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**Before the Senate Caucus on International Narcotics Control
“U.S. – Central America Security Cooperation”
United States Senate
May 25, 2011**

Chairman Feinstein and Members of the Caucus:

I am delighted to have this opportunity to testify before you today on the U.S. government’s efforts to assist the nations of Central America in reversing the region’s deteriorating citizen security environment.

I am also pleased to be here today in my capacity as the Bureau of Western Hemisphere Affairs Coordinator for Citizen Security. As you know, the Obama Administration has four primary, interlocking citizen security initiatives in the Western Hemisphere: the Merida Initiative in Mexico, the Central America Citizen Security Partnership, the Caribbean Basin Security Initiative, and the Colombia Strategic Development Initiative. My job is to ensure that our hemispheric citizen security initiatives are being effectively coordinated within WHA, with partner bureaus within State, as well as with our interagency partners, host nations, and other donors throughout the hemisphere.

Central America is experiencing a citizen security crisis that is threatening the significant democratic gains the region has made over the past several decades. Across the region, we have witnessed surges in murder rates, marked inroads by transnational gangs and narcotics traffickers, and rising levels of crime. We must acknowledge that levels of violence are far too high, and security has become the number one concern of citizens, even ahead of economic concerns.

Despite understandable efforts after the civil conflicts of the 1980s to focus scarce resources on social inclusion and anti-poverty programs, Central America has failed to address some of the root causes of crime and insecurity. Income inequalities remain some of the highest in the world. Large parts of the region’s population lack access to healthcare, social services and educational opportunities. The burgeoning youth bulge in the region represents an additional concern. There

are already an estimated 70,000 members in nearly 900 gangs, or *maras*, in the region.

Compounding the security challenge is that, governments in the region have been slow to invest in building the capacity of law enforcement and security forces, and on fiscal reforms to increase and improve tax collection, which is critically necessary, but politically difficult. Prisons are overcrowded and effectively controlled by the prisoners. Prosecutors and courts are ill-equipped to handle the significant increases in case loads that the wave of crime and violence has created. Pervasive corruption in government institutions has resulted in security forces that are perceived as ineffective and untrustworthy by the region's citizens.

The surge in crime is creating significant economic costs; violence costs the region approximately 7.7 percent of its cumulative GDP. You will hear from Kevin Casas-Zamora in the next panel; he's done some terrific work on Central America, and one of his fundamental conclusions is one we share: it's all about strengthening institutions to serve citizens.

But lest you think that I'm here only with bad news, let me return to the Administration's theme of flexible, pragmatic partnerships, because they become paramount in these circumstances. The kinds of partnerships we are creating require truly shared responsibility. And it was critical that over the past two years, Secretary Clinton listened to Central American leaders when they explained that citizen security was at the top of their priority list.

It is against this backdrop that we have reviewed and redoubled our efforts to support and improve citizen security in Central America. As announced during President Obama's March visit to El Salvador, the United States is committed to helping the nations of Central America fight the scourge of drug trafficking, transnational gangs, organized crime and related violence. Under the Central American Citizen Security Partnership, we are working to enhance the impact of the assistance we provide through the Central America Regional Security Initiative (CARSI). We are encouraging new partners to join efforts in Central America; we are improving donor coordination; and incentivizing host-governments to do more with their own resources.

And we are adjusting our assistance to ensure we have maximum impact in the countries most severely threatened by transnational crime: El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras.

In these Northern Triangle countries, we are focusing on replicating programs that have proved successful and can make short-to-medium-term, sustainable impacts. Programs include municipal crime prevention planning, youth-at-risk services, model precincts and community policing, and border interdiction programs. In Belize, Costa Rica, Nicaragua and Panama, we are supporting host-nation efforts to reduce growing levels of insecurity and to rebuild the capabilities of their rule of law institutions. We are seeking to utilize training and best practices from regional partners, such as Colombia and Mexico to support the efforts of Central American governments. Utilizing ESF funds, USAID is continuing to fund local community-based initiatives that diagnose the risk factors, support better crime prediction tools, and develop municipal-led crime prevention plans.

Central American leaders, recognizing the significant threats to political stability, security, economic prosperity and social inclusion resulting from the rapidly deteriorating citizen security environment, are united as never before in seeking to address the region's security challenges.

The international community recognizes these threats as well. In coordination with other donors and international financial institutions, including the Inter-American Development Bank, the European Union, Colombia, Mexico, Canada, Spain and others, we launched the Group of Friends of Central America to better coordinate donor assistance. The Group of Friends and others who share our concerns about Central American citizen security are supporting the upcoming "International Conference of Support for the Central American Security Strategy," which will be held in Guatemala, by the Central American Integration System (SICA).

To further encourage countries to address their citizen security challenges, we have launched a competitive "Challenge Grants" program with \$20 million in FY 2011 INCLE funds to assist countries that exhibit the political will to develop high-quality, integrated strategies, with concurrent host nation funding and sustainability commitments.

We believe that the threats to Central American citizen safety require a sustained U.S. and international response and political commitment. We are committed to supporting the region's efforts to reduce unacceptably high-levels of crime and insecurity. But we must be sober about the challenges we face. There is no quick-fix or silver bullet to reversing the course in the region. However, we are confident that by working in partnership with the region and like-minded international donors, our assistance can make a real and sustainable difference in Central America.