



Testimony by Cynthia J. Arnson

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“Dangerous Passage: Central America in Crisis

And the Exodus of Unaccompanied Minors”¹

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Chairman Menendez, Senator Corker, and Distinguished Members of the Committee,

As someone who has closely followed Central American affairs for over three decades, I am pleased to have this opportunity to testify on the surge of unaccompanied minors arriving at the U.S. border from Central America.

As our nation seeks to address this unprecedented influx, we must humanely and intelligently respond both to immediate needs and address longer-term perspectives. In the short term, our response must ensure that, in accordance with U.S. and international law, those in need of protection as victims of human trafficking and/or those with legitimate claims for asylum are afforded timely due process; that is, that they are assisted and not penalized. This principle is important to keep in mind in light of the pressures to remove children quickly, given the current size of the influx as well as to send a strong message in an effort to deter further migration.

My testimony will address three of the most important drivers of this flow, and suggest options for improving the quality of democratic governance, citizen security, and inclusive development

¹ I am grateful to Latin American Program interns Kathryn Moffat, Angela Budzinski, and Carla Mavaddat for research assistance.

in Central America. Indeed, a long-term solution to what is now a humanitarian crisis rests on these three pillars—what the U.S. government is prepared to commit over the long-term in pursuit of these goals, and what responsibility Central American actors in and out of government are willing to assume to transform their own countries.

There is no one causal factor that accounts for the unprecedented increase in unaccompanied children attempting to enter the United States, or the lesser but still significant increase in the number of adults attempting to enter with young children. The numbers of young children seeking to enter spiked in this fiscal year after smaller but significant increases in the past two years.² Children from Nicaragua, Panama, and Costa Rica are, for the most part, not part of this increase. This begs a closer exploration as to why such large numbers are arriving from El Salvador, Honduras, and Guatemala—the so-called Northern Triangle. In general, the “push” factors behind this flow stem from the persistent failure of governments following the internal armed conflicts of the 1970s, ‘80s, and ‘90s, to guarantee the security of their citizens or provide a foundation for broad-based socio-economic well-being.³ These twin failures have given rise to a cluster of factors that can be summarized as follows:

Criminal and Drug-Fueled Violence: Central America’s Northern Triangle (El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras) has been described with numbing regularity as the most violent region in the world outside countries at war. The staggering rates of homicide⁴ take their largest toll on young men between the ages of 15 and 29, although young women have been increasingly targeted. Annual homicide statistics, as revealing as they are, tell only part of the story. For example, the homicide rate in El Salvador declined due to a controversial truce between the country’s two most important gangs. However, some parts of the country saw a rise in murders during the gang truce, reinforcing the point that crime rates *within* a country’s borders vary significantly, between urban and rural areas, from city to city, and—within cities—from neighborhood to neighborhood.⁵ Hence, a decline in the national average, as has occurred in Guatemala over the past several years, does not necessarily eliminate “hot zones” with high murder rates. Indeed, a Department of Homeland Security (DHS) study of unaccompanied minors attempting to enter the United States between January and May 2014 found that the largest number by far came from Honduras. Twenty of the 30 top sending cities and towns were Honduran, led by San Pedro Sula, the most violent city in the world.⁶ As noted by DHS,

² The number of Salvadorans, Guatemalans, and Hondurans requesting political asylum in Belize, Costa Rica, Mexico, and Panama, also increased significantly.

³ See Cynthia Arnson, ed., *In the Wake of War: Democratization and Internal Armed Conflict in Latin America* (Washington, D.C. and Stanford, CA: Woodrow Wilson Center Press and Stanford University Press, 2012).

⁴ The rates are 41.2 per 100,000 in El Salvador, 39.9 per 100,000 in Guatemala, and 90.4 per 100,000, according to 2012 figures of the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime.

⁵ See United Nations Development Program, *Informe Regional de Desarrollo Humano: Seguridad Ciudadana con rostro humano: diagnóstico y propuestas para América Latina* (New York: 2013).

⁶ The top cities in terms of places of origin of unaccompanied minors were: San Pedro Sula, Tegucigalpa, and Juticalpa, Honduras; followed by San Salvador, El Salvador; La Ceiba, Honduras; and Guatemala City.

“Salvadoran and Honduran children...come from extremely violent regions where they probably perceive the risk of traveling alone to the US preferable to remaining at home.”⁷

Moreover, excessive focus on homicides, while understandable, does not capture the many forms of street crime, threats, assault, kidnapping, sexual violence, and extortion that affect citizens on a routine and intimate basis. Many statistics are unreliable as civilians do not trust the police or other authorities, leading to significant underreporting of even serious crimes.

Gangs or *maras* are not solely responsible for the levels of violent crime in the Northern Triangle, but their role is pervasive and highly organized. In post-war Central America, numerous factors contributed to the rise of gangs—migration to the United States, which divided families; a lack of opportunity; a culture of violence; access to firearms; an absence of social capital; rapid urbanization, etc.⁸ U.S. deportations of gang members convicted of crimes in the United States, for years with little or no advance warning to government officials in the region, contributed to the diffusion of gang culture and practices. Zero-tolerance or *mano dura* policies adopted by the governments of El Salvador and Honduras, in particular, only made matters worse; these policies reinforced gang solidarity and membership as a form of protection from the state and led to prison overcrowding and the role of prisons as incubators of gang membership. All this took place against a backdrop of incomplete and at times distorted processes of building and reforming civilian security and law enforcement institutions after the end of civil wars. Impunity and corruption remain rampant.

Crime and violence, including that perpetrated by gangs, have worsened as drug trafficking and other forms of organized crime have spread in the Northern Triangle. However, the crisis of insecurity long predates the spillover of Mexican drug trafficking cartels such as the Zetas or Sinaloa into Central America. U.S. demand for drugs has served to deepen the security crisis, as has the failure to restrict the flow of firearms from the United States into Mexico and Central America. Weak institutions and some corrupt officials in those countries have permitted organized crime to flourish.

Poverty and Lack of Opportunity

Poverty by itself is not a good predictor of who will migrate and when, but a general lack of opportunity, particularly when coupled by high levels of violence in poor neighborhoods, creates an important push factor for those who are willing to risk their lives in order to enter the United States. Poverty levels in the Northern Triangle have gone down since the 1990s, but it is still the case that poverty affects approximately 45 percent of Salvadorans, 54.8 percent of Guatemalans,

⁷ U.S. Department of Homeland Security, “Homeland Intelligence Today: Unaccompanied Alien Children (UACs) by Location of Origin for CY 2014: Honduras, El Salvador, and Guatemala,” May 27, 2014.

⁸ José Miguel Cruz, Rafael Fernández de Castro, and Gema Santamaría Balmaceda, “Political Transition, Social Violence, and Gangs: Cases in Central America and Mexico,” in Arnson, ed., *In the Wake of War*, 317-49. Analysts such as Douglas Farah also point to the failure of post-war demobilization and reintegration schemes as a factor behind the rise of gangs. See Douglas Farah, “Organized Crime in El Salvador: Its Homegrown and Transnational Dimension,” in Cynthia J. Arnson and Eric L. Olson, eds., *Organized Crime in Central America: The Northern Triangle* (Washington, D.C.: Latin American Program, Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, 2011), 104-38.

and 67.4 percent of Hondurans. In Guatemala and Honduras, over half of those in poverty are classified as indigent, that is, in extreme poverty.⁹ According to the World Food Program, in Guatemala alone, approximately half of children ages 5 and under suffer from chronic under-nutrition. Rural poverty in general is far worse than in urban areas. Growth rates in the three countries vary; all three economies suffered severe impacts as a result of the 2008 global financial crisis and for the most part, recovery has been mediocre.

One striking indicator of the lack of opportunity is the proportion of 15 to 24-year-olds who neither study nor work. Known by the Spanish acronym “Ni-Ni,” they constitute 23.9 percent of youth in this age group in El Salvador, 22.6 percent in Guatemala, and 28.0 percent in Honduras. Many young women in this category help take care of households. Of young people 15-24 years of age who have work, low levels of education prevail. More than 60 percent of Guatemalans and Hondurans in this age group have left school before completing 9th grade. The same is true for approximately 48 percent of Salvadorans.¹⁰

Northern Triangle countries are also characterized by high levels of inequality of opportunity. Indicators such as the Gini coefficient and the United Nations Development Program’s Inequality Adjusted Human Development Index demonstrate that inequality is pervasive in the region.¹¹

Family Reunification

Migration flows from Central America into the United States increased in a significant way during the civil wars of the 1980s. Many of those entering the United States from El Salvador, Nicaragua, and Honduras were granted Temporary Protected Status. This designation has been renewed repeatedly long after the wars have ended and has been applied to new groups of migrants following natural disasters such as earthquakes and hurricanes, including Hurricane Mitch. Renewals of TPS have been carried out in response to requests from Central American governments who argue that a return of large numbers of migrants would be destabilizing given a lack of opportunities in the labor market. I am unaware of information that specifically links adults with TPS or Green Cards to the flow of undocumented children. But special consideration should be given to family reunification for Central American migrants who have legal status in the United States.

⁹ UN Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean, *Social Panorama of Latin America* (Santiago: 2013). See also: Hugo Beteta, “Central American Development: Two Decades of Progress and Challenges for the Future,” Regional Migration Study Group, Woodrow Wilson Center and Migration Policy Institute, July 2012, 8.

¹⁰ Figures concerning the Ni-Ni’s are drawn from Programa Estado de la Nación, “Nini en Centroamérica: la población de 15 a 24 años que no estudia ni trabaja,” presentation at the INCAE and Woodrow Wilson Center conference “Encuentro de Diálogo en Temas de Seguridad Centroamericana,” Managua, Nicaragua, March 24, 2014.

¹¹ See Dinorah Azpuru, “Las condiciones del Triángulo Norte y los menores migrantes”, *ConDistintosAcentos*, Universidad de Salamanca, Spain, July 14, 2014.

According to the U.S. Department of Homeland Security, of the 11.4 million unauthorized immigrants in the United States in 2012, the number of undocumented Salvadorans, Guatemalans, and Hondurans in the United States were 690,000, 560,000, and 360,000, respectively. Often working in menial jobs, they have nonetheless managed to support family members back home through remittance flows. Remittances have boosted incomes and consumption in Central America, often substituting for, or at a minimum, supplementing weak social safety nets. Remittances constitute fully 17 percent of GDP in El Salvador and 20 percent in Honduras. What these figures demonstrate is that divided families in Central America are critical to the economic well-being of their relatives as well as to their countries' economies overall. The human dimensions of this phenomenon should not be overlooked. This is especially true given that migration and the strains it places on separated families are seen as risk factors for young people joining gangs.

Reporters' interviews with young migrants as well as adults who care for them suggest that the desire of parents and children to be reunited is a push as well as pull factor behind the current flows. There is circumstantial evidence that rumors have spread in communities in the region—stoked by unscrupulous and often brutal traffickers (*coyotes*) anxious to profit from the thousands of dollars each migrant pays—indicating that children will be reunited with their parents and allowed to stay in the United States once they reach the U.S. border. The Obama administration has recently begun publicity campaigns to counter these misperceptions. Even if perceptions can be altered, however, they will do little to curb the desperation that motivates young children and others to embark on a perilous and often fatal journey.

Policy Responses

One thin silver lining in the crisis of undocumented minors is that it has focused renewed attention on the violence, poverty, and hopelessness that affect millions of Central American citizens. Indeed, I can recall no time since the Central American wars of the 1980s when so much U.S. media and policy attention has been paid to the region. Our failure to invest and remain engaged in Central America in the peacetime era, with the same resources and single-mindedness with which we fought the Cold War, has no doubt contributed to the current situation. The Central American Regional Security Initiative (CARSI), launched in 2008 in response to concerns about the spillover of organized crime from Mexico, has focused on security without setting other governance and development objectives as priorities. CARSI has also been under-resourced. This situation needs to change.

There is no magic bullet to address these problems, which have taken decades if not centuries to develop. But progress is possible, with the right leadership, sufficient resources, active civic participation, integral approaches, and adherence to the principles of transparency and accountability. A critical ingredient for policies to be successful is political will and leadership from the region itself. Yet history has shown that the United States still wields tremendous influence and should not hesitate to exercise it on behalf of shared objectives.

In the short run, the current crisis should be handled in ways that protect vulnerable children, many of whom have been traumatized in their home countries or during their journey to the U.S.

border. Indeed, humanitarian workers receive frequent reports of trafficking for sexual exploitation or slave labor, as well as of organ trafficking, kidnappings, and brutal killings. The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees estimates that 58 percent of unaccompanied minors have legitimate claims under U.S. and humanitarian law.

Of the current funding request pending before Congress, far too little is to be made available for addressing the root causes of migration in Central America. The \$295 million included to address “economic, social, governance, and citizen security conditions” is also to be used for the repatriation and reintegration of migrants in Central America. Once these purposes are accomplished, it is unclear how much will be left to meet the significant challenges in remaining areas.

The following suggestions are intended to spur broader thinking about a comprehensive, long-term approach:

- Transparency and accountability around new spending programs must be core commitments upheld by recipients in the region of U.S. and other international assistance. Corruption erodes trust and fosters cynicism across societies and undermines the legitimacy of government institutions. Building institutional capacity and effectiveness means gaining the confidence of citizens across the board. Leaders of key institutions should not serve unless they are models of these principles.
- Future policy initiatives should, as much as possible, be the outcome of broad-based national dialogues in Central America among a range of stakeholders—government representatives; the private sector, business, and professional associations; the Church; think tanks and universities; organized labor; non-profit organizations; *campesino* organizations. The forums, with the involvement of other donors and international development banks, should be convened for the purpose of devising concrete proposals for fostering security, governance, and inclusive development.
- Improving citizen security—a public good—is a necessary condition for fostering investment and economic growth. U.S. assistance programs under CARSI have been overly focused on counter-drug operations and combatting other forms of organized crime. A “whole of government” approach has purported to coordinate development and violence prevention strategies with improved law enforcement and interdiction. But in practice, development goals have been secondary and the security programs not sufficiently focused on fighting the crime and violence that affect citizens’ daily lives.¹² The greatest examples of success in Latin America in improving citizen security involve local, community-based initiatives that involve non-governmental organizations, the private sector, and other civic groups in addition to the police and judiciary.
- While security is paramount, other development and governance efforts must go forward in parallel fashion. Efforts must be made to foster opportunity in the legal economy by investing in human capital formation that matches education and job training with the demands of the labor market, including through strategic investment with a training component. Ensuring the reliability of a legal framework that creates certainty for

¹² Andrew Selee, Cynthia J. Arnson, and Eric L. Olson, “Crime and Violence in Mexico and Central America: An Evolving but Incomplete U.S. Policy Response,” Regional Migration Study Group, Wilson Center and Migration Policy Institute, January 2013.

investors without ignoring the needs of ordinary citizens for whom the judicial system does not function is paramount.

- More must be done to improve the capacity of remittances to contribute to productive investment in communities, in addition to subsidizing household consumption.
- Investments must be made to expand quality public education, including by stimulating U.S. community colleges and vocational and trade schools to partner with underserved communities in Central America. Part of these exchanges should be aimed at improving teacher training.

No lasting solution to the current crisis will be found “on the cheap” or in the short run. In the current U.S. fiscal climate, only smart investments that derive from a strategic logic will survive the political process now and into the future. As the example of Colombia demonstrates, a major turnaround in a country’s fortunes is possible when bipartisan majorities in the United States provide sustained support to committed leaders in and out of government who mobilize their country’s own talent and resources. Central Americans came together with the support of the international community to end their fratricidal wars two decades ago. A similar effort is needed to convert the current crisis into an opportunity for building more inclusive and democratic societies.

Thank you again for this opportunity to share my thoughts.