



# COMMITTEE ON HOMELAND SECURITY

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## Hearing Statement of Oversight, Management, & Accountability Subcommittee Chairman Lou Correa (D-CA)

### *Enhancing Border Security: Addressing Corruption in Central America*

June 11, 2021

Last month this Subcommittee held a hearing to examine the issues that drive people in Central America to leave their homes and migrate north to the United States. Today, I am pleased to have the opportunity to dig deeper into one of those push factors—corruption. This hearing will explore how weak governing systems are exploited by corrupt actors to stifle development and maintain the status quo.

Corruption can divert aid money away from those that need it most, while obscuring the government's actions through layers of red tape and unclear policy. And the effects are felt by all but a select few. Funding for social services like health care, education, and social assistance in Central America is among the lowest in the hemisphere. Last year, approximately 20 percent of Guatemalans and Hondurans admitted to paying bribes in exchange for basic social services. And after being struck by the devastation of two once-in-a-lifetime hurricanes as well as COVID-19, the lack of a government safety net has forced many to see migration to the U.S. border as the only option.

Therefore, as we seek to improve our own border security, we must also support the efforts of our Southern neighbors to bolster hope, opportunity, and security in their own countries. Key to this effort will be strengthening democratic institutions to prevent those in power from exploiting vulnerable populations. Elections must be free and fair, judges and legislators must not suffer from undue influence, and the government must be responsive and accountable to the people.

In recent years, anti-democratic actions in the Northern Triangle countries of Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador in particular, have contributed to undermining public trust in government institutions. Although all three countries hold regular elections, recent leadership changes have led to an increase in authoritarian practices and concerning accusations. Some political leaders have used the COVID-19 pandemic as an excuse for limiting government transparency and infringing on civil rights protections, while others have been accused of working directly with criminal organizations to undermine the rule of law.

In all three countries, judicial systems suffer from a lack of independence and all too often those who dare to issue rulings against corrupt leaders are threatened or removed from their positions. And anti-corruption commissions established in each country to investigate and prosecute corruption have been hamstrung or shut down altogether by these leaders in recent years. Without meaningful investment in fixing these broken systems, they will continue to be exploited year after year by those who benefit from keeping the system unbalanced. So, I am pleased to hear that strengthening democratic institutions to combat corruption is a vital part of the Administration's plan to improve living conditions in the region.

Just this week, Vice President Harris traveled to Guatemala to discuss a partnership on addressing migration push factors like weak governance. She announced the creation of an Anticorruption Task Force, which will include sending prosecutors from the Justice Department to help build corruption cases and strengthen the rule of law. Additionally, the Department of Homeland Security will continue to work closely with local officials in Central American countries to strengthen customs enforcement and prevent illegally obtained wealth from exiting the country, a key way to combat government corruption. But there is only so much the U.S. government can do, and we must work closely with partners in both private enterprise and civil society to achieve lasting reform.

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