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Statement of Ranking Member Bennie G. Thompson (D-MS)

Subcommittee on Border and Maritime Security Hearing

May 22, 2018

I am deeply disturbed by actions President Trump, the Secretary, and Department officials are taking ostensibly to deter illegal migration.

What the Trump Administration, DHS officials, and many of my Republican colleagues call "legal loopholes" are actually laws Congress put in place to protect some of the most vulnerable migrants, particularly children, seeking humanitarian protection.

Separating small children from their parents as a punitive measure runs counter to basic humanitarian principles and should be beneath even this Administration.

Earlier this year, I was proud to lead all 12 of Democrats on this Committee in sending a letter to Secretary Nielsen opposing the practice of separating migrant parents from their children at the border or in immigration detention.

I continue to believe the practice is cruel and will only exacerbate the trauma experienced by children fleeing violence and unrest in their home countries.

DHS is also pursuing policies that may interfere with people's ability to seek asylum in the United States as provided for under the law.

We have laws in place so that people fleeing dangerous situations can request protection and humanitarian relief.

I am confident that our witnesses here today are aware that El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras are facing exceptional levels of violent crime – a sad reality that has persisted for the past several years.

The increased number of Central Americans petitioning for asylum in the United States is not because more people are "exploiting" the system via "loopholes," but because many have credible claims.

Seeking asylum in the United States is not an easy process either.

In addition, anyone undergoing a "credible fear" review has their name and fingerprints vetted via a national security database, which scans records from federal, state, local, and foreign sources.

We also know from immigration court records that 77 percent of asylum seekers who are not in ICE custody do show up for their hearings.

When people, and particularly children, have access to counsel, they are even more likely to appear for their court date.

Though asylum requests in both Mexico and the United States have increased, I take issue with the Administration's characterization that we have a crisis at the border.

DHS' own data shows that overall migration levels at the U.S-Mexico border are at record lows, with apprehensions at their lowest since the early 1970s.

In 2000, Border Patrol apprehended 1.6 million people crossing between ports of entry.

In contrast, in 2017, the agency apprehended less than 310,000 people - a nearly 82% decrease.

Those of us who have worked on this issue for a long time have a responsibility to share facts that offer perspective on the situation at the border rather than foment fear for political gain.

Democrats have long supported smart, effective border security measures and we will continue to do so.

What we will not do is sit idly by while President Trump tries to undermine our values as a Nation of immigrants or prove his border security bona fides on the backs of children.

We are better than that as a Congress and as a country.

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