

THE CURSE OF SOCIALISM IN CENTRAL AMERICA AND THE CARIBBEAN

HEARING

BEFORE THE

SUBCOMMITTEE ON THE WESTERN HEMISPHERE
OF THE

COMMITTEE ON FOREIGN AFFAIRS
U.S. HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

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C O N T E N T S

REPRESENTATIVES

Opening Statement of Subcommittee Chairwoman Maria Salazar	Page 1
Opening Statement of Subcommittee Ranking Member Joaquin Castro	1

WITNESSES

Statement of Eric Jacobstein, Deputy Assistant Secretary, Bureau of Western Hemisphere Affairs, U.S. Department of State	3
Prepared Statement	6
Statement of Greg Howell, Senior Deputy Assistant Administrator, Bureau For Latin America and the Caribbean, U.S. Agency for International Development	9
Prepared Statement	11

APPENDIX

Hearing Notice	30
Hearing Minutes	31
Hearing Attendance	32

THE CURSE OF SOCIALISM IN CENTRAL AMERICA AND THE CARIBBEAN

Thursday, June 27, 2024

HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES,
SUBCOMMITTEE ON THE WESTERN HEMISPHERE,
COMMITTEE ON FOREIGN AFFAIRS,
Washington, DC.

The subcommittee met, pursuant to notice, at 2:13 p.m., in room 2172, Rayburn House Office Building, Hon. Maria Elvira Salazar (chair of the subcommittee) presiding.

Ms. SALAZAR. So the Subcommittee on the Western Hemisphere will come to order.

The purpose of this hearing is to analyze the impact of socialist policies in Central America and the Caribbean and how they undermine American interests in our hemisphere.

Now I am going to recognize myself for an opening statement. It's just going to be few comments.

OPENING STATEMENT OF CHAIRWOMAN MARIA SALAZAR

Thank you very much to Mr. Jacobstein for being here once again and enduring our questioning. I mean, it speaks so highly—I always say it speaks so highly of the American democracy of having people of your stature just like Mr. Howell, and thank you for both being here.

I mean, do you foresee something like this in Venezuela or in Cuba or Nicaragua where the government officials have to come and answer questions to Congress?

So I know—I understand that this is fatiguing and I am sure that you—that you don't necessarily like coming here but I thank you very much and you are a perfect testament of what this wonderful system stands for—democracy.

So thank you for being here and enduring our questions. I am sure that mine are going to be a little bit more rigorous or maybe not as pleasant as my ranking member. So thank you once again, and I will get to it very quickly.

Now I recognize the ranking member, the gentleman from Texas, Mr. Castro.

OPENING STATEMENT OF RANKING MEMBER JOAQUIN CASTRO

Mr. CASTRO. Thank you, Chairwoman Salazar, for convening this hearing on U.S. policy toward Central America and Cuba, and welcome to our witnesses from the State Department and USAID. Great to see you all again.

For decades the United States viewed the hemisphere almost solely through the very cold war lens that prioritized almost at the expense of everything else rooting out communism above all other considerations, and in many cases the United States used its influence to suppress democratic movements and elevate governments that would protect our economic interests and side with the United States over the Soviet Union, often at the expense of their own citizens.

While we won the cold war, which is obviously very important and crucial not only for the United States, our allies, and the world, we lost much of our credibility as defenders of democracy, as partners that would build ties based on our shared democratic values.

So when we frame the challenges of the hemisphere through a left versus right or socialism versus capitalism lens I believe we fail to fully analyze the modern day challenges that both Central America and the Caribbean face, for example, rampant corruption, democratic backsliding, attacks against the rule of law and an independent judiciary, lack of respect for human rights, increasing vulnerability to climate disasters due to climate change, exclusion of indigenous, Afro Latino, and LGBTQI+ communities in the political process, lack of economic opportunity and slow recovery from COVID-19, widespread violence at the hands of transnational crime organizations and gangs.

And to be clear, and I've said this many times in this committee—even before I was ranking member I said it in the full committee—I believe that there are leaders on the left and the right in Latin America and around the world who have abused their people and I actually think that when you get to a certain point of abuse and repression it's no longer about political ideology.

You become an autocrat. You become an autocratic leader, and we've seen that happen from both right—leaders on the right and leaders on the left and I think that we should stand up against those leaders wherever they come from.

So but also, to be clear, it's not our role as Americans to choose the leaders for these countries. They have to go through a democratic process of choosing their leaders or even to choose their economic systems.

Again, the people have to put those systems in place and they have to be committed to sustaining them. We must provide our democratic allies in both regions including Costa Rica, Panama, and the Dominican Republic, the tools needed to strengthen their democratic institutions.

That engagement was on full display in Guatemala where the Biden administration made a dedicated and concerted effort to support Guatemala's democratic process and the peaceful transfer of power just 70 years after the United States overthrew the country's democratically elected president Jacobo Arbenz.

Undoubtedly, the leaders of Cuba, Venezuela, and Nicaragua present the opposite version, one that suppresses the economic hopes and dreams of their people.

But we must realize that engaging in cold war rhetoric only helps authoritarians in all three countries continue to justify their denial of economic, political, and social rights.

As you all know, they often use us, the United States, as an effective foil for their own leadership and to bolster their own political fortunes in their countries, and where we are consistent focused on today's challenges and use sanctions carefully we can make inroads in changing the behavior of these authoritarian leaders.

But we have to focus the conversations on ways we can pragmatically work with countries in the region. That means partnering on anti-corruption and money laundering efforts, engaging with human rights instruments, driving public and private sector investment, and working on partnering on climate resiliency among other things.

That means cooperating on stopping the export of guns manufactured here in the United States that are used by gangs and transnational crime organizations in Haiti, Jamaica, Mexico, Guatemala, and Honduras to exacerbate the various security and stability crises in the region.

That's why I introduced the America's Regional Monitoring of Arms Sales Act and the Stop Arming Cartels Act. Democratic values are what our country was founded upon.

By focusing the conversation on what the United States can do today to partner with countries to foster inclusive, responsive, transparent, and democratic institutions we can better promote a secure, stable, and free Central America and Caribbean and that's what can help us address shared challenges like irregular migration and climate change.

But we must do it together and we must chart a path that focuses on the right set of priorities.

With that, I yield back, Chairwoman.

Ms. SALAZAR. Thank you, Ranking Member.

Other members of the committee are reminded that opening statements may be submitted for the record.

Today we have witnesses from the State Department and USAID who cover American interests in Central America and the Caribbean for the Biden administration.

Mr. Eric Jacobstein is a deputy assistant secretary for the Bureau of Western Hemisphere Affairs at the United States Department of State, and Mr. Greg Howell is the senior deputy assistant administrator for the Bureau of Latin America and the Caribbean of the United States Agency for International Development.

Thank you for being here. Your full statements will be made part of the record and I will ask each of you to keep it to 5 minutes in order to allow time for other members.

I now recognize Mr. Jacobstein for his opening statement.

STATEMENT OF ERIC JACOBSTEIN

Mr. JACOBSTEIN. Chairwoman Salazar, Ranking Member Castro, members of the subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to testify today.

I am pleased to outline our overall approach to Central America and the Caribbean and to specifically discuss how the administration addresses Cuba and Nicaragua as we work to build a more democratic, prosperous, secure and climate resilient hemisphere.

Our work in Central America is guided by the root causes strategy which addresses long-term structural challenges. We're proud of our work in the root causes strategy where we see results across the board including in the fight against corruption.

A key part of our strategy is the vice president's Central America Forward initiative, which has generated \$5.2 billion in new private sector commitments.

In the Caribbean our focus is on strengthening regional and civilian security cooperation and promoting economic prosperity including through enhanced climate resilience and adaptation, energy independence, digital connectivity, and disaster preparedness.

In Cuba our policy focuses on support for the Cuban people including their human rights and fundamental freedoms and their political and economic well-being.

The Cuban regime holds approximately 1,000 unjustly detained political prisoners behind bars. This includes hundreds of peaceful protesters from July 11, 2021. We continuously push for their unconditional and immediate release through bilateral and multilateral channels.

Following the July 2021 protests the administration imposed Global Magnitsky sanctions on components of personnel of the Cuban military and the ministry of the interior responsible for the crackdown on these peaceful protesters.

The State Department also imposed visa restrictions on 28 Cuban officials who enabled unjust detentions and sham trials of peaceful protesters.

We continually make it clear to the Cuban government that human rights remain our top priority in the bilateral relationship.

Communism failed in Cuba. The Cuban people are eager to control their own economic destiny. Today, more than one-third of Cuba's labor force works in one of the island's 11,000-plus private businesses.

The Cuban people still view the United States as a preferred partner. We, therefore, cannot cede space to Russia or China and must continue to foster the growth of the private sector.

We recognize that this will not turn Cuba into a capitalist democracy overnight but we believe that Cuba's dynamic private sector offers ordinary Cubans opportunity for a better life.

In Nicaragua we're committed to promoting accountability for the Ortega-Murillo regime and its brutal repression of civil society, its blatant disregard for human rights, its efforts to fuel irregular migration toward our Southwest border, and its deepening ties with malign actors.

Our efforts have helped to disrupt migratory flows and stymied access to resources that enable the regime to hold its grip on power. We continue to take aggressive measures to curb regular migration throughout the hemisphere and disincentivize use of the Managua Airport by those seeking to profit off vulnerable migrants.

In November 2023 we implemented a new visa restriction policy that targets individuals running charter flights into Nicaragua designed primarily to facilitate irregular migration into the United States.

We've used this new policy to hold bad actors accountable. Together with the Department of Homeland Security and the Treasury we issued a May 15 policy alert notifying commercial airline carriers, air charter companies, travel agents, and service providers of abuse by migrant smuggling and human trafficking organizations operating in and through Nicaragua.

We also are focused on Russia's malign efforts to forge military and security relationships with countries in the region which are aimed at undermining democracy and weakening Western influence.

To address this challenge, on May 15th the administration sanctioned the Russian police training center in Managua for its role in enabling the Nicaraguan national police's repression of the Nicaraguan people.

The Biden-Harris administration continues to take actions to ensure the Nicaraguan regime's ill-gotten gains cannot be used to further its brutal repression of civil society.

In March we designated Nicaragua's attorney general, who's played a role in the regime's property seizures, and in May we designated two Nicaraguan gold mining companies that allowed the regime to profit from corrupt operations, adding to the list of 12 other entities and 50 individuals sanctioned by the Treasury Department under Presidential Executive Order 13851, which was amended by Executive Order 14088.

In addition, the State Department has taken steps to impose visa restrictions on more than 1,400 individuals connected to attempts to silence the voices of the Nicaraguan people through repression, unjust detentions, and sham trials.

Thank you again for the opportunity to testify here today and I look forward to your questions.

[The prepared statement of Mr. Jacobstein follows:]

**Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for Western Hemisphere Affairs
Eric Jacobstein
Testimony for House Foreign Affairs Committee,
The Curse of Socialism in Central America and Caribbean
June 27, 2024**

Chairman Salazar, Ranking Member Castro, members of the committee, thank you for the opportunity to testify today.

I am pleased to outline our overall approach to Central America and the Caribbean and to specifically discuss how the Administration addresses Cuba and Nicaragua as we work to build a more democratic, prosperous, secure and climate resilient Western Hemisphere.

Our work in Central America is guided by the Root Causes Strategy which addresses long-term, structural challenges. We are proud of our work on the Root Causes Strategy where we see results across the board, including in the fight against corruption. A key part of our strategy is the Vice President's Central America Forward initiative which has generated \$5.2 billion in new private sector commitments.

In the Caribbean, our focus is on strengthening regional and civilian security cooperation and promoting economic prosperity, including through enhanced climate resilience and adaptation, energy independence, digital connectivity, and disaster preparedness.

In Cuba, our policy focuses on support for the Cuban people, including their human rights and fundamental freedoms and their political and economic well-being.

The Cuban regime holds approximately 1,000 unjustly detained political prisoners behind bars. This includes hundreds of peaceful protestors from July 11, 2021. We continuously push for their unconditional and immediate release through bilateral and multilateral channels.

Following those protests, the Administration imposed Global Magnitsky sanctions on components and personnel of Cuban military and Ministry of Interior responsible for the crackdown on peaceful protestors. The State Department also imposed visa restrictions on 28 Cuban officials who enabled unjust detentions and sham trials of peaceful protesters. We continually make it clear to the Cuban government that human rights remain the top priority in our bilateral relationship.

Communism failed in Cuba. The Cuban people are eager to control their own economic destiny. Today, more than one third of Cuba's labor force works in one of the island's 11,000-plus private businesses.

Despite Russian efforts to guide the development of Cuba's private sector, the Cuban people still view the United States as their preferred partner. We cannot cede this space to Russia or China and must continue to foster the growth of the private sector.

We recognize that this will not turn Cuba into a capitalist democracy overnight, but we believe that Cuba's dynamic private sector offers ordinary Cubans opportunity for a better life.

In Nicaragua, we are committed to promoting accountability for the Ortega-Murillo regime's brutal repression of civil society, blatant disregard for human rights, efforts to fuel irregular migration towards our southwest border and deepening ties with malign actors. Our efforts have helped to disrupt migratory flows and stymied access to resources that enable the regime to hold its grip on power.

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to facilitate irregular migration to the United States. We have used this new policy to hold bad actors accountable.

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To address this challenge, on May 15, the Administration sanctioned the Russian Police Training Center in Managua for its role in enabling the Nicaraguan National Police's repression of the Nicaraguan people.

The Biden-Harris Administration continues to take actions to ensure the Nicaraguan regime's ill-gotten gains cannot be used to further its brutal repression of civil society. In March, we designated Nicaragua's Attorney General, who has played a role in the regime's property seizures. And in May, we designated two Nicaraguan gold mining companies that allowed the regime to profit from corrupt operations, adding to the list of 12 other entities and 50 individuals sanctioned by the Department of the Treasury under Presidential Executive Order 13851 as amended by E.O. 14088. In addition, the State Department has taken steps to impose visa restrictions on more than 1,400 individuals connected to attempts to silence the voices of Nicaraguans through repression, unjust detentions, and trials lacking fair trial guarantees.

Chairman Salazar, Ranking Member Castro, members of the committee, thank you for the opportunity to testify before you today. I look forward to your questions.

Ms. SALAZAR. Thank you, Mr. Jacobstein, and I recognize Mr. Howell for his opening statement.

STATEMENT OF GREG HOWELL

Mr. HOWELL. Chair Salazar, Ranking Member Castro, distinguished members of the subcommittee, thank you for the invitation to discuss USAID's work to advance economic opportunity, democratic values, and human rights in Central America and the Caribbean.

In the decades that USAID has spent working in the region we've seen the consequences of governments putting political agendas ahead of people and we've learned how to address these challenges most effectively.

We forge our partnerships not with specific political parties or administrations but with people and institutions that bravely push for democratic change. This work is critical to local communities, to broader regional stability, and our own national security here at home.

That's especially true of USAID's efforts in countries like Nicaragua, Cuba, and beyond. In Nicaragua the Ortega-Murillo regime's repressive or authoritarian rule is creating an increasingly nonpermissive environment.

With support from malign actors like the PRC and Russia, the regime is persecuting civil society actors, closing independent media outlets, and attacking those who speak out against the regime.

USAID stands with the brave Nicaraguans making their voices heard in support of democratic principles and human rights. Those efforts are especially important as USAID is one of the few donors supporting human rights defenders and implementing partners exiled abroad.

Some of our deepest, most enduring foreign partnerships have stemmed from supporting other nations in their darkest hour. The work of these partners to call out the regime's abuses and advocate for democratic change is vitally important and USAID is proud to stand with them.

We support those who shine a light on injustice across Central America through the Voices Initiative, which brings together USAID, the State Department, and like-minded partners so we can bring to bear all of the U.S. government's tools to protect and promote civic space.

At USAID we've used our voice to protect our partners and those under threat, consulting closely with organizations to better understand risks they are facing and increasing our programming to meet some of those challenges.

That includes our work offering at-risk human rights defenders, journalists, democracy activists, and anti-corruption champions with legal, psychosocial, and even relocation assistance as well as fellowship opportunities in the U.S. universities for those from Guatemala, Honduras, El Salvador, and Nicaragua.

These regional efforts ensure that those fighting for democracy have access to protection and can continue their work from outside of their countries if needed.

And in Cuba USAID operates within the parameters of the Cuban Democracy and Libertad Acts. For nearly 30 years across four U.S. administrations USAID has helped the people of Cuba in the face of oppressive government rule, supporting human rights, fundamental freedoms, and democratic values by strengthening civil society and providing improved access to information.

USAID provides ongoing humanitarian assistance to political prisoners and their families and to individuals who face hardship because of their political beliefs.

There are currently more than a thousand political prisoners in Cuba and USAID provides assistance to approximately 800 of those individuals and thousands of Cuban families, and our assistance includes nutritional food items, vitamins, over the counter medicines which are an invaluable lifeline to improve their physical and psychological well-being.

USAID also promotes the free flow of information to, from, and within Cuba through greater access to independent news.

Over the last decade USAID has helped train hundreds of journalists whose work in major international outlets has counteracted information manipulation by the regime, documenting the dismal conditions on the island and highlighting the human rights violations by the regime.

Those violations include forced labor, garnished wages, threats, and surveillance endured by Cuban doctors who serve in overseas medical missions.

We are proud to support brave Cuban citizens who are risking their lives to advocate for a free and democratic future for their country.

At a time of global power competition in the hemisphere and alarming examples of leaders in the region betraying democratic principles, it is in the interest of the United States to foster partnerships that work toward a more peaceful, democratic, prosperous, and stable Western Hemisphere.

That is why it is critical that USAID maintains a presence across the region and supports those who champion our shared values.

Thank you, and I look forward to your questions.

[The prepared statement of Mr. Howell follows:]

**Written Testimony of
Greg Howell, Senior Deputy Assistant Administrator for Latin America and the Caribbean
Before the House Foreign Affairs Subcommittee on Western Hemisphere
“The Curse of Socialism in Central America and the Caribbean”
June 27, 2024**

Chair Salazar, Ranking Member Castro, distinguished members of the Subcommittee, thank you for the invitation to discuss the work USAID does to advance economic opportunity, democratic values, and human rights in Central America and the Caribbean.

In the decades that USAID has spent working in the region, we have seen the consequences of governments putting political agendas ahead of people and we have learned how to address these challenges most effectively.

Globally, we forge our partnerships not with specific political parties or administrations but with people, democratic institutions, the private sector, and civil society organizations that share our values and bravely push for democratic change, prosperity and human rights in difficult conditions. This is work that's not only critical to local communities, but to broader regional stability and our own national security here at home.

That's especially true of USAID's efforts in countries like Nicaragua, Cuba, and beyond.

Nicaragua

In Nicaragua, where the Ortega-Murillo regime's repressive authoritarian rule is creating an increasingly volatile, non-permissive environment, USAID stands with the brave Nicaraguans who are continuing to make their voices heard in support of the democratic principles and respect for human rights that will be critical to any democratic progress. The regime, with the support of malign actors including the PRC and Russia, is increasingly persecuting civil society actors, forcing the closure of most independent media outlets, and attacking religious institutions and individuals who speak out against the regime.

Our efforts in Nicaragua are especially important, as USAID is one of few donors supporting human rights defenders and implementing partners exiled abroad. While the context is volatile, some of our deepest, most enduring foreign partnerships have stemmed from supporting other nations in their darkest hour. The work of these partners to call out the regime's abuses and advocate for democratic change is vitally important, and USAID is proud to stand behind them.

Central America Programming

We work to support those who shine a light on injustice across Central America through the Voices initiative. Administrator Power launched the Voices Initiative at the 2022 Summit of the Americas to bring together USAID, the State Department, and like-minded partners including governments, civil society, and the private sector so we can bring to bear all of the U.S. government's tools – from public and private diplomacy, to foreign assistance programming, to enforcement authorities – to protect and promote civic space.

At USAID, we have used our voice to protect our partners and those under threat, consulting closely with organizations to better understand risks they are facing and increasing our programming to meet some

of those challenges. That includes our work offering at risk human rights defenders, journalists, democracy activists, and anti-corruption champions with immediate support such as legal, psychosocial, and even relocation assistance, to more medium-term protection with fellowship opportunities at U.S. universities for those from Guatemala, Honduras, El Salvador, and Nicaragua.

These regional efforts ensure that those fighting for democracy have access to protection and can continue their work from outside their countries, if needed. Amidst closing civic space, our work to strengthen cross-border civil society networks are important for information-sharing and documentation of corruption, freedom of expression, and human rights at a regional level.

Cuba

In Cuba, USAID operates within the parameters of the Cuban Democracy and Libertad Acts. For nearly 30 years, across four U.S. administrations, USAID has helped the people of Cuba in the face of oppressive government rule, supporting human rights, fundamental freedoms, and democratic values by strengthening civil society and providing improved access to information.

USAID provides ongoing humanitarian assistance to political prisoners and their families, and to politically marginalized individuals who face hardship because of their political beliefs or efforts to exercise their fundamental freedoms. There are currently more than 1,000 political prisoners in Cuba. USAID provides assistance to approximately 800 of those individuals and thousands of Cuban families including nutritional food items, vitamins, and over-the-counter medicines, which are an invaluable lifeline to improve their physical and psychological well-being.

USAID also promotes the free flow of information to, from, and within Cuba through greater access to independent news about issues relevant to Cubans on the island and around the world. Over the last decade, USAID helped train hundreds of journalists whose work in major international outlets has counteracted the regime's disinformation campaign by documenting the dismal conditions on the island, and the human rights violations and abuses by the regime. Those violations include the forced labor, garnished wages, threats, and surveillance endured by doctors who serve in overseas Medical Missions, and the on-island impact of exporting so many of Cuba's medical professionals and much-needed medications and medical supplies.

We are proud to support brave Cuban activists and citizens who are risking their lives to advocate for a free and democratic future for their country.

Conclusion

At a time of global power competition in the hemisphere and alarming examples of leaders in the region betraying democratic principles, it is in the interest of the United States to foster effective partnerships that work toward a more peaceful, democratic, prosperous, and stable hemisphere. That is why it is critical USAID maintains a presence across the region and supports those who champion our shared values.

Thank you for the opportunity to appear before you today to talk about USAID's work. I look forward to answering your questions.

Ms. SALAZAR. Thank you, Mr. Howell.

I now recognize myself for 5 minutes of questioning.

Well, I think that we agree on the end goal so thank you. I like very much what you have been saying. So I just have few questions here for you and I am going to start with Mr. Jacobstein.

As you know, last month Cuban regime officials were at the Miami Airport inspecting something, a tour with TCA, and we just learned that last week there was a second secret visit of four Cuban regime officials to the same airport, the Miami International Airport, but this time four agreements were signed with the U.S. Government.

What type of agreements are those? Do you have any idea, Mr. Jacobstein?

Mr. JACOBSTEIN. Thank you very much for your question.

So in terms of TSA, I would say TSA has coordinated with the Cuban Civil Aviation Authority and the Cuban authority for airport and services for years on airport security measures and best practices, always in the U.S. interest.

Ms. SALAZAR. But signing agreements with the Cubans, do you think the Cubans ever—once they sign they ever fulfill their promise?

Mr. JACOBSTEIN. So I would just say in terms of the visit of the FAA I don't want to speak on behalf of the Department of Transportation or the FAA.

Ms. SALAZAR. Yes, but you're at the State Department. You know everything that the U.S. Government is doing vis-a-vis Cuba.

Mr. JACOBSTEIN. I would say the rationale for this visit is clear and very much in the U.S. national interest. We're interested in aviation safety—

Ms. SALAZAR. It's clear. Wait a minute. It's clear. You're going to tell me that the Cubans are going to help the Americans fight terrorism if they are in the list of terrorist states? So maybe, and maybe you can clarify this. I am not sure why maybe you guys are trying to create a scenario where you can take Cuba off the list of terrorist countries.

Do you think that's what you guys are doing by granting the—by saying it? You see the Cubans are here in Miami and they're signing agreements and they're going to help us fight terrorism. Tell me.

Mr. JACOBSTEIN. Absolutely not.

Ms. SALAZAR. Good. So you're not—you're not going to take Cuba off the list of terrorist countries? Is that what you're telling me?

Mr. JACOBSTEIN. You asked me about these visits. These visits are intended to promote aviation safety and security especially for U.S. passengers. That is fundamental and critical to us. We want all these passengers including Cuban Americans who go back and visit their family members to be safe.

Ms. SALAZAR. And I agree with that. But at the same time you're talking to Cuba officials. So go back to—it's not what Cuba wants, which we know what they want.

It's what the United States, in this case the Biden administration, is looking for, which I really would like to be wrong in thinking that you're just laying the groundwork so you can take Cuba off that list.

And I just want you to tell me that I am wrong. Am I wrong? You're not planning to take it off?

Mr. JACOBSTEIN. So as I've said before, U.S. law establishes specific statutory criteria for sending in a State sponsor of terror designation.

Ms. SALAZAR. I am not asking you that. I am asking you something different.

Do you think the State Department at this hour is trying to—is creating the conditions and the scenario in order to take Cuba off the list of terrorist countries?

Mr. JACOBSTEIN. At this time there is no review ongoing on State sponsor of—

Ms. SALAZAR. Say that again.

Mr. JACOBSTEIN. At this time there's no ongoing review on the State sponsor of terror designation.

Ms. SALAZAR. Well, you have until July 12th to start that—to start that ongoing or to start that investigation or that study because you have a specific date.

So you're telling me right now, of course, is, what—it's July—I mean, it's June, what, 28th. But you have until July 12th. So what are you guys planning to do July 13th?

Mr. JACOBSTEIN. There's no specific timeframe for a review but at this—

Ms. SALAZAR. Oh, yes. Six months before you need to review—according to the law you need to review 6 months before and then you take them off or you leave them on.

So July 12th would be the day.

Mr. JACOBSTEIN. I don't think that's accurate to say that July 12th is the day but I just would say again that should any review happen any future review would be based on the law and criteria established by Congress.

Ms. SALAZAR. Can you just answer yes or no if you guys are thinking about taking Cuba off the list? And the only reason why I am insisting on this is because if you were to do that you're giving that cruel and despicable regime oxygen to do what you just said right now.

A thousand political prisoners are in jail just because they went out and they claimed libertad. So can you tell me yes or no? Are you guys thinking about taking Cuba off the list or not?

Mr. JACOBSTEIN. I would just say, again, any review of Cuba's status on the SST should one happen would be based on the law and the criteria established by Congress.

Ms. SALAZAR. That means yes, you are thinking about doing it—

Mr. JACOBSTEIN. It does not.

Ms. SALAZAR [continuing]. And that is very bad. But we will talk about it further.

Now, but I want to congratulate you at the same time because there's a new application on your phone called ta-ta-ta which I am not going to say it but it's very good, and there's good news for the Cubans because now for what I hear coming from the Biden administration you're going to have an app that the Cubans are going to be able to use and then when ETECSA shuts down then this app

is going to allow the Cubans to connect to another form of internet and that's great.

So

[speaking foreign language]. Do you know anything about that?

Mr. JACOBSTEIN. I am not tracking this specific issue but happy to discuss our efforts within that.

Ms. SALAZAR. But you just said it right now that you want a digital—you said digital connectivity. That's No. 1. And Mr. Howell said it, too.

If you give connectivity to the Cubans you're giving them the possibility of them demonstrating in the streets of Havana and everyone will see them even though they're being beaten by the regime.

That's great. Connectivity—that's all we need. Do you agree?

Mr. JACOBSTEIN. Yes. The administration supports the Cuban people's access to an open, interoperable, secure, and reliable internet.

U.S. regulations already allow for certain activities to support the Cuban people's access to information on the internet, and the actions announced by OFAC by the Treasury Department on May 28th including supporting greater access to U.S. internet services, applications, e-commerce platforms, that builds on that support.

And then on top of that I would say our programs through the Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor they increase Cubans' on-island ability to access information and to communicate freely and securely using digital security best practices and censorship circumvention tools.

So this is very much at the top of our mind.

Ms. SALAZAR. Good, and we're going to work with it because I am just saying it to you and to the Cuban people who are watching this hearing that there's hope coming.

And I don't want to extend my time too much and I don't want to fatigue my colleagues' patience.

Just one more, Honduras. The State Department was supposed to give Congress a report on democracy in Honduras. It was due last week.

What happened?

Mr. JACOBSTEIN. I will followup on the status of the report as soon as I am back.

Ms. SALAZAR. All right. But why haven't you finished it?

Mr. JACOBSTEIN. Sometimes these reports lag in time for a number of reasons. But I don't have anything further than that. But happy to provide that.

Ms. SALAZAR. Well, you're not giving me—but I am giving—unfortunately, Madam President Xiomara Castro I am giving her an F on the report because democracy is not being protected in Honduras and I am going to give you two examples.

Madam President just honored Nicolas Maduro the highest honor Hondurans can give. How embarrassing for the Hondurans, the Francisco Morazan Medal to Nicolas Maduro, really.

And Madame President is China's best friend in the region, and not only that, she has established collectivos Chavez style. You know what those are? She forms sort of a paramilitary—a group of people with guns so they can go and attack the police.

So in my book she gets an F. What do you say about that?

Mr. JACOBSTEIN. Thank you very much. So our goal—

Ms. SALAZAR. I am sure she thanks you, too.

Mr. JACOBSTEIN. Our goal through the root causes strategy in Central America is to focus on promoting democracy, prosperity, security—

Ms. SALAZAR. But talk to me about Honduras specifically.

How do you view what she's doing?

Mr. JACOBSTEIN. Specifically in Honduras there are a number of areas in which we cooperate—on migration management, on investment facilitation. We recently signed a memorandum of understanding on gender-based violence.

Yes, there are challenges as well and, for example, just last fall there were violent attacks on Members of Congress during the selection process for the attorney general, and so we in response used the Section 353 report to put a sanction in place for Ricardo Arturo Salgado Bonilla, who is the current minister of strategic planning.

Ms. SALAZAR. Are you sending Madam President the message that she should not be messing with Honduras' democracy and she should not be moving to the left like Chavez, Maduro, Ortega, Fidel? Are you sending that message?

Mr. JACOBSTEIN. Throughout the region we absolutely focus on the need to have good—

Ms. SALAZAR. And what do they—what do they respond in exchange?

Mr. JACOBSTEIN. Good governance is critical in all the countries of Central America and that is a—

Ms. SALAZAR. But what do they respond? What do they tell you when you send that very noble message?

Mr. JACOBSTEIN. We have countless conversations. I won't get into the internal diplomatic conversations but this is something that's top of mind along with our focus on shared economic prosperity, anti-corruption, migration management, and a host of issues.

Ms. SALAZAR. Of course.

Finally, another 30 seconds—Nicaragua. As you said, Rosario and Daniel they have a big pinata. They are now—Nicaragua has become this platform for people to arrive to come to the United States.

We're talking about a thousand flights. Each person pays \$10,000. You have had 300,000 people from all over. Right here you have people coming from Morocco, from Senegal, from Libya, from India, from Tajikistan, from Kazakhstan.

You have 300,000 people coming to Nicaragua and it happens that eight of them were terrorist members of ISIS. They wound up in New York. So what list would you put Ortega on?

Mr. JACOBSTEIN. Absolutely, this is top of mind for us. No one should profit off of vulnerable migrants.

Ms. SALAZAR. What are you going to do about it?

Mr. JACOBSTEIN. We've taken a number of steps, which I outlined in my—

Ms. SALAZAR. Give me—tell me two of them.

Mr. JACOBSTEIN. For example, we implemented a new 3C policy Secretary Blinken announced in November 2023 in which we're re-

voking visas for charter airlines who are facilitating a regular migration through Nicaragua.

We put in place a number of sanctions just on May 15th, which I mentioned.

Ms. SALAZAR. Why don't you put them on the list of terrorist countries as well? Can you do that? Could Nicaragua? I mean, they're sponsoring terrorists. They're letting terrorists go through there to come here. Can we do that?

Mr. JACOBSTEIN. Happy to take back your recommendation. I would say that we've taken a number of—

Ms. SALAZAR. That wasn't—would you agree with that?

Mr. JACOBSTEIN. We've taken a number of very robust steps to deal with the irregular migration challenge and you have seen a reduction in the charter flights. It's still a huge challenge and I am working very closely in particular with commercial airlines.

The International Air Transport Association, on the margins of the Los Angeles declaration ministerial meeting that Secretary Blinken attended in Guatemala, put out a robust statement on the work they're doing.

So we're working both inside of Nicaragua and outside of Nicaragua to address this critical challenge.

Ms. SALAZAR. Thank you for your efforts. I yield back.

And sorry, I appreciate your patience, Ranking Member, now Representative Castro.

Mr. CASTRO. Thank you, Chairwoman.

Ms. SALAZAR. I now recognize the ranking member for five or more minutes.

Mr. CASTRO. Thank you.

Eric, you're really earning your government salary today. I guess—I do have a question but first let me speak to the to the Cuba issue. And, Chairwoman, I respect—you know, she obviously has a very strong perspective, very strong, strong convictions, and I know many people in her district agree with her.

I guess I want to present a bit of an alternative because she knows we disagree on this. You know, since the early 1960's we tried one thing, which was to distance ourselves from Cuba, sanction Cuba, to isolate Cuba, and the result was that the Castros stayed in office for decades and decades and decades and the people in Cuba were impoverished. The society fell behind other nations of the world even though it has incredible potential as a nation and the people have incredible potential.

And I think it comes down to whether you believe, going forward, we should stick to those 1960's policies or whether we would have more influence on the direction of Cuba—again, not picking their leaders or picking how they do things, just like any—we don't need to do for any other nation but have some influence in the direction they take, I think that the answer is engagement.

And I know the designation of terror came in the last week, I think, of the Trump administration, that the Secretary of State made that designation literally on their way out.

And so I hope that you all will undertake that review. I think it is a necessary review and, again, you know, it comes down to me whether we're going to take a different approach than we took for decades and decades that obviously has not worked, and what—or

whether we're going to leave Cuba in the hands of nations like China and Russia.

And I think that's why I was supportive of what President Obama was trying to do in his second term, which was to normalize diplomatic relations, to start preparing at that time for the departure of both the Castros and be ready at that time in that moment to build a closer relationship with the Cuban people and the Cuban government to try to make the country more democratic and, you know, to take a different course.

It didn't end up panning out that way, obviously. In fact, when President Trump came in, like I said, in their last week they designated the country as a State Sponsor of Terrorism and that is where the Biden administration took over and that's where it finds itself now.

But, you know, I hope that we will take a different course. So but I did have a question I wanted to ask you. I am concerned about the ongoing efforts to undermine and discredit the convictions of the eight individuals found guilty of the murder of human rights and environmental defender Berta Caceres.

As you know, the appeals to those convictions are ongoing and are overdue for a judgment and I am concerned as are other Members of Congress that the judges are coming under undue pressure to free the convicted corporate executives that ordered that murder.

Is the United States closely tracking the court case and will you commit to pushing back against false statements regarding the facts of the case?

Mr. JACOBSTEIN. Thank you very much for that question, Ranking Member Castro. Yes, we are tracking the case and the ongoing concerns for environmental defenders in Honduras, and happy to work closely with you, your office, and our embassy in Honduras to ensure that we followup and ensure a free and fair trial on this.

Mr. CASTRO. And we're now 2 years in the administration of President Castro there who was elected with the backing of much of civil society. What do you see as the trends for the safety and freedom of civil society in Honduras?

Mr. JACOBSTEIN. Thank you very much. So, you know, we certainly work very closely with Honduran civil society on a number of issues. I was in Honduras earlier this year, met with members of civil society.

I would say in particular met with members of grief in a community—LGBT community—who feel under threat. So I feel like there's—I feel there's much more we can do. The embassy works very closely to ensure that these individuals, these groups, have our support but we do think there's more that can be done including through the human rights protection mechanism in Honduras.

So we'll continue to push hard on that.

Mr. CASTRO. And then one more question for now. In February 2023 the United States worked to free 222 Nicaraguan political prisoners who were imprisoned by the Ortega-Murillo regime.

In fact, we flew those people directly to the United States on a U.S. government-funded flight. Many of those individuals have been rendered stateless by the regime and they've applied for asylum so they're not at the risk of deportation.

I understand that of the 160 individuals who applied for asylum only one has had an interview so far. So I wanted to ask you will you work with your colleagues at DHS to prioritize their asylum applications or provide them advanced parole before the end of the year, especially given our role in bringing them to the United States?

Mr. JACOBSTEIN. Thank you very much. So the State Department and USAID allocated significant resources to enable safe transportation and immediate care for the 222 individuals released from prison in Nicaragua.

However, we don't have the resources or mandate to provide the long-term care some of the 222 require. But in terms of your specific question, since the arrival of the 222 the State Department has worked closely with USCIS to facilitate the travel of immediate family members of these individuals from Nicaragua to the United States through lawful pathways.

This will continue as more members of the 222 become sufficiently established in the United States. So in terms of those who are in process, once members of the 222 submit their asylum applications the State Department can provide comments on specific asylum applications to USCIS or to the Department of Justice. I am happy to work with you to followup on the specific procedures.

Mr. CASTRO. Thank you. I yield back, Chairwoman.

Ms. SALAZAR. You had another 5 minutes. All right.

Now I recognize Representative Self for 5 minutes.

Mr. SELF. Thank you, Madam Chair.

First question for you is what is the political trend? We heard a lot about inputs from you. What do you think is the political trend in Central America, toward or away from democracy? How do you judge the trend?

Mr. JACOBSTEIN. Thank you very much. So it's a mixed bag. I think that we've seen some positive trends and our goal is to meet partners where they are, always in the U.S. interest under the root causes strategy to work together to reduce irregular migration.

Mr. SELF. Okay.

Mr. JACOBSTEIN. I would say one very positive example is in Guatemala where we've worked very closely with President Elect, now President Arevalo—

Mr. SELF. Okay. So we've got a mixed bag. Okay. Thank you.

The ruling parties in Honduras, Nicaragua, and Cuba are each members of the Foro de Sao Paulo. I quote from last year. This is their statement. "The U.S. project of domination over Latin America and the Caribbean is facing an environment marked by threats to its hegemony." That's us.

"The dispute with China and the growing presence of progressive or leftist political forces in regional governments—Central America and the Caribbean—constitute an important challenge to a country—that's us—"affected by multiple crises that are manifesting themselves in the political, economic, social, and cultural spheres."

Now, you said earlier that—and I am going to ask you if you believe that the Biden administration can pull these three countries out of the orbit of the Foro.

You said before, and I want to get to this because this is important, that you would conduct this review under the guidelines set by Congress—the law set by Congress.

Why should this committee believe that? Because the view is that the Biden administration on this what you call irregular immigration we consider that lawless. There is no attempt to secure the southern border.

So do you believe—and there are other examples around the world that I could give you—do you believe that the administration believes—do you, that's you—do you believe that you can pull Honduras, Nicaragua, and Cuba out of the Foro?

Mr. JACOBSTEIN. This is an independent forum so I wouldn't say that we would have a role to do that. But venues like the Sao Paulo Forum could have the potential to play a role in advancing hemispheric progress but only if they move away from past criticism and toward consensus building.

So the comments that have been referenced we find unconstructive in many ways.

Mr. SELF. You find not constructive and yet you give—in fact, you have requested in the Fiscal Year 2025 budget request millions of dollars for these three countries. How do you reconcile that? You admit it's an independent forum. You're not going to pull them out. How do you reconcile that?

Because the root strategy that you have here—the root cause strategy that you have here—how are you going to change their behavior? That is the bottom line question.

Mr. JACOBSTEIN. So the root causes strategy provides resources to nongovernmental organizations, implementers throughout the region. This is not a blank check to governments.

There's very little money that goes directly to governments themselves. We work with governments. We partner where we can and where we should. But these are resources that are intended to support societies at large.

So I will go back to one of your colleagues, and I don't remember who it was, said that we—yes, it's true we are no longer the chief trading partner with Central and South America. China is the chief finance partner with Central and South America.

So I don't see how you are going to influence these governments if you're simply giving the people who are suffering, the NGO's under them, money and yet you're not working to change them.

And I say again I don't know what confidence we can have in the administration of doing it under the laws that Congress passes.

Madam Chair, I yield back.

Ms. SALAZAR. Thank you, Congressman Self.

Now I recognize Ranking Member Castro for another round of questioning.

Mr. CASTRO. Thank you.

We all agree that democratic backsliding, regardless of political leanings or ideology is a concern in the region. In his war on gangs Salvadoran President Bukele has filled the largest prison in Latin America by undermining the country's checks and balances, violating human rights, and bypassing the judicial system in the name of restoring law and order.

I wanted to ask you, Mr. Jacobstein, does the United States remain concerned about respect for human rights and the rule of law in El Salvador?

Mr. JACOBSTEIN. Thank you for that important question.

We'll continue to call for progress on democracy, human rights, inclusive governance, transparency, and the rule of law during President Bukele's second administration.

So, you know, I would say it is true that during El Salvador's State of exception reported gang crimes have dropped significantly but these gains were achieved at the price of respect for fair trial guarantees and principles of justice.

Prison conditions, historically challenging, worsened so we raised these concerns with Salvadoran officials, particularly prison conditions for minors, and we continue to urge the government of El Salvador to end the State of exception both publicly and privately.

Mr. CASTRO. And, you know, look, I think the election and also the polls have shown that the president there has been quite popular with the people and I think there is relief among the public that gang violence is down and why wouldn't there be relief.

But as a nation we've also stood for—we've always stood for the fact that processes matter and respect for the rule of law matters, and there are strong indications that people who are innocent and not attached to any gangs have been rounded up in this dragnet that's going on in El Salvador.

And this is an example—you know, when I talk about being critical of leaders on the left or the right this is an example, I think, of where I feel as though if this were a leftist leader in Latin America that had imprisoned 2 percent of his or her population there would be a lot of people demanding that we do something about that and that we, you know, take every action in terms of sanctions and everything else to stop it.

But here we have a leader on the right who has now imprisoned by many estimates about 2 percent of the population and there isn't much said about it.

And so, yes, that's deeply concerning. The differential treatment in leadership and, you know, begs the question whether we're going to consistently apply our values as a country to leaders depending on where they are or not depending on where they are on the ideological scale or spectrum.

But let me ask a followup on that. President Castro of Honduras recently announced plans to build a 20,000 capacity mega prison as part of a larger crackdown on gang violence, raising concerns that Honduras will follow El Salvador and its approach.

Do you share those concerns and have you communicated them with the government of Honduras?

Mr. JACOBSTEIN. Thank you very much.

When it comes to states of exception, just as in El Salvador we always believe a State of exception must, indeed, be exceptional.

So it's certainly something that we've communicated throughout the region, that we understand the need for governments to respond to security situations in their country, to respond to the trauma of years of gang violence, but that due process is critical.

Mr. CASTRO. And that State of exception is essentially an emergency position, right? Not something that should last permanently there?

Mr. JACOBSTEIN. Yes, exactly.

Mr. CASTRO. Thank you, Chairwoman. I yield back.

Ms. SALAZAR. Thanks to you, Ranking Member. Now I will grant—I will recognize Representative Self for 5 minutes.

Mr. SELF. Thank you, Madam Chair.

In this discussion that you just had I would quote President Reagan, “There is no left or right. There is only up toward maximum individual freedom consistent with civil society or there’s down to the ash heap of history.”

So I think freedom ought to be your message, freedom for the people of Central America, and regardless of who that is the message I would ask you to send to the people of Cuba, each of these countries, is freedom—that we will stand with them for freedom, for liberty—for personal responsibility and liberty.

With that, I yield back, Madam Chair.

Ms. SALAZAR. Thank you, Representative Self.

And now I recognize myself for 5 minutes of questioning.

I wanted to—I just wanted to continue with what I was asking you and go back now in depth that we have a little bit more time about Nicaragua.

It’s embarrassing what they’re doing. It’s embarrassing, and we have allowed it. We’re talking about 300,000 people from all over the world coming to Nicaragua, a thousand flights in the last year, \$10,000 per person and we have terrorist cells in New York and Philadelphia.

So, in reality, what can we do to send the message to Daniel Ortega, who has transformed that country into a tyranny in the last 4 years, that he needs to stop this?

He’s making a joke, a big pinata out of this. So level with me. What can we really do?

Mr. JACOBSTEIN. Thank you.

So we’re taking aggressive action in this space.

Ms. SALAZAR. And what does aggressive action mean?

Mr. JACOBSTEIN. President Biden issued an executive order in October 2022 which we implemented this year in May to the Treasury Department to sanction two entities in the gold sector. This is a sector that is enriching Ortega-Murillo’s regime.

So that is one piece of it. You have seen the sanctions, countless visa revocations, additional sanctions on his attorney general, on the Russia Training Center.

Ms. SALAZAR. But you know, Mr. Jacobstein, that those people do not want to come to Sax or go to Disney World. So they don’t really care about coming to the United States.

It’s CAFTA-DR that will hurt them, and I hate to say this because it’s not very good for the average Nicaraguan but we’ve got somehow to stop these people.

You know Rosario Murillo is evil. You know this, and look what they’re doing to us. And Mexico is letting them come through. But it comes through Nicaragua.

So tell me what else can we do? Because we don’t want—can you imagine—I don’t even want to say it in public. Please tell me.

Mr. JACOBSTEIN. Thank you. So we share your concerns. We're extremely concerned and that's why we have taken aggressive actions both on—you mentioned the visa policy. That's one piece. But also sanctions that get them in their pocketbook and that's what happened with the gold section saying—the gold sector sanctions.

Sanctioning the Russia Training Center was also really important because that went after their efforts to, you know, essentially train others in the hemisphere on Russian police tactics.

So we took these actions. But then also, as I said, we're working to put in penalties against the regime itself. We're also working outside of Nicaragua. That's through the visa revocations for executives of charter airline companies through our good collaboration per Marshall Airlines to work closely with them.

So we're working across the board to address this issue, and our diplomatic efforts, honestly, with foreign governments and outreach have helped prevent numerous charter flights bound for Nicaragua from Africa, Central Asia, the Middle East.

Our embassy in Managua, our embassies around the world, are sharing information with each other to ensure that these charter flights stop.

Ms. SALAZAR. So maybe we can send the message—I am just going to translate what you said—we can send the message to the private sector, meaning those charter companies, that they should not be engaging in business anymore with the Ortega regime?

Mr. JACOBSTEIN. Absolutely. Our diplomats——

Ms. SALAZAR. That's exactly what you're doing?

Mr. JACOBSTEIN. Our diplomats do that.

Ms. SALAZAR. How can we help you send that message loud and clear?

Mr. JACOBSTEIN. We would appreciate that. We're happy to work with you and your office in finding ways to collaborate.

Ms. SALAZAR. Of course.

Mr. JACOBSTEIN. We do feel that a number of charter airlines have moved out of this space, but in a sense it's whack-a-mole.

Ms. SALAZAR. We need all of them out of the space.

Mr. JACOBSTEIN. So we need continue to push. So we'd be happy to work with you on that.

Ms. SALAZAR. Good. Now, let's go back to Honduras. You know that Honduras—I just told you that I give her an F, unfortunately, because I have a lot of—thousands of Hondurans in my district. Those are hardworking people. They don't deserve this type of political elite.

Now, recently the president has allowed 100 Cuban doctors to get to Honduras. We know that the Cuban doctors are treated as slaves. USMCA says that you cannot treat any type of professional as this type of—be involved in this type of human trafficking. El Colegio Medico de Honduras oppose their presence.

This Congress passed a law that requires the State Department to cancel the United States visas of any government official who is involved in trafficking Cubans or any other nationality.

So are you concerned about the fact that the Cubans are now being slaved by Xiomara Castro's government?

Mr. JACOBSTEIN. We're very concerned about Cuba's medical misdeeds. You mentioned the Fiscal Year 1924 appropriations act

which called for a report listing the countries and international organizations for which the Secretary's credible information are directly paying the government of Cuba for coerced and trafficked labor of Cuban medical professionals.

So after the president——

Ms. SALAZAR. Interrupting you. I mean, you understand that that money doesn't get to the Cuban doctor's pocket, right?

Mr. JACOBSTEIN. Yes.

Ms. SALAZAR. So that government goes—that money goes to the United—to the Cuban government. So you pay \$1,000 for one Cuban, \$5,000, and the Cuban doctor gets \$200.

Mr. JACOBSTEIN. Absolutely, and we continue to urge countries considering hiring Cuban workers to keep agreements transparent and respect human rights and internationally recognized labor rights.

Ms. SALAZAR. But why don't we cancel their visas?

Mr. JACOBSTEIN. So——

Ms. SALAZAR. That will be a very loud message. Would you consider that?

Mr. JACOBSTEIN. Thank you.

Ms. SALAZAR. Any Honduran government official that is involved in the human trafficking of Cuban doctors or any other doctor doesn't come to the United States?

Mr. JACOBSTEIN. Yes.

Ms. SALAZAR. Do you like that idea?

Mr. JACOBSTEIN. Absolutely. We'd be happy to look into any information you have on individuals. The department at this time does not have——

Ms. SALAZAR. Starting with the president, just like you guys did with Giammattei in Guatemala, cancel their visa. Don't you see that everyone wants to enjoy the American dream and come and enjoy what we have?

So we got to use that in order to help other people: the Cubans, the Nicaraguans, the Hondurans, the Guatemalans, the Salvadorans. Everybody is entailed.

Mr. JACOBSTEIN. Happy to receive any information you have.

Ms. SALAZAR. Do you agree with that?

Mr. JACOBSTEIN. We'd be happy to——

Ms. SALAZAR. I need you to do that because that way we're sending a very strong message to these governments that they cannot be playing around and doing what they're not supposed to do when it comes to human rights.

Mr. JACOBSTEIN. Yes. Happy to receive information on this when—on any of these issues and to followup with you.

Ms. SALAZAR. All right.

Now, finally, finally, let's go back to Cuba and connectivity. You know that I've always said that the Biden administration after July 11th the best thing that he can do for the Cubans is to give them connectivity.

You know very well, and the Biden administration has been there with the Cubans and you have recognized that they have come out into the streets just simply screaming "Libertad," right, and connectivity is—if they were only—if they could have connectivity, which is having internet, once ETECSA which is the

Cuban internet company shuts down the average Cuban would go back into the streets, demonstrate, and at least know that if they're being beaten at least the world will see them.

That's what I would need, and I represent the Cuban exile community in Miami. Connectivity. What do you know about this new app?

Mr. JACOBSTEIN. As I mentioned previously, I don't have information on this app but would be happy to followup. I would just say, more generally—

Ms. SALAZAR. What do you mean you don't have information on this app? This app is—it's out there and we're about to announce it.

Mr. JACOBSTEIN. Look forward to learning more. I would say it's important to note that despite the Cuban government's efforts to control access to information millions of Cubans are online every day accessing a whole variety of information, including our very active U.S. embassy—

Ms. SALAZAR. No. No. No. No. But when they go out and here or there you know what the Cuban regime does? They shut it down.

How do I know? Because I have people in Cuba telling me, oh, they just shut down internet and it's just text. Obviously, video is no good because they're going to see how the repressive apparatus is beating them and breaking their necks on the streets.

Mr. JACOBSTEIN. And this is precisely why our programs increase Cubans' on-island ability to access information, to communicate freely and securely using digital security best practices and censorship circumvention tools. So this is top of mind for us.

Ms. SALAZAR. All right. Good. I am glad that it's a priority for me, too. And, finally, I just want to go—Mr. Howell, you have not been able to—I am very sorry that I've not spoken with your or have given the opportunity to speak a little bit more.

But, you know, when I was a news reporter for Univision I was the Central American bureau chief and I lived in El Salvador and Honduras, and I can say to you that USAID is like God the Father. Everyone loves USAID because it brings the best of the American system, not only the American dollars.

So I have high regard for USAID. I have been hearing lately that within Central America the USAID policies have changed.

What do I mean by that? That sometimes you give money to those programs that do not necessarily go—are aligned with what the local people want, that we're talking too much about cultural and social and sexual orientations and basically what the Guatemalans and the Hondurans—what they want is a job, be able to learn a trade, be able to have a little loan so they can live their little American dream in their country.

So what do you say to that—to those criticisms that I am sure you have heard them?

Mr. HOWELL. Thank you, Chairwoman Salazar.

Actually, in Honduras we are working closely with the people of Honduras and we've worked there for over 60 years and proud to work with civil society groups like the National Anti-Corruption Council which has actually exposed cases of corruption very re-

cently with a former vice minister of security under the previous administration.

We also work to prevent and stop gender-based violence, which is a terrible scourge in the——

Ms. SALAZAR. Why don't you give me two or three programs that are the top programs, let's say, in Guatemala and Honduras? Those two countries. Top programs where you are allocating the most resources in.

Mr. HOWELL. Well, as far as one of our success stories, certainly, working with the private sector. USAID has worked with 70,000 coffee farming families. That's over half of all coffee farming families, and with international buyers are exporting high-quality Honduran coffee internationally——

Ms. SALAZAR. Good.

Mr. HOWELL [continuing]. Creating jobs and improving the incomes of farming families.

Ms. SALAZAR. What else?

Mr. HOWELL. What else? We're actually working closely with the labor ministry of Honduras on legal pathways for H-2 visas. We've tripled the number of H-2 visas emitted from Honduras to allow Hondurans to work ethically and temporarily here in the U.S. under this lawful Pathways program that benefits not only the Honduran people but also U.S. consumers and U.S. companies.

Ms. SALAZAR. Sure. What about Guatemala?

Mr. HOWELL. Well, glad you asked. I worked there for 4 years and worked very successfully as well with the private sector in Guatemala training youth, preventing violence, working with civil society and as well the municipalities across Guatemala.

Climate change is another key aspect of our work, trying to maintain and save the Mayan Biosphere Reserve in the northern part of the country.

Ms. SALAZAR. But have you heard the same thing that I've been hearing—and I am not being so critical because I said I know USAID is not perfect but it brings the American spirit to these countries—that sometimes you are putting too much emphasis on those programs that have nothing to do with the sensitivities of the place.

Mr. HOWELL. No, appreciate that. We appreciate feedback all the time, but currently——

Ms. SALAZAR. You haven't heard it?

Mr. HOWELL [continuing]. Under the president, President Arevalo——

Ms. SALAZAR. Yes.

Mr. HOWELL [continuing]. He has assumed office so we're pleased to just——

Ms. SALAZAR. No, but before. Before Arevalo we were there during Giammattei and to everybody else, I mean, like you said, 70 years before.

So you have not heard the criticism that I've heard? But I will share that with you if you want to in private so maybe you can hone in on those programs according to what the local people want.

Mr. HOWELL. I appreciate that, ma'am——

Ms. SALAZAR. Good. I will work with you and try to help you, because I know the area very well. So thank you very much for your patience——

Mr. HOWELL. Thank you very much.

Ms. SALAZAR [continuing]. And to you, Mr. Jacobstein. So I think that the clock saved you, right?

[Laughter.]

Ms. SALAZAR. I thank the witnesses for their valuable testimony and the members for their questions. The members of the subcommittee may have some additional questions for the witnesses and we will ask you to respond to them in writing.

And pursuant to committee rules, all members may have 5 days to submit statements, questions, and other materials for the record, subject to the length limitations.

Without objection, the committee stands adjourned. Thanks again.

[Whereupon, at 3:11 p.m., the committee was adjourned.]

APPENDIX

MATERIAL SUBMITTED FOR THE HEARING RECORD



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

Subcommittee on the Western Hemisphere
Maria Salazar (R-FL), Chairwoman

June 20, 2024

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 at 2:00 p.m. in room 2172 of the Rayburn House Office Building. The hearing is available by live webcast on the Committee website at <https://foreignaffairs.house.gov/>.

DATE: Thursday, June 27, 2024

TIME: 2:00 p.m.

LOCATION: 2172 RHOB

SUBJECT: The Curse of Socialism in Central America and the Caribbean

WITNESSES: Mr. Eric Jacobstein
Deputy Assistant Secretary
Bureau of Western Hemisphere Affairs
U.S. Department of State

Mr. Greg Howell
Senior Deputy Assistant Administrator
Bureau for Latin America and the Caribbean
U.S. Agency for International Development

*NOTE: Witnesses may be added.

By Direction of the Chair

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 -226-8467 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 Thursday Date June 27, 2024 Room 2172 RHOB

Starting Time 2:12 pm Ending Time 3:12 pm

Recesses ☐ (____ to ____) (____ to ____) (____ to ____) (____ to ____) (____ to ____) (____ to ____)

Presiding Member(s)
Rep. Maria Salazar

Check all of the following that apply:

Open Session ☒

Executive (closed) Session ☐

Televised ☒

Electronically Recorded (taped) ☒

Stenographic Record ☒

TITLE OF HEARING:

The Curse of Socialism in Central America and the Caribbean

COMMITTEE MEMBERS PRESENT:

Rep. Joaquin Castro, Rep. Greg Stanton, and Rep. Keith Self

NON-COMMITTEE MEMBERS PRESENT:

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.)

1. Statement from Rep. Greg Stanton

TIME SCHEDULED TO RECONVENE _____

or

TIME ADJOURNED 3:12 pm

Meg Wagner
Full Committee Hearing Coordinator

Committee on Foreign Affairs
Subcommittee on Western Hemisphere

118th Congress

ATTENDANCE

Meeting on: The Curse of Socialism in Central America and the Caribbean

Date: 6.27.24

Convened: 2:12 p.m.

Adjourned: 3:12 p.m.

Representative	Present	Absent	Representative	Present	Absent
Ms. Salazar	X		Mr. Castro	X	
Mr. Green		X	Mr. Stanton	X	
Mr. Huizenga		X	Mr. Moskowitz		X
Mr. Davidson		X	Ms. Kamlager-Dove		X
Mr. Self	X				
Mr. James		X			

The Curse of Socialism in Central America and the Caribbean

House Committee on Foreign Affairs

Western Hemisphere Subcommittee

Greg Stanton (D-AZ)

Thursday, June 27, 2024, at 2:00PM ET, Rayburn 2172

Thank you, Madam Chair.

MIGRATION

Safe Mobility Offices (SMOs) work with migrants to determine if they are eligible for orderly pathways to the US—disincentivizing travel to our Southern border. To date, they have served more than 21,000 people. In a recent briefing with my staff, USCIS told my office that the strides made by the SMOs are “proof of concept”—but acknowledged that there was much room for growth.

DAS Jacobstein, we have previously talked about the Safe Mobility Offices (SMOs) that are set up in Colombia, Costa Rica, Ecuador, and Guatemala.

1. *What resources are required to expand the impact and reach of the SMOs? How is the Administration engaging governments around the world to support migration via the SMOs?*

BIDEN EXECUTIVE ORDER:

Earlier this month, President Biden took executive action to bar migrants who cross the Southern Border unlawfully from receiving asylum. I supported this necessary action to regain operational control of the border. It's working. Since this policy went into place, unlawful crossings have plummeted more than 40 percent.

2. *DAS Jacobstein, how is the Administration communicating this change in policy to potential migrants to prevent them from making the journey?*

NEARSHORING

We must also address the root causes of migration. When people have more economic options and a sense of security, they more easily stay in their home countries.

I recently introduced the bipartisan H.R. 8414, the *Semiconductor Supply Chain Security and Diversification Act*. In part, it aims to address economic root causes of migration by directing the Development Finance Corporation to invest in parts of the semiconductor supply chain in the Western Hemisphere—specifically the “upstream” critical mining and processing parts and the downstream testing and packaging parts.

Such investments would create productive, local options for people who might otherwise join gangs or migrate north. But there are major obstacles, including inadequate energy, poor infrastructure, and security issues.

3. *DAS Jacobstein, how are we working with Central American and Caribbean countries to improve their security situations and rule of law? What more should we be doing?*
4. *DAS Jacobstein, we are using schools and universities, the State Department’s International Technology Security and Innovation Fund, trade agreements, and the Americas Partnership for Economic Prosperity to promote regional integration and nearshoring. What should the United States be doing to help Central American nations attract nearshoring investment?*
5. *Deputy Assistant Administrator Howell, how does USAID’s implementation of the Administration’s Root Causes Strategy stem migration by providing economic opportunity?*