



COMMITTEE ON HOMELAND SECURITY

Ranking Member Bennie G. Thompson

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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

The Broken Path: How Transnational Criminal Organizations Profit from Human Trafficking at the Southwest Border

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Addressing human smuggling and trafficking is a critically important challenge. Unfortunately, based on their politically charged rhetoric and baseless accusations about the Biden Administration's border policies, I doubt my Republican colleagues intend to use this hearing to help find meaningful solutions.

More likely, my Republican colleagues have convened this hearing to mislead the American public about what the administration is doing to combat human smuggling and trafficking at the border. In fact, the Biden Administration and Secretary Mayorkas are going after the cartels and have implemented enhanced counter-trafficking and counter-smuggling efforts. They are not only investigating and prosecuting individuals involved in these crimes but also investing in prevention efforts and assisting victims.

My Republican colleagues will try to make the American people think that shutting our borders to asylum seekers would help stop human smuggling and trafficking. In fact, doing so would have the opposite effect, empowering cartels to exploit migrants further. We know that migrants are fleeing terrible conditions and will travel to the U.S. border no matter the obstacles placed in their way. But the more difficult the journey, and the more hurdles migrants have to overcome, the more the cartels can charge.

The reality is that we need legal pathways for migrants who are often fleeing conflict, persecution, or dire economic conditions in search of a better life. They seek the safety and the American dream, and knowingly embark on a treacherous journey to achieve it. We need to cut smugglers out and have safe and humane pathways for migrants to come to the United States under our laws.

It's also important to recognize how natural disasters can affect any community, regardless of background, but particularly the most vulnerable who have little choice but to set out in search of safety, security, and prosperity. Unfortunately, in desperation, people are sometimes taken advantage of.

After Hurricane Katrina, for example, many foreign workers were hired to rebuild oil rigs and facilities damaged by Hurricane Katrina. They were promised good jobs and permanent U.S. residency by recruiters who required them to pay up to \$10,000. Still, when they arrived at Signal Shipyards in Pascagoula, Mississippi, they discovered they would not receive the promised residency documents. Instead, "they were charged \$1,050 per month to live in guarded labor camps where up to 24 men lived in single 1,800-square-foot (167-square-meter) units and were exploited to work." They became victims of human trafficking, specifically labor trafficking. Such instances are a stark reminder that these issues have no business being tied to partisan maneuvering, but rather we must work together to end human trafficking and smuggling.

In the 117th Congress, then-Ranking Member John Katko of the Homeland Security Committee and I sought to enhance and streamline DHS's ability to combat human trafficking by introducing the *Countering Human Trafficking Act*, which made the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) Center for Countering Human Trafficking (CCHT) permanent and increased coordination among DHS components.

I am grateful that President Biden signed the legislation into law last December. This bipartisan, bicameral law had the support of every CHS subcommittee Chair and Ranking Member. I hope we can get back to working together to provide real solutions to protect the most vulnerable and mitigate threats to our homeland.

I look forward to hearing from our witnesses today on how Congress can do more to combat human trafficking and human smuggling, as well as how we can better protect people from being exploited by bad actors.

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