



COMMITTEE ON HOMELAND SECURITY

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Subcommittee Hearing Statement of Chairman Bennie G. Thompson (D-MS)
DHS's Efforts to Disrupt Transnational Criminal Organizations in Central America
July 28, 2021

As the Subcommittee has learned through its recent hearings, many of the root causes of migration from Central America are interrelated. Transnational criminal organizations are an example. Violence fueled by these organizations' efforts to control migration routes in the region has led to some of the highest crime rates in the world. Crime has caused thousands to flee in fear of their lives, especially minors who are often targeted by local gangs.

The ability of criminal organizations to bribe government officials and exploit weak judicial systems in Central American countries allows them to operate with impunity. The Department of Homeland Security (DHS) has had long-standing efforts focused on addressing the many threats transnational criminal organizations pose to the U.S. But actions by the Trump Administration to dismantle some of these efforts may have limited the Department's effectiveness. For example, we now know that President Trump's DHS worked to undermine—and ultimately shutdown—a joint task force that coordinated Department-wide efforts to address border threats.

Repeated cuts to U.S. foreign assistance in Central America and failure to hold corrupt politicians accountable also made conditions in the region worse over the past 4 years. The influx of migrants to the U.S. southern border created new opportunities for criminal enterprises. Smugglers are charging large sums to help desperate migrants make the journey north. In turn, these payments fund fees charged by the larger criminal organizations who control access to key border crossing routes. Sadly, we have all heard too many stories of migrants being assaulted, robbed, or abandoned along the way.

I applaud the Biden Administration for taking action to address these challenges and to strengthen DHS's capacity to combat criminal organizations. In April, Secretary Mayorkas announced the creation of Operation Sentinel, a collaborative effort led by U.S. Customs and Border Protection to counter migrant smuggling operations. In June, the Department of Justice formed a joint task force with DHS to enhance U.S. law enforcement efforts against human smuggling and trafficking groups operating in Mexico and the Northern Triangle.

I look forward to hearing from our witnesses today about these initiatives and ways Congress can support DHS's efforts to combat transnational criminal organizations and further strengthen border security.

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