

**FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE****Statement of Ranking Member Bennie G. Thompson*****Dangerous Passage: The Growing Problem of Unaccompanied Children Crossing the Border***

June 24, 2014 (Washington) – Today, Committee on Homeland Security Ranking Member Bennie G. Thompson (D-MS) delivered the following prepared remarks for the full Committee hearing entitled “Dangerous Passage: The Growing Problem of Unaccompanied Children Crossing the Border”

“On a daily basis, waves of children ranging from toddlers to teenagers are fleeing violence, oppression, and economic desperation from Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador – many of them sent by their families. They are simply looking for a safe-haven. As an intense and significant humanitarian crisis develops, we are finding its origins to be as complex as its implications.

It is irresponsible to attribute this crisis to one U.S. policy, or for that matter one US President. Despite the demagoguing by many, this crisis is not just an immigration matter nor is it just a foreign policy matter. This crisis is not exclusive to the United States. Much of the Western Hemisphere is seeing this crisis. According to the United Nations, these children are streaming into Mexico, Panama, Nicaragua, and Belize as well as Canada and the United States.

From our perspective, we seem to be barraged, on almost a daily basis, by troubling images of vulnerable children, many still clutching their dolls and teddy bears, crossing the border into the United States and being immediately apprehended by Border Patrol Officers. This fiscal year alone, Border Patrol Officers have apprehended and detained over 50,000 unaccompanied children at the southwestern border.

The number of kids arriving at our border without their parents seems to grow by the day. The influx of these kids has certainly strained Border Patrol resources, but the men and women of the Border Patrol have risen to the challenge. In 2008, then-President George Bush signed the William Wilberforce Trafficking Victims Protection Reauthorization Act. The law recognizes that special care is demanded when dealing with the young and vulnerable. Under those laws, the Border Patrol is required to take unaccompanied children who are not from Mexico into custody, screen them, and transfer them to the Department of Health and Human Services’ Office of Refugee Resettlement. I would note, for the record, that during this challenging time, even though Border Patrol has had to ramp up activities in the Rio Grande Valley, the agency’s ‘effectiveness rate’ has improved.

For those out there that are looking for simple answers and to lay blame with on President Obama’s policy on Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals or even the Senate passed comprehensive immigration reform legislation, I would note that neither would apply to these kids. Hence, the assertion that the recent surge in unaccompanied children is due to lax immigration enforcement does not pass the smell test.

In a time of a crisis such as this, we need to get our priorities in line and find both near-term and long-term ways to address this situation. On June 2nd, the President tapped Secretary Johnson to establish a Unified Coordination Group to ensure Federal unity of effort to address this situation. In turn, Secretary Johnson appointed FEMA Administrator Fugate to be the Federal Coordinating Official and lead these efforts throughout the Executive Branch.

Looking out to the long-term, we need to do more to turn the tide on this crisis by, among other things, fostering greater stability among our neighbors and dissuading families from taking such action. Over the weekend, Secretary Johnson issued a Public Service Announcement in various Central American countries debunking the myths about U.S. immigration policy and informing the parents about the danger of traveling from Central America to the United States.

Today, I want to hear more from the Department about the response and their work with other federal agencies including the Departments of Health and Human Services, Defense, and State in addressing this crisis. We need to organize all our Federal agencies involved, not just DHS, to effectively address this sudden surge. Looking beyond DHS, there are questions to ask about HHS' resources and for that matter, State's engagement through regional security initiatives, such as the Central American Regional Security Initiative. Do these programs have enough funding and personnel to be effective? I recognize that the panel assembled today may not be in a position to answer this question but it is a question I will be pursuing.

Dehumanizing and labeling these kids and their parents will not yield a solution. Labeling this as an 'Administration failure' will not address what is actually going on in El Salvador, Honduras, and Guatemala that would cause a parent to hand over their son or daughter to a smuggler or to send that child on a perilous trek through Central America and Mexico to the United States.

At this time, we can use our platforms to rise to the occasion and be helpful, or we can engage in political grandstanding at the peril of young lives. It is my hope, that this Committee, with its strong history of bipartisanship can choose the former and be a model for effective leadership on this matter."

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