisis in Venezuela, high levels of crime and violence in the Northern Triangle, and renegotiate the North American Free Trade Agreement with Mexico and Canada, it should bear in mind that this President's repulsive rhetoric and destructive policies toward our southern neighbors only serve to undermine U.S. interests and exacerbate tensions in the region.

Statement for the Record from Representative Norma Torres
Advancing U.S. Interests in the Western Hemisphere
July 11, 2018

In recent months, some Members of Congress have raised concerns about the International Commission against Impunity in Guatemala (CICIG) and its role in the case of a Russian family that was convicted in Guatemala for various offenses related to passport fraud and identity theft. While I support my colleagues in their efforts to ensure transparency and fairness, and while I acknowledge that CICIG, like all institutions, is not immune to mistakes, it is essential that the United States continue to strongly support CICIG in a bipartisan manner, in the context of our broader efforts to promote security and prosperity in Guatemala and throughout Central America.

Since the end of the country's civil war in 1996, the Guatemalan state has struggled to free itself from the grasp of organized criminal networks that have penetrated and corrupted the highest levels of government in successive administrations. This systemic corruption drains state resources, while distorting the priorities of government institutions and inhibiting the state's capacity to tackle the serious challenges facing the country, such as widespread poverty, malnutrition, gang violence, and drug trafficking.

In the years following the end of the civil war, the Guatemalan people sought valiantly to establish a true democracy that responded to the needs and interests of the people, and to seek justice for the victims of war crimes and human rights violations, including the more than 200,000 people who were disappeared or killed during the civil war. However, powerful criminal networks, especially those known as "illegal security groups and clandestine security organizations" (CIACS, in Spanish), undermined Guatemala's nascent democracy and thwarted the fight for justice. Criminality became rampant and the CIACS used their influence in government to carry out a range of illicit activities, including the trafficking of drugs, arms, and persons, with impunity.

To overcome the power of these CIACS and other criminal networks, and to strengthen the rule of law in Guatemala, in 2006 the Guatemala state entered into an agreement with the United Nations to create CICIG, whose mandate permits it to "carry out independent investigations, to act as a complementary prosecutor and to recommend public policies to help fight the criminal groups that are the subject of its investigations."

Since its creation, CICIG's work has increased the capacity of Guatemalan prosecutors and police to investigate organized crime. With CICIG's support, prosecutors have learned to build complex cases against major criminal networks, and have established a witness protection program; police investigators learned to use advance investigative techniques, such as judicially supervised wiretapping, to gather evidence. Joint investigations by CICIG and the Guatemalan authorities have led to the successful prosecution of corrupt politicians of all political stripes, including the two previous presidents, and to convictions of dozens of powerful drug traffickers, including members of the Zetas Cartel. CICIG's work has also had a positive impact on public safety in Guatemala. In 2009, the homicide rate was 45.1 per 100,000; by 2017, it had fallen to 26.1. With CICIG's help, Guatemala has become the only country in the Northern Triangle to

experience a steady decline in violence. Because of these accomplishments, CICIG has become the most popular institution in Guatemala. Much work remains to be done, but CICIG's contributions to the rule of law in Guatemala are undeniable.

In fact, because of CICIG's success, other countries have sought to replicate its model. In 2016, the Government of Honduras entered into an agreement with the Organization of American States to create the Mission to Support the Fight Against Corruption (MACCIH), which is modeled on CICIG and has already produced significant results, with legislative reforms passed into law and indictments of widespread corruption networks operating in Honduran government institutions.

I am proud that Congress has worked on bipartisan basis to support CICIG and its role in Guatemala's fight against corruption. Under both Democratic and Republican leadership, Congress has appropriated funds for CICIG; Democratic and Republican administrations have endorsed and supported the Commission's work. Last year, the House passed H.Res 145, my resolution in support of CICIG and the fight against corruption in Central America, as well as an amendment I offered, which exempts CICIG funds from the conditions that are normally placed on aid to the Central American governments.

Members of our committee, on both sides of the aisle, have repeatedly met with Ivan Velasquez, the CICIG Commissioner, and we have been vocal in our support. The Trump administration has also expressed support for CICIG and its Commissioner. For example, when Guatemala's president attempted to expel CICIG's Commissioner from the Country, UN Ambassador Nikki Haley stated that, "Mr. Velásquez is a critical voice calling out corruption and upholding the rule of law. He has the full support of the United States and the international community." Just last week, a White House spokesperson reaffirmed that CICIG is key to the fight against corruption in Guatemala and to the broader effort to improve conditions in the country.

Fighting systemic corruption and dismantling criminal networks that have penetrated state institutions are not easy tasks. It should not come as a surprise to any of us that CICIG has powerful enemies, including those who fear criminal prosecution, and those who are already imprisoned. CICIG's employees and their Guatemalan counterparts carry out their work in a climate of severe pressures and threats, and are regularly the subject of smear campaigns. Some in Guatemala have even taken the extraordinary step of hiring lobbyists in Washington, D.C., paying as much as $80,000 per month to influence U.S. policy, presumably with the intention of weakening U.S. support for CICIG and the fight against corruption in Guatemala.

Congress must not give in to these pressures, and must continue to stand with CICIG and with all of those who are fighting corruption in Guatemala. We have invested far too much in CICIG, and have far too much at stake, to give up now. By staying the course, we can help the Guatemalan people achieve their long-sought goal of an effective and impartial justice system. Doing so is best chance to create the conditions for a more prosperous and secure Guatemala, where the next generation can see a future for themselves in their home country.

Questions for the Record from Chairman Edward R. Royce
Advancing U.S. Interests in the Western Hemisphere
July 11, 2018

Question:

The potential for deeper integration of the U.S. energy market with those of other countries in Latin America is well known. After a long period of declining oil production in Mexico, in 2013 the country adopted historic reforms to PEMEX – its state-owned energy company – to invite more foreign direct investment, creating new opportunities for U.S. firms while at the same time providing much needed technical and capital investments in the country's energy industry. President-elect Obrador has called into question his commitment to these reforms, which could significantly impact one of the hemisphere's biggest producers. Similarly in Honduras, a hydrocarbons law has been proposed which could impact U.S. investors. How is the State Department engaging with Mexico, Honduras and other countries in the region to support America's commercial and energy interests in the continent?

The Honorable Kenneth H. Merten's Answer:

Support for U.S. investors and businesses operating overseas is a top priority. Several countries, including Argentina, Brazil, Colombia, and Guyana have opened opportunities in the energy sector for U.S. private sector investment as well as government-to-government technical assistance. Our engagement has helped further open opportunities by accelerating Central American regional energy integration, advancing energy integration efforts with Mexico and the Andes, promoting solutions that created new markets for U.S. energy companies throughout the Americas. In the Caribbean, we seek to increase the use of low cost, reliable sources of energy to spur economic development to create new opportunities for U.S. energy firms and exports.

We continue to engage the current Mexican government and plan to engage the incoming administration to advance the implementation of its energy reforms and increase opportunities for U.S. businesses. In Honduras, we understand U.S. companies are concerned over the proposed hydrocarbon bill. We have met with government officials on this issue and continue to monitor developments closely.

[**Note:** The preceding question was directed to both witnesses. Prior to printing, however, no response was received from Ms. Sarah-Ann Lynch.]

Questions for the Record from Ranking Member Eliot Engel
For the Honorable Kenneth H. Merten
Advancing U.S. Interests in the Western Hemisphere
July 11, 2018

Central America – Violence Trends:

Question:

Please provide the Committee with the following data on violence in the Northern Triangle countries of El Salvador, Honduras and Guatemala:

(a) Data disaggregated by age on the overall rates of gender-based violence in the Northern Triangle countries, regardless of whether or not these acts of violence are reported to government authorities
(b) Data on incidences of gender-based violence cases reported to the authorities in the Northern Triangle countries and the percentage of perpetrators investigated, apprehended, prosecuted, and convicted
(c) Data disaggregated by age on the overall rates of domestic violence in the Northern Triangle countries, regardless of whether or not these acts of violence are reported to government authorities
(d) Data on incidences of domestic violence cases reported to the authorities in the Northern Triangle countries and the percentage of perpetrators investigated, apprehended, prosecuted, and convicted.
(e) Descriptions of the obstacles (including capacity gaps within the criminal justice system) to resolving gender-based violence cases and deterring violence against women and children in the Northern Triangle countries.
(f) Descriptions of gender-based violence trends in each of the Northern Triangle countries.
(g) Information regarding the incidence of violence, including domestic abuse, against indigenous women
(h) Information on the availability of trauma-informed legal and social services for victims of gender-based violence in Northern Triangle countries, including in shelters.
(i) Data on the number of police officers, prosecutors, court personnel, and specialized units trained in violence against women and children in Northern Triangle countries.
(j) Data on the time period from first report of crime to official verdict in gender-based violence crimes in Northern Triangle countries.
(k) Data on the availability of restoration services (including shelter, trauma care, and economic support) for women and child victims of gender-based violence in Northern Triangle countries.
(l) Data on the capacity of child welfare systems in each Northern Triangle country to protect unaccompanied children, including runaways and refugee returnees in Northern Triangle countries.
(m) Descriptions of barriers to comprehensive health care, including reproductive health care, for survivors of gender-based violence in Northern Triangle countries.

(n) Data disaggregated by age on the overall rates of violence against LGBTI individuals in the Northern Triangle countries, regardless of whether or not these acts of violence are reported to government authorities
(o) Data on incidences of violence against LGBTI individuals reported to the authorities in the Northern Triangle countries and the percentage of perpetrators investigated, apprehended, prosecuted, and convicted

Answer:

The Department and USAID developed a comprehensive Results Architecture for the U.S. Strategy for Central America to measure U.S. interagency progress in advancing security, prosperity, and governance objectives in Central America. In accordance with requirements accompanying the fiscal year 2018 appropriation, the Department submitted a progress report to Congress on this monitoring and evaluation plan in May.

There is limited disaggregated available data on gender-based violence (GBV) in the Northern Triangle. The Department is aware of a number of obstacles and trends in the region related to GBV, including unequal access to justice and health care, limited services available in indigenous languages, and few shelters for survivors. Women and girls with disabilities and indigenous, African-descendant, lesbian, and transgender women and girls often face multiple forms of discrimination, making them even more at risk when conflicts arise.

Young women and girls often face intimate partner violence and experience sexual assault or abuse by gang members, forcing them to drop out of school or relocate. Lack of accountability perpetuates existing patterns of violence and abuse. Persistent social exclusion, ingrained socio-cultural attitudes, heightened levels of generalized violence, high levels of impunity, inadequate legal frameworks, and weak institutions contribute to the insecurity of women and girls in the region. The U.S. Strategy for Central America supports programming to address these underlying conditions.

Question:

What more can the State Department do to strengthen in role in support of the capacity of states and other entities in the Northern Triangle to combat and prevent gender-based violence as a push factor for migration?

Answer:

As a part of the U.S. Strategy for Central America, we are addressing the underlying causes of gender-based violence (GBV) by working with governments and civil society in the Northern Triangle. In Honduras, we are supporting efforts to increase public advocacy against GBV, filling gaps in emergency assistance, and promoting a judicial and civil-society approach that empowers victims. In Guatemala, the U.S. government supports the 24-hour court system to reduce pre-trial detention periods, better protect victims, and increase the efficiency of the judicial system. We are also supporting a court that specializes in sexual assault, exploitation, and trafficking of women and children. In El Salvador, the U.S. government supports municipal

prevention centers to provide citizens a "one-stop shop" for crime and violence prevention services, including services for women and youth.

Central America – Family Reunification:

Question:

I recently introduced the *Central America Family Protection and Reunification Act* with Representatives Torres and Espaillat which would in part require the State Department – through our embassies in El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras – to play a much more active role in supporting Central American governments and parents on family reunification.

Can you please tell us what our embassies in these countries are doing to support family reunification?

Answer:

For questions related to current efforts in family reunification, we refer you to the Departments of Homeland Security and Health and Human Services, the U.S. government leads for this effort. The Department supports the Departments of Homeland Security and Health and Human Services by liaising with Mexican and Central American governments to ensure the United States fully complies with requirements for consular notification, communicates relevant policies, and encourages partnership with foreign governments to achieve speedy and lawful reunification. The Department remains deeply committed to working with the people of Central America to address the root causes of irregular migration. The United States has committed approximately $2.6 billion in foreign assistance to Central America for Fiscal Years 2015 to 2018. Together, we are working to address the drivers of illegal immigration and illicit trafficking and stop transnational criminal organizations, including criminal gangs.

Caribbean:

Question:

In your statement, you discussed the Administration's Caribbean 2020 Strategy. While the strategy as written is very impressive, its implementation – a full year after it was sent to Congress – leaves much to be desired.

(a) For each of the areas in the Caribbean 2020 Strategy (security, diplomacy, prosperity, energy, education and health), please provide the Committee with a timeline of when the Administration will take specific policy actions.

Answer:

This initiative cannot be unilateral: input and cooperation from our Caribbean partners is essential. In this context, we have devised and are implementing the Caribbean 2020 Strategy with limited available personnel and funding resources. Diplomatically, we consult regularly

with Caribbean officials on the Caribbean 2020 Strategy pillars. On security, we are committed to the Caribbean Basin Security Initiative, and prioritizing maritime security and capacity-building in counternarcotics and law-enforcement. We look to highlight private sector engagement and sustainable growth in a second Prosperity Roundtable with our Caribbean partners in 2018. Through the Department's Caribbean Energy Security Initiative, we are seeking options to stimulate investment in the Caribbean energy sector. We are strengthening partnerships between U.S. and Caribbean higher education institutions that teach entrepreneurship, technical, and vocational skills. We work with Caribbean community leaders on health projects, such as disaster management training with the American Red Cross, and containing Zika in Barbados and the Eastern Caribbean with the Caribbean diaspora and the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

Question:

The Strategy states, "We will hold a trade and investment conference with Caribbean countries focused on increasing bilateral trade and improving the region's investment climate and regulatory environment." When and where will this conference take place?

Answer:

The Department hosted an inaugural Caribbean Prosperity Roundtable in November 2017 with Caribbean policymakers and private sector representatives to spur economic development and trade, and plans are underway for a second Roundtable in 2018. We continue work to ensure that reconstruction efforts in the Caribbean result in resilient, cost-effective energy systems.

Question:

The Strategy states, "Were funding to become available in the future, the Department could explore expanding its diplomatic and consular presence in Eastern Caribbean countries that do not currently host a permanent U.S. diplomatic mission." In anticipation of funding becoming available, please provide the Committee with a detailed plan on how the U.S. could expand our diplomatic and consular presence in the Eastern Caribbean.

Answer:

Embassy Barbados constitutes the United States' diplomatic and security presence in the Eastern Caribbean, with support from the U.S. Embassy in Grenada and the U.S. Consular Agency in Antigua and Barbuda. Official personnel based in Embassy Barbados travel frequently to engage with government officials and other host nation interlocutors in all Eastern Caribbean countries to advance and defend bilateral and regional U.S. foreign policy goals. We are focused on ensuring that we actively promote U.S. interests from this platform and we intend to continue to do so. Any decisions on a future expansion of our diplomatic and consular presence in the Eastern Caribbean would be premised on which countries would best support the protection of U.S. citizens and advancement of U.S. interests not only bilaterally, but also regionally.

Ecuador:

Question:

In response to questions at the hearing on a *New York Times* report that U.S. delegates to the World Health Assembly fought aggressively to weaken a resolution encouraging breast-feeding, going so far as to threaten Ecuador, the sponsor of the resolution, with the removal of military assistance and trade penalties, Ambassador Merten said during the hearing that it was his understanding "from our Ambassador" and "from the folks that work on this in our bureau" that "nobody was threatened."

Did anyone from the State Department, the White House, or any other U.S. government agency threaten Ecuador in any way, or suggest that their sponsorship of this resolution would result in any response from the United States?

Answer:

No. The United States works constructively with other Member States of the World Health Organization to find common ground on issues at the World Health Assembly (WHA) and other governing bodies. On the resolution in question, the United States was a leading voice in negotiations that led to adoption of the resolution by consensus. The United States hears from a wide variety of stakeholders in advance of the annual World Health Assembly.

Question:

What exactly was communicated to the government of Ecuador on this resolution, and by whom?

Answer:

The United States communicated through various bilateral and multilateral channels that improving nutrition among mothers, infants, and young children is an important public health priority for the United States and highlighted that we share a common objective to protect and promote health and nutrition for mothers and their children. We asked the government of Ecuador to withdraw its proposed resolution as we had procedural and policy concerns with it, to include the fact that a resolution had been adopted on this topic in 2016 after a long and difficult negotiation, and that reopening that negotiation would detract from other important initiatives before the World Health Assembly (WHA). Substantively, we raised concerns with references to a controversial 2016 guidance document that sought to restrict information available to parents about safe, appropriate products for the children of mothers who for medical or personal reasons cannot breastfeed or choose not to exclusively breastfeed. In 2016, the Obama Administration raised the same concerns about the guidance. We noted that Member States consider a range of factors when determining whether and how best to address issues of inappropriate marketing or promotion of foods for infants and young children in their national contexts and that the resolution did not adequately reflect the complexity of the global public health context - or the

scope of nutrition issues being considered at the WHA. For further information, we refer you to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

Allende and Monterrey Incident:

ProPublica has reported on two specific incidents in Mexico involving State Department-funded and DEA-trained Sensitive Investigative Units (SIUs). First, in March 2011, gunmen from Los Zetas invaded the Mexican town of Allende, forty minutes from the U.S. – Mexico border, murdering between 60 and 300 civilians. This attack was sparked by a Mexican Federal Police SIU investigation aimed at taking down leaders from Los Zetas. A member of the SIU reportedly leaked information on these efforts, and the Zetas leaders ordered the attack on Allende as revenge on the individuals who had given information to the SIU in the first place. Despite the fact that the unit had a poor record of keeping intelligence out of the hands of criminals, DEA agents in Mexico City allegedly passed information to the SIU which led to this tragic chain of events. Separately, in April 2010, individuals from Los Zetas stormed a Holiday Inn in Monterrey and took hostage five individuals who have not been seen since. At the time, the DEA and the SIU were carrying out an operation from the hotel but switched to a different hotel the night before the attack. Four hotel guests and a hotel manager were reportedly mistaken as SIU members and kidnapped. According to *ProPublica*, SIU members "used personal credit cards to secure their rental cars and hotel rooms," making it easy for the individuals from Los Zetas to track them down.

Question:

What was the role of the State Department and the DEA in the Allende and Monterrey incidents?

Answer:

The State Department remains committed to working with the Mexican government to combat transnational crime. However, for detailed information on the Allende and Monterrey incidents, inquiries should be referred to the Office of the Inspector General at the Department of State.

Question:

Was there any reporting by the State Department or DEA to headquarters and/or senior officials at the Departments of State and Justice following each of these incidents?

Answer:

The State Department remains committed to working with the Mexican government to combat transnational crime. However, for detailed information on the Allende and Monterrey incidents, inquiries should be referred to the Office of the Inspector General at the Department of State.

Question:

What practices, if any, were changed by WHA, INL or the DEA in Mexico or globally as a result of the SIU's activities?

Answer:

The State Department remains committed to working with the Mexican government to combat transnational crime. However, for detailed information on the Allende and Monterrey incidents, inquiries should be referred to the Office of the Inspector General at the Department of State.

Question:

What was the chain of custody of the information that was passed to the SIU in each of these incidents? Who approved passing this information to the SIU?

Answer:

The State Department remains committed to working with the Mexican government to combat transnational crime. However, for detailed information on the Allende and Monterrey incidents, inquiries should be referred to the Office of the Inspector General at the Department of State.

Question:

The Allende tragedy was precipitated by the leak of sensitive information provided to the DEA by a local source. This information was then shared by DEA with an SIU whose commander was rumored to have connections to Mexican drug trafficking organizations. I understand that the Mexican government refuses to allow U.S. vetting of commanders of these SIUs.

Should the U.S. government share information with SIUs if we are unable to vet their leadership?

Answer:

The State Department remains committed to working with the Mexican government to combat transnational crime. However, for detailed information on the Allende and Monterrey incidents, inquiries should be referred to the Office of the Inspector General at the Department of State.

Question:

Did the State Department, DEA or any other U.S. government agency provide compensation or at least an explanation to any of the families of the victims of these incidents?

Answer:

The State Department remains committed to working with the Mexican government to combat transnational crime. However, for detailed information on the Allende and Monterrey incidents, inquiries should be referred to the Office of the Inspector General at the Department of State.

Question:

What steps could the Departments of State and Justice take to ensure greater accountability for the DEA when innocent civilians are harmed as a result of its operations?

Answer:

The State Department remains committed to working with the Mexican government to combat transnational crime. However, for detailed information on the Allende and Monterrey incidents, inquiries should be referred to the Office of the Inspector General at the Department of State.

Mexico:

Question:

Can you please specifically describe how our security cooperation with Mexico protects the American people?

Answer:

Transnational criminal organization (TCO) activity in Mexico directly affects the safety, security, and prosperity of the United States. According to the Centers for Disease Control, in 2016, more than 42,000 U.S. citizens died from drug overdoses involving prescription and illicit opioids, including heroin and synthetic opioids such as fentanyl. Over 90 percent of heroin consumed in the United States comes from Mexican TCOs. In addition to heroin, TCOs traffic fentanyl, cocaine, and methamphetamine across the U.S.-Mexico border and are the greatest criminal drug threat to the United States. U.S.-Mexico security cooperation is essential to address illicit drug trafficking and TCOs.

The Merida Initiative has fostered closer collaboration with the Government of Mexico to combat distribution of illicit drugs. In 2017, the United States and Mexico adopted a strategic approach to disrupt the entire business model of TCOs, including attacking drug production; cross-border movement of drugs, cash, and weapons; markets; and illicit revenue. Merida programs assist Mexican specialized units that work closely with U.S. law enforcement counterparts, providing Mexico with the tools to more effectively eradicate opium poppy and disrupt the TCO networks, and enhancing the capacity of Mexican officials to secure its borders.

Cuba Health Incidents:

Question:

In December, Secretary Tillerson stated that the health incidents that affected our personnel in Cuba were "targeted attacks." Since then, the Trump Administration has continued to use this description. Yet, according to press reports, no one – including the FBI – has been able to prove what happened and who, if anyone, is culpable. Meanwhile, the Trump Administration has referred to similar occurrences in China as "health incidents."

What specific evidence can you point to that shows that the health incidents in Cuba were "targeted attacks?"

Answer:

There is still much we do not know about the health attacks in Cuba. No cause or culprit behind these attacks has been identified to date. Despite the inability to identify a specific attacker or mechanism of injury, the fact pattern of these reports indicated that the attacks appeared to be targeted at the U.S. diplomatic community. The investigation into various aspects of this matter is ongoing.

Question:

What will it take for the State Department's travel warning on Cuba to be reversed?

Answer:

The protection of U.S. citizens overseas is among the Department's most fundamental missions. The information used to formulate Travel Advisories is collected from a range of sources, such as crime statistics and other information that is publicly available, information gathered from U.S. government sources, as well as assessments by our embassies and consulates. Travel Advisories also take into account decisions made to protect the security of U.S. government personnel overseas and ensure that private U.S. citizens receive appropriate security information. This analysis is undertaken without regard to bilateral political or economic considerations. The Department continues to investigate the cause of the injuries to U.S. personnel in Cuba.

Question:

When will the CDC be deployed to Cuba?

Answer:

The Department has asked the CDC to assist but we do not direct how the CDC, the premier epidemiologic investigatory body in the U.S. government, formulates and conducts its investigations. The Department stands ready to assist the CDC in this investigation as necessary and appropriate. I direct you to the CDC for any plans they have to deploy teams to Cuba.

Cuba – Impact of Downsizing on U.S. Embassy Operations:

Question:

As a result of the staff reduction at the U.S. Embassy in Cuba, the Trump Administration is extremely unlikely to meet our commitment under a 1994 immigration agreement with Cuba to issue a minimum of 20,000 travel documents. This impacts average Cubans who seek to come to the United States. At the same time, in a recent *ProPublica* article, prominent Cuban dissident Marta Beatriz Roque said that the U.S. withdrawal had already had a "dramatic" impact on human rights advocates on the island, all but eliminating their access to American diplomats and making it much more difficult for dissidents to travel to the U.S. She said, "Basically, I would say the interaction with the U.S. Embassy right now for us is at a level of zero. The embassy is not getting the information it needs about the human rights situation in Cuba. Our contact before was frequent. Now there is no contact."

What impact has the U.S. diplomatic downsizing had on our human rights work in Cuba and our ability to process visas?

Answer:

The Department monitors and advances human rights developments in Cuba, consistent with the June 2017 National Security Presidential Memorandum on Strengthening the Policy of the United States Toward Cuba. We remain engaged with and support activists, dissidents, and other members of Cuban civil society in Havana, Washington, and beyond. The Department also continues to call out the Cuban regime's enduring repression of its citizens and its recent undemocratic leadership transition.

U.S. Embassy Havana currently processes only diplomatic nonimmigrant visa applications and nonimmigrant cases for applicants with life-threatening illness. As of June 1, we are scheduling immigrant visa interviews for Cuban nationals at U.S. Embassy Georgetown, Guyana.

Question:

Have you established criteria to determine when you will re-staff the embassy?

Answer:

The Department is reviewing the threat situation presented by the health attacks in Havana through the High Threat/High Risk Assessment Process, which began June 29. Once this review is complete, we can assess the staffing situation at Embassy Havana. All staffing decisions will include safety and security considerations of U.S. government personnel and family members, as well as the interests of the United States and the Cuban people. The Department has also convened an interagency Task Force, chaired by Deputy Secretary Sullivan, to discuss the incidents in Havana and Guangzhou. The Task Force has been meeting twice weekly to assess

the situation and inform the ongoing review process. Additionally, a government-wide effort to find the cause behind the health attacks continues, as does the criminal investigation.

Question:

When exactly will you re-staff the U.S. Embassy in Cuba?

Answer:

The Department is reviewing the threat situation presented by the health attacks against our diplomats in Havana. Once this review is complete, we can assess the staffing situation at Embassy Havana. A government-wide effort to find the cause behind the health attacks continues, as does the criminal investigation. We continue to seek assurances from the Cuban government to resolve this threat—assurances which the Cuban government has not provided to date.

Question:

In the meantime, how are you maintaining critical monitoring of human rights?

Answer:

The Department continues to monitor human rights developments in Cuba by engaging regularly with independent members of Cuban civil society in Havana and Washington. We continue to advance our human rights priorities consistent with the June 2017 National Security Presidential Memorandum on Strengthening the Policy of the United States Toward Cuba by raising our concerns with the Cuban government and in international fora. The Department continues to administer the annual Congressional appropriation of economic support funds supporting democracy programs in Cuba and call out the Cuban regime's enduring repression of its citizens.

Questions for the Record from Representative Paul Cook
For the Honorable Kenneth H. Merten
Advancing U.S. Interests in the Western Hemisphere
July 11, 2018

Peru Agrarian Bonds:

Question:

I want to raise an issue that I've been personally engaged on over the last several months. I've encouraged the Peruvian Government to resolve the claims of many of my constituents who have invested in Peruvian Agrarian Reform Bonds, commonly known as "land bonds." This issue directly impacts a large pension plan in San Bernardino County and thousands of my constituents. It is my understanding that the Peruvian Government has suggested that it does not have an obligation to pay the debt now because it was issued over 50 years ago by a communist regime even though the Peruvian Supreme Court authorized the sale or transfer of these bonds on the secondary market and ruled in 2001 that the government must compensate bondholders in an amount equal to the "current value" of the debt.

What steps is the Administration taking to help resolve this issue, especially related to Peru's interest in joining the OECD?

Answer:

Officials at the Department of State and at our Embassy in Lima have met with representatives of current holders of the bonds (which were issued by left-wing Peruvian military governments between 1969 and 1979) on multiple occasions, and our door will continue to be open to them. The Department will continue our dialogue with the Peruvian government on this issue.

Each country must meet high standards to join the OECD. Peru will be held to these standards as part of any consensus decision by OECD members to issue an invitation to Peru to start the accession process.

Combatting Transnational Criminal Threats:

Question:

The region faces multiple threats from transnational criminal organizations that undermine democracies and destabilize the region. These groups include drug cartels in Mexico, the MS-13 and 18th street gangs in Central America, rebel groups like the ELN and BACRIM in Colombia, and Iran-backed Hezbollah in South America. These groups contribute to violence and insecurity in the countries where they operate, drive illegal migration from the region, extort local communities and use their money to influence government officials and undermine democratic institutions including electoral processes.

How would you assess current U.S. efforts to combat drug trafficking organizations and other transnational crime groups operating in the region?

Answer:

The Department actively engages regional partners to increase their capacity and willingness to disrupt illicit networks, dismantle criminal organizations, and protect all of our citizens. Our diplomatic engagement and capacity building directly strengthen U.S. national security by combating illicit trafficking and smuggling routes, while creating an environment for increased U.S. trade and investment. Our efforts help disrupt transnational criminal organizations, strengthen border security, combat corruption and impunity, and reduce the flow of irregular migrants, illicit drugs, and illegal goods across our southern border.

Our programs focus on the areas where these criminal networks operate, most notably Colombia, Mexico, Central America, and the Caribbean. We engage partner governments in order to improve information sharing and expand law-enforcement cooperation. Key programs include enhancements to interdiction forces, investigative capabilities, border controls, and migration management. These programs take a comprehensive approach, strengthening the rule of law and denying criminal organizations the permissive environment they need. In Mexico, INL-supported Joint Intelligence Task Forces contributed to more than 200 arrests, including principal leaders of the Sinaloa cartel, and the extradition of "El Chapo" Guzman. In Colombia, our programs build capacity for law enforcement operations against high-value targets, including Gulf Clan leaders, and assist the Colombian government in achieving drug interdictions.

Question:

How effective have Kingpin and other drug trafficking designations been on reducing drug trafficking operations and the flow of drugs to the U.S.?

Answer:

Kingpin Act designations impede drug traffickers from laundering millions of dollars in drug trafficking proceeds into legitimate businesses. They are an important U.S. government tool to hinder Transnational Criminal Organizations (TCO) from using drug money to expand their criminal enterprises. The U.S. Department of the Treasury (Treasury) is the leading U.S. agency for implementation of the Kingpin Act sanctions program. According to Treasury, since the Act's inception in 1999, more than 2,000 foreign nationals and entities running or supporting TCOs have been listed in Treasury's Specially Designated Nationals (SDN) sanctions list. As a result, billions of dollars in drug proceeds and assets have been blocked from drug traffickers' laundering operations.

Question:

How can we increase our efforts to dismantle these groups, which have contributed to the opioid epidemic in our own country?

Answer:

Nearly all of the illicit opioids available in the United States originate from abroad. Mexico is the primary source country for heroin consumed in the United States, while also being a transit country for fentanyl and precursor chemicals from China. Canada is likewise a transit country for fentanyl and precursor chemicals from China. Transnational criminal organizations (TCOs) which facilitate the production and trafficking of these illicit drugs to the United States have exacerbated the U.S. opioid epidemic by flooding the market. The Department, through the Merida Initiative, focuses on dismantling these groups by working with Mexico to target drug traffickers' entire business model. To protect American lives, we need to partner with Mexico to not only disrupt the networks that smuggle drugs, cash, and weapons across our shared border with Mexico, but also to achieve meaningful criminal justice outcomes that prosecute and deny TCOs the ability to act with impunity and profit from their crimes, and to fight the corruption that undermines our efforts.

We appreciate the Peña Nieto administration's cooperation on combating the opioid crisis, and we intend to collaborate closely with President-elect Andrés Manuel López Obrador to keep our efforts moving forward.

U.S. Anticorruption efforts:

Question:

Several high-profile corruption scandals have broken out across the region, including the Odebrecht scandal, but corruption is entrenched in every level of government, often involves the private sector, and is negatively affecting public confidence in government institutions and democracy.

What is the State Department's strategy for combatting corruption in the region?

Answer:

Pervasive corruption and poor governance erode prosperity and undermine security in this region and around the world. We support country-level ownership of anti-corruption efforts and bilateral and multilateral diplomatic and foreign assistance efforts to prevent and combat corruption. We will continue to work with our partners to improve the rule of law and strengthen independent judiciary sectors; defend freedom of expression and independent journalism to shine a light on corrupt practices; and will build upon relevant outcomes from the 2018 Summit of the Americas, including reinforcement of democratic governance in the fight against corruption. We will also continue to work closely with Congress to ensure that our efforts to combat corruption in the Western Hemisphere are robust, accountable, and coordinated.

Question:

What examples has the State Department seen of the U.S. private sector's role in addressing corruption issues and strengthening the rule of law in Latin America?

Answer:

I have observed several examples of the private sector's increased commitment to transparency in the region. American Chambers of Commerce, whose members are already subject to the Foreign Corrupt Practices Act, promote anti-corruption efforts to level the playing field for U.S. companies and seek more transparency in doing business. At the 2018 Summit of the Americas, the private sector leaders that comprise the Americas Business Dialogue issued a commitment to promote transparency and work with leaders in addressing corruption. Business leaders from multiple sectors in the United States and other Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) economies have signed codes of conduct for doing business. In Central America's Northern Triangle countries, the American Chambers of Commerce and other local business leaders have been active in pursuing formal public-private dialogues aimed at streamlining and improving transparency in infrastructure investment, public procurement, and trade and customs procedures. Private sector support bolsters reform efforts and political will to achieve new legal frameworks, empower effective civil society advocates, increase judicial capacity, and improve international coordination.

Question:

How is the U.S. engaging the private sector and countries in the region following the Summit of the Americas in Lima to implement the 57 points that were agreed to in order to ensure countries address corruption issues?

Answer:

U.S. follow up to the 2018 Summit of the Americas focuses on implementing the region's commitments to combating corruption, promoting transparency, and ensuring our security, as reflected in the leaders' "Lima Commitment" declaration. The Department is supporting Peru's efforts to develop a follow-up mechanism to ensure implementation of governments' Summit commitments, which include combating transnational criminal organizations and their corrupt activities, enhancing international legal cooperation, and combating bribery of domestic and foreign public officials, among others.

Due in large part to U.S. government and private sector efforts, the Lima Commitment encourages Summit governments to work with stakeholders, including civil society and the business community, to combat corruption and its root causes. The Department is working with the Americas Business Dialogue to ensure governments and the private sector are equally committed to transparency in doing business. The Department will seek input on implementing the Summit of the Americas outcomes from the Americas Business Dialogue and civil society leaders and continue to advocate for those stakeholders to have substantive roles in the Summit of the Americas process.

Promoting U.S. Commercial Interests in the Region:

Question:

I am concerned about the importance of protecting U.S. intellectual property rights in the region, and I've heard from U.S. businesses, especially in the pharmaceutical sector, who have invested billions of dollars in developing innovative drugs for the market. One trend I'm hearing from businesses about is recent action by some countries in Latin America to unlawfully obtain access to U.S. intellectual property using compulsory licenses on patent protected medicines. Other companies have had regulatory and bribery challenges and inconsistent application of permits and licenses in many countries.

What is the State Department doing to work with the region to address these challenges?

Answer:

The State Department is committed to working with international partners to identify practical ways to increase access to safe, effective, affordable, and life-saving medicines around the world, and to support policies that drive development of new medicines. The State Department regularly underlines our concerns regarding infringement of U.S. firms' intellectual property rights in meetings with foreign government officials in the Western Hemisphere and we advocate for strengthened IP regimes.

The U.S. government position on compulsory licensing is clearly stated in the 2018 Special 301 Report: "To maintain the integrity and predictability of IP systems, governments should use compulsory licenses only in extremely limited circumstances and after making every effort to obtain authorization from the patent owner on reasonable commercial terms and conditions. Such licenses should not be used as a tool to implement industrial policy, including providing advantages to domestic companies, or as undue leverage in pricing negotiations between governments and right holders."

Questions for the Record from Representative Brad Sherman
For the Honorable Kenneth H. Merten
Advancing U.S. Interests in the Western Hemisphere
July 11, 2018

World Health Assembly in Ecuador:

Question:

On July 8, the *New York Times* reported that the American delegation to the World Health Assembly sought to block the introduction of a resolution promoting breastfeeding. The resolution's intended sponsor, Ecuador, was threatened with "punishing trade measures" and the "withdraw[al of] crucial military aid." It has also been reported that our Ambassador in Quito said the Administration might end military assistance in northern Ecuador if the resolution was introduced.

Was Ecuador threatened over its potential introduction of the resolution by the State Department or any other U.S. government agency? Did Ambassador Chapman, or any other official, "suggest" or otherwise imply economic or military cooperation consequences if the resolution was introduced?

Answer:

No. The United States made no threats against any partner nation in relation to the proposed resolution for the May 2018 World Health Assembly. The United States works constructively with other Member States of the World Health Organization to find common ground on issues at the World Health Assembly and other governing bodies. On the resolution in question, the United States was a leading voice in negotiations that led to adoption of the resolution by consensus.

Question:

After Ecuador opted to not introduce the resolution, did the United States pressure or encourage other countries to not introduce, or to revise the language of, any resolutions relating to breastfeeding?

Answer:

The United States did not engage in pressure tactics in relation to this resolution. The United States worked collaboratively with colleagues from other nations to come to agreement on the wording of the resolution during the recent World Health Assembly.

Question:

Was the State Department in contact with representatives of any infant formula company in advance of the World Health Assembly? Is the State Department aware of any Assembly-related

contacts with such companies by any other U.S. government agencies or White House officials? If so, please describe the nature of these contacts.

Answer:

The United States hears from a wide variety of stakeholders in advance of the annual World Health Assembly. The State Department was not in contact with representatives of any infant formula company in relation to the resolution proposed by the government of Ecuador. Furthermore, the State Department is not aware of contacts with infant formula companies by any other offices of the United States government in relation to the resolution proposed by the government of Ecuador.

Question:

Will you commit to support efforts to promote breastfeeding at the World Health Assembly? Specifically, if an identical resolution to the one originally proposed by Ecuador is offered at next year's Assembly, will the United States support it?

Answer:

The United States strongly supports breastfeeding as the healthiest option for infant nutrition and development. Improving maternal, infant, and young child nutrition is a high priority among Member States at the World Health Assembly, and the United States will continue to affirm our consistent support for breastfeeding at the World Health Organization. Through USAID, the United States helped countries to promote, protect, and support breastfeeding as a way to reduce infant malnutrition and child mortality for more than 45 years with outstanding results, including the doubling of breastfeeding rates across 20 of our priority nutrition countries between 1990 and 2014. The importance of breastfeeding is not what was in dispute in an early draft of the resolution presented by the government of Ecuador. What was in dispute in the resolution were references to a controversial 2016 guidance document that sought to restrict information available to parents about safe, appropriate products for the children of mothers who for medical or personal reasons cannot breastfeed or choose not to exclusively breastfeed. In 2016, the Obama Administration raised the same concerns about the guidance.

Questions for the Record from Representative F. James Sensenbrenner
For the Honorable Kenneth H. Merten
Advancing U.S. Interests in the Western Hemisphere
July 11, 2018

Working with Peru:

Question:

"There is concern that the government of Peru has thus far been unable to resolve the claims of many of our constituents who have invested in Peruvian Agrarian Reform bonds, commonly known as "land bonds." These constituents are hard working men and women, often in blue collar jobs, who have invested via their pension funds, which are already facing considerable financial strain. Though the former President of Peru Pedro Pablo Kuczynski assured me last year that he would meet with the U.S. bondholders, to date the government has refused to do so. In her confirmation hearing, the WHA Assistant Secretary nominee committed to working with the Peruvian government to achieve a final resolution to this issue."

What steps can the Department of State take to encourage Peru to fulfill its obligations to U.S. citizens on these notes?

Answer:

Officials at the Department of State and at our Embassy in Lima have met with representatives of current holders of the bonds (which were issued by left-wing Peruvian military governments between 1969 and 1979) on multiple occasions, and our door will continue to be open to them. The Department will continue our dialogue with the Peruvian government on this issue.

Question:

Is the United States willing to block Peru's membership request into the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) until the bond issue is resolved?

Answer:

Each country must meet high standards to join the OECD. Peru will be held to these standards as part of any consensus decision by OECD members to issue an invitation to Peru to start the accession process.

Questions for the Record from Representative Joaquin Castro
Advancing U.S. Interests in the Western Hemisphere
July 11, 2018

The Honorable Kenneth H. Merten's Answers

Family Separation

Question:

What role does the State Department play in family reunification for parents who have already been deported?

Answer:

The State Department is not involved in implementing U.S. border apprehension and deportation policies, though we communicate with foreign governments to help them understand how U.S. policies may affect their citizens. For questions related to current efforts in family reunification, we refer you to the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) and the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS), the U.S. government lead in the effort. We coordinate closely with DHS, HHS, and other federal agencies in immigration-related discussions with the Central American and Mexican governments, and with respect to the topic in other regional fora. Further, we are working closely with our partners in Central America and Mexico to ensure that individuals returning to the region who hold U.S. citizenship are appropriately documented and effectively integrated into society.

Question:

Has this issue come up in any meetings with countries abroad or international organizations? If so, please detail any such high-level interactions.

Answer:

The Department is committed to our partnership with the Central American and Mexican governments to expand economic opportunity, improve governance, and enhance citizen security in the region. We regularly discuss immigration-related issues with government counterparts in bilateral and multilateral meetings, including at international fora.

On June 29, the OAS Permanent Council approved by consensus a resolution proposed by Mexico, El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras expressing concern regarding implementation of the "zero tolerance" policy and the separation of migrant families along the U.S. southwest border. The final text called on the United States to continue implementing the June 20 executive order ending family separations. The United States delivered a statement regarding U.S. immigration practices and included a footnote clarifying various legal understandings and concerns. Additionally, we communicated our openness to considering a site visit by the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (IACHR) to the southwest border, as requested in the resolution.

Venezuela

Question:

Is the State Department tracking the emigration of Venezuelan citizens who have fled Venezuela due to the ongoing political and economic turmoil in the country? To which countries have they fled?

Answer:

The State Department's Bureau of Population, Refugees, and Migration (PRM) tracks the outflows of Venezuelans and maintains an estimate of the number of Venezuelans present throughout Latin America and the Caribbean. The countries in the region hosting the largest population of Venezuelans are Colombia, Peru, Ecuador, Chile and Brazil. However, there are also some smaller countries in the region, especially Trinidad and Tobago, which are hosting large numbers of Venezuelans in proportion to their overall population.

Question:

What efforts is the United States government undertaking to support the ability of these countries to accommodate these emigres?

Answer:

The United States, through the Department of State's Bureau of Population, Refugees, and Migration (State/PRM) and USAID's Bureau for Democracy, Conflict and Humanitarian Assistance, is providing life-saving humanitarian assistance to vulnerable people in countries affected by an influx of fleeing Venezuelans. This assistance, provided in coordination with other humanitarian organizations and relevant government authorities, includes shelter for the most vulnerable, safe drinking water and hygiene supplies, food, protection from violence and exploitation, and access to work, education, and medical care. In FY 2017 and to date in FY 2018, the United States has provided more than $37 million in humanitarian funding for the regional response to the Venezuela refugee and migration crisis. The funding includes nearly $24 million in State/PRM funding, including support for the regional, multi-sectoral response efforts of UNHCR and IOM in the broader Latin America and Caribbean region; $6 million for USAID/FFP-supported programs in Colombia and Ecuador; and nearly $7.5 million for USAID/OFDA-supported programs in Brazil, Colombia and the region. We are monitoring migration flows and assessing options for additional humanitarian assistance in the region given the scale of the displacement.

Question:

How many such Venezuelan citizens have moved to the United States as a result of the political and economic situation in Venezuela?

Answer:

The political and economic crisis inflicted by the Maduro regime has forced millions of Venezuelans to flee their homeland. The United States is supporting emergency response efforts throughout the hemisphere to help mitigate the plight of the Venezuelan people. We support the democratic aspirations of the people of Venezuela and urge an end to the crisis along with a swift return to a prosperous democracy.

For specifics on immigration into the United States, we refer you to the Department of Homeland Security.

Question:

From which countries do the security forces of the Venezuelan government procure weapons, equipment, training?

Answer:

The Venezuelan government procures the majority of its weapons, equipment, and training from Russia and China. It sustains a small amount of legacy U.S. and European equipment.

Question:

Has the United States provided or sold any weapons, equipment, or training to Venezuelan security forces since January 2008? If so, what please detail any such transfers or sales.

Answer:

No. Venezuelan security forces have not received any weapons, equipment, training, or any form of security assistance from the United States since 2006.

NAFTA

Question:

When will the United States, Mexico, and Canada wrap up NAFTA negotiations?

Answer:

USTR is renegotiating NAFTA to modernize the agreement in order to reflect the highest standards and to rebalance the agreement to better serve U.S. interests.

The United States, Canada, and Mexico have held seven rounds of negotiations covering more than two dozen different topics. The NAFTA countries have held discussions at all levels of government since the last formal negotiating round in March.

The Department continues to support ongoing efforts and the U.S. commitment to rebalance and upgrade the agreement.

Question:

What are the negotiating objectives of the United States in renegotiating the NAFTA agreement? Have these objectives of the United States changed during the course of the renegotiations, since January 2017?

Answer:

In renegotiating NAFTA, the Administration seeks to create more balanced, reciprocal trade that supports more high-paying jobs for Americans and grows the U.S. economy. We seek to modernize the agreement to reflect the highest standards, and to rebalance the agreement to better serve the interests of American workers, farmers, ranchers, and businesses. These goals have not significantly changed since USTR first published negotiating objectives in July 2017 with an update in November 2017.

Question:

Has the United States government conducted an analysis of the economic costs of withdrawal from NAFTA? Please provide a copy to me if any such analysis exists.

Answer:

The President has made it clear that we need more balanced, reciprocal trade that supports more high-paying U.S. jobs and grows the U.S. economy. The United States is working to secure the best possible deal for American workers and businesses.

As you are aware, USTR has the lead in the negotiations for the United States, with support from the Department of State and other agencies. The Department will continue to support U.S. negotiating objectives.

Question:

Of the various chapters of a renegotiated NAFTA, which chapters have negotiators finalized? Which chapters are remaining?

Answer:

We have completed seven formal rounds in the renegotiation of the NAFTA. To date, we have concluded substantive discussions in nine chapters and several sectoral annexes. The nine chapters include small and medium-sized enterprises, competition, anti-corruption, good regulatory practices, administration and publication, sanitary and phytosanitary, telecom, technical barriers to trade, and competitiveness. Significant issues remain to be negotiated. The chapters remaining include energy, customs/trade facilitation, financial services, investment, digital trade, rules of origin, and government procurement, among others.

Economic Support and Integration

Question:

What efforts are the Department of State and USAID currently taking to support economic integration, connectivity, and commerce between the United States and Latin America and the Caribbean?

Answer:

The United States has free trade agreements with 11 countries in Latin America and the Caribbean, playing a significant part in the $1.1 trillion in goods and services we traded with the region last year. The Department is participating in the renegotiation of NAFTA to bring it in line with 21st century standards, especially on digital trade. As part of the U.S. Strategy for Central America, USAID is working to enhance regional integration and improve trade facilitation, targeting assistance on key ports of entry and economic corridors to reduce the time and cost of trading across borders. These efforts are boosting regional competitiveness and reducing costs for U.S. and local businesses.

The United States is an official observer to the Pacific Alliance (Mexico, Chile, Peru, Colombia), which is enhancing economic integration across the region. The Department has supported the Pacific Alliance in the areas of small business development, entrepreneurship, and trade facilitation and is developing additional areas of cooperation. The Department also supports similar activities through the OAS. The Department's Caribbean 2020 strategy is engaging in areas such as expanding internet access and promoting sustainable economic policies across the region in key forums such as the U.S.-CARICOM Trade and Investment Council.

[**Note:** The preceding questions were directed to both witnesses. Prior to printing, however, no responses were received from Ms. Sarah-Ann.]

Questions for the Record from Representative Norma J. Torres
For the Honorable Kenneth H. Merten
Advancing U.S. Interests in the Western Hemisphere
July 11, 2018

"On July 7, 2018, the Secretary of State published the following notice in the Federal Register:

'By virtue of the authority vested in me as the Secretary of State, including pursuant to section 7045(a)(4)(B) of the Department of State, Foreign Operations, and Related Programs Appropriations Act 2017 (Div. J, Pub. L. 115-31), I hereby certify that the central Government of Guatemala is taking effective steps, which are in addition to those steps taken since the certification and report submitted during the prior year, to:

Work cooperatively with an autonomous, publicly accountable entity to provide oversight of the Plan;

Combat all forms of government and international agency corruption and impunity when credibly alleged;

Implement reforms, policies, and programs to improve transparency and strengthen public institutions, including increasing the capacity and independence of the judiciary and the Office of the Attorney General;

Implement a policy to ensure that local communities, civil society organizations (including indigenous and other marginalized groups), private sector, faith-based organizations, and local governments are consulted in the design and participate in the implementation and evaluation of activities of the Plan that affect such communities, organizations, and governments;

Counter the activities of criminal gangs, drug traffickers, and organized crime;
Investigate and prosecute in the civilian justice system government personnel, including military and police personnel, who are credibly alleged to have violated human rights and to ensure that such personnel are cooperating in such cases;

Cooperate with commissions against corruption and impunity and with regional human rights entities;

Support programs to reduce poverty, expand education and vocational training for at-risk youth, create jobs, and promote equitable economic growth particularly in areas contributing to large numbers of migrants;

Implement a plan that includes goals, benchmarks, and timelines to create a professional, accountable civilian police force and end the role of the military in internal policing, and to make such plan available to the Department of State;

Protect the rights of all citizens, including protection of freedom of the press;

Increase government efficiencies, including implementing tax reforms and strengthening customs agencies to promote a more stable economy and job creation;

Resolve commercial disputes, including the confiscation of real property, between U.S. entities and such government.'

On August 27, 2017, two days after the Attorney General and the International Commission against Impunity in Guatemala (CICIG) announced they were seeking to lift President Morales's immunity from prosecution, Morales declared the head of CICIG, Iván Velásquez, persona non grata and ordered him to leave the country. One of Morales's ministers resigned rather than carry out the order, and the constitutional court—Guatemala's highest court—blocked the order.

On September 11, 2017, the Guatemalan Congress voted to defeat a motion to remove President Morales' immunity from prosecution. Two-thirds of the 158-member legislature, or 105 deputies, are needed to remove an official's immunity; only 25 deputies voted to remove his immunity. About 20 percent of the legislators are also under investigation.

On September 13, 2017, the Guatemalan Congress approved the "National Emergency" bill. This bill would have reduced penalties for violations of campaign finance laws, and made party accountants—rather than party leaders—responsible for such violations. Public outcry was such that the Congress repealed the bill, which the public labeled the 'Pact of the Corrupt,' two days later. Thousands of protesters demanded the resignation of Morales, and of the 107 legislators who voted to weaken anticorruption laws.

On September 21, 2017, the Guatemalan Congress again voted to continue to protect the president from further investigation, although the number voting to rescind his immunity rose to 70. Attorney General Thelma Aldana and CICIG had sought to lift President Morales's immunity from prosecution so they could further investigate alleged violations of campaign finance laws, as well as potentially illegal bonuses paid to him by the military.

On Wednesday, July 4, 2018, the National Civil Police recalled 20 police officers who were assigned to provide security for CICIG, leaving only 25 officers to provide security for the Commission, even though Article 8 of the agreement between the Guatemalan Government and the United Nations states that 'the Government of Guatemala shall take such effective and adequate measures as may be required to ensure the security and protection of the persons referred to in this Agreement.'

Beginning on June 26, 2018, the Chief of Security of the Guatemalan Public Ministry ordered a series of changes to the security measures provided for the security of former Attorney General Thelma Aldana, including the replacement of vehicles provided for her security with older models in poor condition, including one vehicle which lacked brakes.

Question:

Does the Department agree that these actions are contrary to the requirement that the Government of Guatemala 'Implement reforms, policies, and programs to improve transparency and strengthen public institutions, including increasing the capacity and independence of the judiciary and the Office of the Attorney General' and the requirement that the Government of Guatemala 'Cooperate with commissions against corruption and impunity and with regional human rights entities'?

Answer:

While serious challenges remain in the implementation of reforms, policies, and programs to improve transparency and strengthen public institutions, the Department notes that Guatemala has made sufficient progress to meet the Congressional criteria.

Question:

If so, how did the Department take these actions into account when making its decision to issue the certification described above?

Answer:

The Department certified Guatemala following a thorough evaluation of the steps taken by the Guatemalan government to meet each of the 12 Congressional criteria, as set forth in the FY 2017 Consolidated Act.

Specific progress has been made in several areas. For example, the public ministry, in collaboration with the International Commission Against Impunity in Guatemala (CICIG), thoroughly investigated current and former government officials and private sector actors credibly alleged to have committed corrupt acts. On May 3, following a transparent nomination process, President Morales complied with the guidelines set forth by the postulation commission to select a qualified new attorney general, Maria Consuelo Porras Argueta, with credentials to continue the fight against corruption. At the request of President Morales, Guatemala's congress increased the public ministry's 2017 budget by 22.7 percent over 2016 levels to include funding for anticorruption and internal affairs prosecutors units and the establishment of new investigative units to work alongside CICIG in the Western Highlands. These were all positive effects that factored into the decision to certify.

Question:

To what extent is the Department concerned that issuing a certification despite the preponderance of such actions could send a policy signal that the United States supports or countenances such actions?

Answer:

Continued collaboration with the Guatemalan government is vital to our efforts to stem illegal immigration, fight corruption, combat impunity, enhance security cooperation, and increase economic opportunity in Central America.

Certifying Guatemala allows U.S. foreign assistance to move forward as intended to advance our strategy for Central America, including through support for the International Commission Against Impunity in Guatemala (CICIG) and capacity building for the Public Ministry, and through programs that work to address the economic drivers of illegal immigration.

Question:

What actions does the Department intend to take to deter future actions that are contrary to the requirement that the Government of Guatemala 'Implement reforms, policies, and programs to improve transparency and strengthen public institutions, including increasing the capacity and independence of the judiciary and the Office of the Attorney General' and the requirement that the Government of Guatemala 'Cooperate with commissions against corruption and impunity and with regional human rights entities'?"

Answer:

The Department is committed to using all of the tools at our disposal, including travel restrictions and visa revocations, to ensure individuals who have violated human rights, have engaged in corruption, or committed other criminal acts, including impeding the fight against corruption and impunity, do not secure safe haven in the United States.

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