

**Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary for the
Bureau of Population, Refugees, and Migration (PRM), Marta Youth's
Testimony Before the
House Homeland Security Subcommittees on Border Security and
Enforcement; and Oversight, Investigations, and Accountability
March 21, 2024 Hearing**

Good afternoon, Chair Higgins, Chair Bishop, Ranking Member Correa, Ranking Member Ivey, and distinguished members of the Committee. I am pleased to be here today to share with you the latest on our efforts to respond to the historic levels of irregular migration and forced displacement in the Western Hemisphere.

MIGRATION AND FORCED DISPLACEMENT CHALLENGE - CONTEXT

The world is facing historic levels of human mobility, and the Western Hemisphere is no exception. Last year, over 20 million people were displaced across the region. While the United States has been the destination for many, we are far from alone. Of the more than 7.5 million Venezuelans living outside their country, over 6.5 million are in Latin America and Caribbean. Costa Rica is now hosting over 500,000 Nicaraguan refugees and migrants fleeing the Ortega regime. These individuals are on the move alongside others from Central and South America, from the Caribbean, and from elsewhere in the world. It is clear that no one country alone is impacted, and that no one country holds the solutions. For an effective response, we need more than just humanitarian aid and increased enforcement. We must consider the unique reasons people are on the move—some are fleeing persecution, violence, and natural disasters, others seek economic opportunity, and others family reunification.

To account for these distinct needs and circumstances, the Administration's comprehensive approach is to address the causes that lead people to migrate, create protection mechanisms within the region, and facilitate safe, orderly, humane and lawful migration pathways. This holistic approach

involves strengthening national asylum, registration, regularization, and integration frameworks; improving humane border enforcement and repatriation capabilities abroad; preventing refoulement; and increasing the consequences for irregular entry to the United States.

We have worked to make this comprehensive approach regional, by partnering with 21 countries from across the hemisphere through the Los Angeles Declaration on Migration and Protection. Today, I will share some of the work we are doing as part of this broad, comprehensive, and collaborative approach to migration management in the region.

Strengthening Pathways to the United States and Third Countries Outside Latin America and the Caribbean

Since 2021, to address irregular migration and ensure our national security, the United States has led the largest expansion in decades of lawful pathways to the United States to help refugees, vulnerable migrants, and forcibly displaced persons in the Western Hemisphere. Individuals seeking international protection and other lawful pathways have various potential options for regular migration to the United States and other countries, including refugee resettlement, humanitarian parole, family reunification, labor pathways, and seeking asylum in host countries, subject to meeting eligibility criteria. They can also access various support services provided by international organizations and NGOs in the region.

The Safe Mobility initiative (known by the Spanish name *Movilidad Segura*) is one of the many ways the United States is facilitating access to safe and lawful pathways from countries in the region, so refugees do not have to undertake dangerous journeys in search of safety. Safe Mobility Offices (SMOs) are currently operational in Colombia, Costa Rica, Ecuador, and Guatemala.

The Safe Mobility initiative revolutionized how we refer and process individuals in the region for refugee resettlement. The SMOs also serve as hubs for providing information about humanitarian parole, family

reunification, and labor pathways. Applicants apply via an online platform through which experts from international organizations, specifically the International Organization for Migration (IOM) and the UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR), help individuals assess which, if any, lawful pathways might work for them. More than 150,000 people already registered on MovilidadSegura.org. And if the individuals are not eligible for any of those lawful pathways, they are informed about services and programs available to them in their application country or country of origin to give them safe, supported options to remain where they are.

The Safe Mobility initiative is designed to provide access to a range of lawful pathways to the United States but also to other countries as well. Refugee resettlement processing is just one option available via SMOs. Individuals who qualify for resettlement to the United States under the Safe Mobility initiative undergo expedited refugee processing based on lessons learned in the Administration's effort to rebuild the U.S. Refugee Admissions Program (USRAP). These refugee applicants undergo the same rigorous and multi-layered interagency screening and vetting process as all other refugees and, if eligible, most will arrive in the United States in just a matter of months.

As of March 3, through the Safe Mobility initiative, more than 22,200 individuals have been referred to USRAP for potential resettlement to the United States, and more than 14,000 individuals have been screened for other lawful pathways to the United States. More than 6,500 individuals have already arrived in the United States under the Safe Mobility initiative.

We are also working with other migrant-hosting countries to expand lawful pathways, including labor pathways with Spain and Canada. Almost 300 vulnerable migrants in Costa Rica have been referred for resettlement to Spain via the SMO mechanism. We are working to expand the reach of the SMOs. An interagency working group focused on lawful pathways to third countries is working with other countries to connect them to the Safe Mobility initiative.

Working closely with international organization partners, we are building capacity, running extensive messaging campaigns, and exponentially increasing the number of people who receive information or services via the SMOs. In the refugee pathway, for example, we aim to resettle between 35,000 and 50,000 individuals in Fiscal Year (FY) 2024, an historic and ambitious goal which would amount to an increase in refugee resettlement from the Western Hemisphere of over 450 percent from last year.

Strengthening pathways to the United States and other countries through the SMOs is a groundbreaking approach that will prove essential in helping meet the needs of the day: protecting our borders, promoting safe and orderly migration, while still taking advantage of the wealth of benefits that refugees and migrants bring to local communities and the overall economy of United States.

Strengthening Protection Options Within the Region

While refugee resettlement is a critical lifeline for certain groups of people, asylum in other countries within Latin America is an excellent option for many in need of international protection. The humanitarian assistance funds Congress has generously provided to the Bureau of Population, Refugees, and Migration (PRM) to administer has had a significant impact in stabilizing displaced populations in host countries, especially by strengthening access to asylum and regularization in countries like Colombia, Costa Rica, Ecuador, and Mexico. These programs, in conjunction with partner country efforts, have provided access to protection and stability for millions of individuals and have helped to mitigate movements to the U.S. border to seek safety.

The United States is the global leader in delivering humanitarian assistance worldwide, including in the Western Hemisphere. PRM provided more than \$594 million of the funding entrusted to us by Congress in humanitarian assistance in the Western Hemisphere in FY 2023. With this assistance, our international humanitarian organization partners deliver lifesaving water, shelter, sanitation, and emergency healthcare to refugees, asylum seekers,

internally displaced persons, stateless persons, and vulnerable migrants. Our assistance stabilizes refugees and vulnerable migrants in their host communities and provides solutions closer to home so that displaced people can remain in host communities and avoid dangerous journeys toward the United States. This assistance also helps host countries receive refugees and migrants as an opportunity for social inclusion and economic growth. Those who are able to integrate and rebuild their lives closer to home are much less likely to continue the dangerous journey northward.

The humanitarian funding PRM oversees bolsters our partners' capacity-strengthening work with host governments to develop effective and efficient asylum systems, strengthen humane migration management mechanisms, and give local communities the resources they need to welcome and integrate refugees and other vulnerable populations.

With our support through our partner, UNHCR, Mexico's national refugee commission increased its registration and processing capacity by nearly 500 percent since 2018. In 2023, Mexico was the country with the third-highest number of asylum claims in the world.

Through our humanitarian partners, we also support Costa Rica's asylum agency, including 90 percent of its staff costs. Despite its relatively small size, the country hosts more than 600,000 Nicaraguans and received the fourth-highest number of asylum claims in the world in 2023, behind only the United States, Germany, and Mexico.

Colombia and Ecuador have taken significant steps to improve migrant access to regularization and support services. With PRM assistance, partner organizations helped Colombia develop and implement a ten-year temporary protected status program that so far has allowed over 1.6 million Venezuelans to work and access health and education services in Colombia. And in Ecuador, PRM partners IOM and UNHCR provide essential staffing and technical support to Ecuador's ambitious registration and regularization program. Since the program started in August 2022, more than 201,000

individuals completed registration, 83,600 have received a temporary residency visa, and more than 64,000 have received an Ecuadorian ID card.

All these efforts to build asylum capacity and help migrants and refugees access legal status and services in the region have allowed millions of individuals to gain the legal status that allows them to remain and lead dignified lives throughout the region.

In interviews with humanitarian partners, displaced persons in Mexico and at our southwest border often report moving and hiding within their home country multiple times before fleeing across a border. We know that when these individuals have a viable option to stay in their country safely, that is the option they choose. Through our UN and other partners, we work with governments in the region to strengthen local protection responses for internally displaced persons, so they need not resort to crossing an international border.

When we talk about supporting options for people to restart their lives within the region as opposed to coming here, improving access to protection, whether through asylum or other temporary status, is only part of the challenge.

All this work on strengthening administrative processing capacity and reforming legal frameworks only pays off if the circumstances in host countries enable refugees to rebuild their lives and become self-reliant. This means being able to enroll their kids in school, access local healthcare and other social services, get jobs and housing, and open bank accounts—which is why PRM also supports local integration efforts throughout the region.

For example, we support UNHCR, in coordination with the Government of Mexico, to help refugees get jobs, including in Mexican cities with labor shortages along the country's industrial belt. Since its inception, this program has helped more than 30,000 refugees find dignified, decent work

and rebuild their lives in Mexico. The program has an average retention rate after a year of around 70 percent.

Just this year, our support in Guatemala enabled the authorities there to transition to a fully online system for issuing work permits to asylum seekers with pending claims, reducing the average wait time from 15 to four business days.

In Brazil, the Brazilian government voluntarily relocated more than 100,000 Venezuelans from the border to more than 930 Brazilian cities since 2018, representing a quarter of the 426,000 Venezuelans who have arrived in Brazil. This relocation effort, supported by PRM partners who rely on U.S. humanitarian funding, enables Venezuelans in Brazil to better access jobs, housing, and education, as well as reunite families.

Our approach to integration includes support for host communities as well, which is critical to promoting social cohesion and mitigating the risk of rising xenophobia.

Regional Circular Labor Migration Pathways

One of the many reasons people migrate is for economic opportunity. When these workers lack lawful means to migrate, they are more vulnerable to exploitation and abuse, whether by human smugglers or traffickers or in the workplace. This is why our approach to expanding access to lawful pathways includes increasing the availability of temporary labor pathways with worker protections to the United States but also to third countries, including within the region.

The H-2 visa program is the primary pathway for seasonal migrants to find temporary work in the United States while supporting U.S. employers in certain sectors. On November 17, 2023, the Department of Homeland Security, in consultation with the Department of Labor, exercised a temporary increase of 64,716 H-2B temporary nonagricultural worker visas for FY 2024. Twenty thousand of these visas are reserved for nationals of

Colombia, Costa Rica, Ecuador, El Salvador, Guatemala, Haiti, and Honduras. At the same time, we are working across the U.S. government to enhance safeguards in these programs, to better protect the rights of all workers in the United States.

Beyond labor pathways to the United States, or as previously mentioned to Spain and Canada and other countries in the future, we are also working to strengthen pathways and protection for migrant workers elsewhere in the Western Hemisphere. PRM funding to IOM enables labor migration capacity building that engages governments and private sector actors in the region to strengthen their labor pathways and implement ethical recruitment practices. One highly successful outcome of these efforts is Costa Rica's bilateral temporary labor migration mechanisms in the agricultural sector. Over 27,800 migrant workers from Nicaragua and Panama have benefited from these mechanisms, making an important contribution to the Costa Rican economy during the coffee harvest. And we expect the program to expand to additional countries in Central America this year.

This exemplifies the kind of programming PRM seeks to support. It increases worker protections and allows individuals to access economic opportunities while remaining closer to their families. It also leverages existing data on circular migration flows to regularize pathways where the need is greatest. In doing so, the program directly cuts down on irregular migration at its inception and reduces instances of abuse and exploitation.

CLOSING

Responding to the Western Hemisphere's largest migration and forced displacement crisis in history requires an approach as comprehensive as the reasons people are on the move. Expanding access to lawful pathways; strengthening local options such as asylum, regularization and reintegration frameworks; and promoting integration into host communities are just one portion of the Administration's comprehensive plan. Combined with root causes programming, repatriation, border management, and increased consequences for irregular entry, these efforts make up the Administration's

holistic approach to create safe, humane, lawful and orderly migration options within the region.

In closing, I'd like to thank the members of these subcommittees for the opportunity to discuss these critical issues and the work we are doing to meet the challenges of the moment. We appreciate your support.