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**U.S.–Central American Security
Cooperation**

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My name is Dr. Ray Walser. I am a Senior Policy Analyst in the Douglas and Sarah Allison Center for Foreign Policy Studies at The Heritage Foundation. The views I express in this testimony are my own, and should not be construed as representing any official position of The Heritage Foundation.

I wish to thank you for inviting me to testify on the very timely subject of the challenges to U.S. security cooperation in Central America. It is both an honor and a privilege to appear before you today.

Before I joined The Heritage Foundation, I had the good fortune to serve as a career Foreign Service Officer with the Department of State. Much of my time with State was devoted to Central America. Therefore, I feel a deep and enduring sense of solidarity and concern for the security and well-being of our 40 million Central American neighbors.

The United States has a long and often complex relationship with the nations of Central America. In the past three decades, we have witnessed a general movement from revolutionary upheaval, civil war, and insurgency to the establishment of regional and national peace, an era of improved conflict resolution, electoral democracy, and government reform.

The Arias Peace Plan and peace agreements in El Salvador (1992) and Guatemala (1996) opened doors for competitive elections, civilian control of the military, limited efforts at government reform, reductions in the militaries, better human rights records, and renewed efforts to achieve regional integration through the Central American Integration System (SICA) and similar attempts to forge greater regional unity and integration. Reforms of the economy broadened the extent of the middle class yet failed to address with sufficient rapidity the deep-seated problems of poverty, marginalization, and social exclusion.

During the presidency of George W. Bush, the U.S. negotiated and won congressional approval for Central American-Dominican Republic Free Trade Agreement (CAFTA-DR), granting access to the U.S. market and helping to sustain diversified export growth for more than bananas and coffee. The U.S. market for textiles alone has created thousands of Central American jobs. Millennium Challenge compacts with El Salvador, Honduras, and Nicaragua seek to foster stronger democratic performance and enhanced economic opportunity.

Today in 2011, the general perception is that Central America has largely worked its way off Washington's agenda. The free trade deal, while criticized, has been struck, immigration reform is far from becoming a political reality, and fiscal constraints limit our ability to deliver assistance at every turn. The U.S. appears to be caught at times in a whirlpool of inaction.

Nevertheless, as this hearing indicates, U.S and international focus is once more being drawn to a troubled Central America where a problematic security situation could threaten to undermine political stability and undercut even modest economic growth. The drivers of public attention and security unease are no longer dictators and Marxist-Leninist insurgents, but a dangerous 21st century brew of poverty; violence; illicit

trafficking in drugs, guns, people, and cash; common crime; corruption; and weak state institutions which threaten the ability of the citizens of Central America to live peacefully and productively within the boundaries of democratic and free market societies.

An unholy trinity of criminal elements—multifaceted international drug trafficking and criminal organizations, domestically-based crime syndicates, and youth gangs—has dramatically expanded their operations and capacity to harm Central America’s well-being. They are effectively waging a form of irregular and asymmetric war against the government institutions, states, and people of Central America. The result is a reign of criminal terror that is as costly in terms of lives and material damage as many active wars.

Central America has become a major transshipment conduit for drugs moving from the Andes to the U.S. market. The most recent U.S. State Department drug report estimated that 60 percent of the cocaine destined for the U.S. first enters North America via Central America. Central America has also become a landing strip for drug-laden aircraft, many sent on one-way missions to crash land in Honduras and Guatemala. Cocaine seizures in Central America and Panama in 2010 totaled nearly 100 metric tons (MT) versus approximately 10MT in Mexico. Every Central American country—excepting Belize and El Salvador—is now considered a major transit country for drugs; even traditionally peaceful and democratic Costa Rica is on the list. Central America is also coming to assume a role as an important staging area and potential production area, especially as pressure is applied to criminal organizations in Mexico, pushing them south.

The presence of gangs—most widely known are the 18th Street Gang (M-18) and the *Mara Salvatrucha* (MS-13)—adds another dimension to Central America’s security dilemma. The number of gang members is believed to be as high as 70,000 throughout the region.

There has been a substantial deterioration in crime indicators in recent years. Homicide rates in El Salvador, Honduras, and Guatemala—the Northern Triangle—are among the highest in the world, at times ranging between 50 and 77 per 100,000. (The rate in the U.S. is around 5 per 100,000.) The homicide rate in Guatemala, for example, is four times the rate in Mexico, despite the current spike in drug-related homicides in the later. A profound sense of victimization spreads deep into the fabric of Central American society. A recent study found that in all five Central American countries, roughly 14 percent to 19 percent of the citizens reported they had been victims of crime during the preceding 12 months.

In Guatemala, experts fear the national government has lost its monopoly on the legitimate use of force. What has emerged in some areas is a “shadow state” which may comprise as much as 40 percent of Guatemala’s national territory. The International Crisis Group, for example, recently observed that Guatemala has become a “paradise for criminals.”

Crime is a voracious enterprise that does not confine itself to drug trafficking. It entails an enormous variety of illegal activities: extortion, kidnapping, car and property theft, immigrant smuggling, human trafficking, and domestic drug retailing.

I will take one example to illustrate the point. The targeting of public transportation and bus drivers and passengers has produced a string of atrocities that have included massacres and grenade attacks in El Salvador, Honduras, and Guatemala. In 2010 alone, 119 country bus drivers and 51 other transport workers were homicide victims in Guatemala. It is reported that 625 bus drivers have died as a result of criminal violence in El Salvador since 2006. Criminals in Central America prey upon the weakest elements of society who lack the means and resources of self-defense.

The growing presence of Mexican transnational criminal activities is very troublesome. Most active in Central America are the powerful Sinaloa cartel and the former military arm of Mexico's Gulf Cartel, the notorious Zetas. It is believed the Zetas, whose brutality and disregard for human life have shocked Mexico, have discovered a kinship in arms and criminality with renegade special forces soldiers from Guatemala, the Kabiles. The Zetas ability to operate in military-like fashion and their ruthless application of terror tactics forced Guatemala's government of Alvaro Colom to declare a "state of siege" in Alta Verapaz in late 2010.

There is little disagreement from the Obama Administration, from Central Americans, or from the experts who monitor events in Central America that the security situation is grave and begs U.S. attention and leadership.

Two Tracks to Central American Security

Any sustained effort to improve the security situation and enhance cooperation in Central America will require immediate actions by the Central American nations and sustained support from the U.S. and other external actors.

I will begin with Central America's role and responsibility. Drawing from the lessons of Colombia and other nations facing grave security challenges, Central Americans need to recognize that security is a fundamental democratic value and a necessary condition to securing gains achieved via the ballot box and increased citizen participation. The security situation in Central America will not improve until there is a substantial modification in the behavior and performance of Central America's key political actors. These include political and business and commercial elites as well as by the servants of the state in the judicial and law enforcement professions. There is an imperative need for commitment or buy-in by the region's economic and social elites. This is not something the U.S. can just dial up or write into an assistance plan.

The first requirement is political will and leadership at the national and local level. Speaking in Washington recently, former Colombian president Alvaro Uribe stressed that political leaders in crime-embattled countries must overcome both their physical fears but also the political fear of change. Central America needs leaders able to command popular support and ready to assume full responsibility for their successes as well as for their failures.

There is need as well for state presence backed by rule of law and an end to impunity. The situation calls for massive and continuous reform and professionalization of the law enforcement, judicial, and prison sectors. Senior officials from Guatemala who visited The Heritage Foundation recently spoke with grave regret about the politicized and corrupt system they received from previous Guatemalan administrations. They

argued that under President Alvaro Colom serious efforts are underway to build greater institutional strength. With elections in September, it remains to be seen whether the modest progress made under the Colom presidency can be sustained in Guatemala.

Overall, Central American policy and opinion makers must make a commitment to support multi-year, multi-administration efforts to introduce and preserve badly needed reforms. They must cease viewing law enforcement as a major source of political patronage. They must be prepared to fight corruption by taking measures that bar the corrupt from participation in the political process and expand the judicial powers of the national government to investigate and root out corruption at all levels of government. In short, they must demonstrate that the status quo is unacceptable.

In the realm of the investigation and prosecution of crimes, the fundamental facts are genuinely disturbing. The central task is to radically alter current situations in which many crimes go unreported and of those that are reported to authorities, 96 percent or more go unresolved. All too often, absent a signed confession, murderers routinely go unpunished. These judicial failures build an alarming sense of impunity among criminal elements that make sport of homicide.

Various efforts to get tough on crime and to fight gangs have been tried in the past decade. *Mano duro* [strong-hand] policies targeted known gang members and led to the incarceration of large numbers of youth but the outcomes have been considered disappointing. Innocent individuals were swept up in raids, prisons became recruiting grounds for new gang members, and gang members learned to change behavior patterns such as shedding their tattoos to escape detection. Simply locking up young men in inadequate and often inhuman incarceration conditions did little to solve the underlying crime problem or improve justice systems.

Finally, Central America continues to suffer from democratic backsliding and the emergence of populist-style leaders whose efforts to extend their grip on power come at great institutional costs. The cases of Manuel Zelaya in Honduras and Daniel Ortega in Nicaragua clearly indicate the political forces that polarize nations, weaken democratic institutions and the rule of law, and ultimately benefit the lawless.

I believe the Colombian model of democratic security remains a rich mine of information and best practices and with potential applications that merit thorough examination and perhaps replication in Central America. The Administration should work to analyze with rigor what can be gleaned from the comparative success of the Colombia experience.

U.S. Strategy, Diplomacy & Assistance

The Obama Administration recognizes the growing dimensions and complexity of the challenges it faces in Central America. Yet, the strategic direction and the nature of the response to the crisis have not always been crystal-clear. On different occasions in its first two years, senior members of the Administration frankly stated that the “war on drugs” has been a failure, yet they have continued to pursue many of the same tactics and implemented policies aimed at supply reduction, interdiction, and targeted law enforcement that can be considered to be at the core of the “war on drugs.”

The Administration has elevated its sights to move beyond fighting against “drugs and thugs.” It aims, it argues, to improve citizen security in a comprehensive or holistic fashion. It has also undertaken to alter the tone of the discourse that surrounds the drug and crime challenge, acknowledging a heightened sense of shared or “co-responsibility,” recognizing that U.S. drug consumption, firearms, and bulk cash play a role in fueling cycles of violence in the Americas. The Administration’s policy also reemphasized the importance of partnership based on equality and mutual respect and shared values.

However, it too often downplays the extreme inequality of resources and capabilities among the parties, especially where institutions are weak and too often permeated by corruption and bureaucratic inertia. It tends to gloss over historical, cultural, and ideological differences which have impeded whole-hearted cooperation in the past. Finally, it is still challenged to produce a comprehensive strategy for the whole of the Western Hemisphere, one that integrates the components of the Merida Initiative, Plan Colombia, and our security and counter-narcotics support for the nations of Central America and the Caribbean.

Almost two years ago, Congressman Eliot Engel (D-NY) and others in the House of Representatives called for the establishment of a broad commission to develop a comprehensive strategy that would integrate all the various constituent parts. The director of the Office of National Drug Control Policy (ONDCP), Gil Kerlikowske, has stated that his office staff is current preparing a Western Hemisphere Drug Strategy that will be released this summer. It will hopefully help to clarify our thinking about the region and support consensus-based policies.

The Administration has established the Central American Security Initiative (CARSI) as the focal point for its efforts in the region. The essential elements of CARSI are directed at the following objectives:

- Creating safe streets and communities for citizens;
- Disrupting flows of criminals and contraband across borders;
- Extending governance and rule of law to vulnerable groups, especially youth;
- Reestablishing effective state presence and security in communities at risk; and
- Fostering enhanced levels of security and rule of law coordination and cooperation between Central American states.

To date the Administration states that it has either spent or will spend approximately \$260 million to support CARSI and meet security needs in Central America. This amount is often compared in a less than favorable light with the assistance given to Colombia and Mexico.

The Administration has also outlined a concept of developing a Central American Citizen Security Partnership, which it says represents a new and flexible approach to enhancing citizen security or safety. During his recent Latin American trip, President Obama offered to work with El Salvador and others “to address the social and economic

forces that drive young people toward criminality” and “to strengthen courts, civil society groups and institutions that uphold the rule of law.”

How this new Partnership and CARSI mesh together remains to be seen. The intent appears to be to make the Partnership a broader undertaking able to attract a wide range of international backers and become a mechanism for matching donors with recipients. The goal, moreover, is to move forward with a plan that represents the often repeated “networked, whole-of-government” approach. The challenge will be to find the resources necessary to match sweeping promises and expanded mandate with a serious potential for developing excessive expectations on the part of the Central Americans.

Building Policy Consensus

I hope that the Administration, Congress, and the American public can work to develop a stronger policy consensus about future actions. Our actions as a nation are too often deflected into contentious and unproductive debates. A vocal minority in the U.S. wants to focus attention on our bad habits and practices they believe to be at the root of the problem and tackle everything from laws on drug usage to reshaping the Second Amendment in order to provide relief to our southern neighbors. Another body of opinion demands sweeping changes in the drug paradigm in order to open avenues for decriminalization and legalization that will reportedly—at an underdetermined social cost—deprive criminal organizations of some of their profits and lessen the burden on U.S. law enforcement. Others debate whether we should focus on supply reduction and interdiction strategies abroad or concentrate on demand and harm reduction at home. Finally, we have to choose between “hard power” assets and tools such as helicopters and coastal craft and radars and secure telecommunication and data banks and “soft power” efforts that focus on institution building, training, judicial reform, communications strategies, and grassroots and community development.

We are not likely to resolve these fundamental debates in the near future. But the situation in Central America will not improve while we debate and argue. Arriving late on the scene of a fatal collapse in Central America is not acceptable.

In the time remaining, I will highlight a few areas of importance and emphasis where I believe there are grounds for agreement and offer a few modest recommendations. Overall, the U.S. needs a comprehensive policy of security and counter-drug cooperation that spans a broad spectrum of efforts from interdiction and law enforcement support to community development and demand reduction. We must support interlocking actions that originate at production and trafficking points of origin and extend in a seamless fashion to the final destination of distribution, consumption, and abuse.

Intelligence, Domain Awareness, and Interdiction

The U.S. must work to assist Central Americans to gain and preserve control over their national territory and to improve interdiction capacity. The use of the forward operating base in El Salvador as well as access to Palmerola/Soto Cano air base in Honduras are essential assets we must continue to integrate into our overall Central American effort.

The U.S. needs to exploit fully the assets represented by the Joint Inter-Agency Task Force South and U.S. Southern Command, which is focused on aerial and maritime detection and interdiction in the Caribbean Basin and the eastern Pacific. It must also work to maximize interface between Southern and Northern Commands in the Mexico-Central America area of operations, especially along Guatemala and Belize's border with Mexico. Developing a point of support for security operations in Guatemala might be an undertaking that merits consideration.

The U.S. has employed Operation Enduring Friendship with the goal of improving maritime interdiction assets and command and control. The challenge remains to provide adequate deployment and maintenance of maritime assets to meet fresh challenges presented by increasingly sophisticated delivery vehicles such as semi-submersible and completely submersible vessels.

The U.S. can work to develop national and regional intelligence platforms similar to *Plataforma Mexico*. It will also increase its capabilities as part of Intelligence, Surveillance and Reconnaissance (ISR) in order to develop a common operating picture and to enhance "domain awareness" in Central America. The U.S. must continue to explore the full array of technological aids from sensors and UAVs to modernized radars and imagery technology that will support the fight against increasingly resourceful and inventive transnational criminals.

Institutional Strengthening

There is little disagreement that virtually all of the institutions necessary for enhanced security and the protection of the lives and property of citizens remain in need of reform and strengthening. In short, the goal is to prevent the existence of "hollow" or "failed states" in Central America. This is not an easy task; it entails patient state-building activities.

Experimentation and hybrid institutions can help. In Guatemala, the U.N-backed International Commission against Impunity (CICIG) has established an impressive record of addressing massive problems in the judicial sector. It has become a model for pragmatism, experimentation, and flexibility. The potential for replicating it or creating a similar body elsewhere in other Central American states merits further exploration although it will require a major act of political will on the part of the Central Americans.

The U.S. goal is to assist with the development of trustworthy institutions staffed by individuals of integrity and high professional standards. We can start by focusing on special vetted units to investigate high-profile crimes and going after criminal masterminds and kingpins. We can work to establish anti-corruption safeguards and strong internal affairs units. The U.S. can help improve forensic capabilities which have long been a staple of assistance provided by the Department of Justice's International Criminal Investigative Training Assistance Program (ICITAP). Regional police training and professionalization programs and opportunities should continue through increased use of the International Law Enforcement Academy (ILEA) in El Salvador. The U.S. also needs to develop better yardsticks to measure exceptional performers who can then serve in Central America as examples—or as one expert called them—"beacons of hope" for future programs.

The role of the militaries in Central America in fighting drugs and crime remains a subject of heated debate. While today's Central American militaries are far smaller than they were in previous decades and have more circumscribed influence in politics, they remain central national institutions with the elements of discipline, national cohesion, and security vision needed in the fight against pervasive criminality and localized terror. The downside of using military forces is their limited ability to engage in law enforcement and investigatory work, their often poor human rights track records, and the fear that military personnel will be subjected to and succumb to the same pressures of corruption that reach deep into civilian agencies. This said, a comprehensive strategy for Central America must include effective military-to-military support that meshes all elements of national defense and security.

Rule of Law and Judicial Reform

Central American states must deliver justice and end criminal impunity. The political systems and culture must reinforce the perception and belief that observing laws is an essential aspect of citizen life and offers a genuine hope for a better future. Those who make and administer the law must demonstrate that the law applies to them as well and foster what is often described as a "culture of lawfulness."

The U.S. has had a long, if not always successful, focus aiding justice reform in Latin America; these have included earlier Administration of Justice and ICITAP programs to improve forensic capabilities and prosecutorial skills. The support for justice sector reform in Colombia has provided a wealth of relevant examples and best practices, as have the ongoing efforts at judicial reform in Mexico. Measures needed in Central America include efforts to modernize laws regarding wiretaps and electronic surveillance to make them admissible as evidence and also the updating of asset forfeiture laws. Central Americans could assist by creating a regional body that would seek to update and harmonize regulations, practices, and national laws to increase their effectiveness against criminal activities. The Administration should propose a Central American partnership for legal and judicial reform just as it has proposed partnerships for green energy and to promote Pathways to Prosperity.

The U.S. can and should assist in enforcing existing gun laws at home and abroad. The sources of arms linked to violence in Central America are multiple. For example recent cables released through WikiLeaks expressed concern that corrupt officers with access to unsecured arsenals in Guatemala and Honduras were supplying criminals with weapons. The quantity of arms remaining from the conflicts of the 1980s is still undetermined. Weapons purchased in the U.S. but illegally exported abroad also play a role in Central American violence.

The U.S. should work with the Central Americans to assist them in enforcing national gun law requirements and utilizing programs such as e-Trace to share information and investigate potential violations of gun laws originating in the U.S. These efforts should be coordinated with ongoing efforts in Mexico and along the southwestern border of the U.S.

Other proposed solutions, such as U.S. ratification of the Inter-American Convention against Illicit Manufacturing of and Trafficking in Firearms (CIFTA), will bring only symbolic relief, create the potential for conflicts with the Second Amendment,

and mandate a largely unenforceable scheme of registration and compliance. New measures at home such as the reinstatement of the Federal Assault Weapon Ban do not command wide support in the U.S. Congress or with the American public at large.

It maybe a fair observation to note that the other indispensable element that fuels violence—access to cash and money laundering—is a difficult but far less controversial area for further coordinated government action. The U.S. can work with Central Americans to redouble anti–money-laundering efforts in the region.

Community Development

Without sound and secure communities, Central America will remain a breeding ground for criminality. Strategic thinking should focus on ways to provide means and incentives that will make even poor, under-policed communities safer. These include efforts to establish model precincts in areas of high crime density. Much additional work is needed to optimize the use of scarce resources for policing as a tool for reaching marginalized citizenry.

It is clear that the fight against criminal activity must begin at the contact point where the law-abiding individual and the criminal actor meet. Future efforts must empower citizens with improved capacity to resist or fight criminal activity. This means local police and community watch organizations. It should include efforts to utilize cell phones, social media networks, and tip lines as active weapons in crime prevention. It also means a regular system of incentives to those who supply useful information to the authorities that leads to arrests and prosecutions.

Other community-based programs must seek to develop alternatives to criminality and promote programs such as “*Bienvenidos a Casa*” a trial program in El Salvador to re-incorporate individuals deported from the U.S. into a more welcoming environment in order to forestall potential recruitment by criminal organizations. Job and sport activities that target “at-risk” youth also have value.

Another key aspect is what might be called public information strategy. Governments and civil society should make every effort to bring psychological and moral pressures to bear on criminals. Colombia’s former President Uribe has called for efforts to “de-civilize” criminal behavior in order to remove any pretense of social benefit or moral ambiguity from the crimes of homicide, kidnapping, or trafficking in persons or drugs.

As in Colombia and in Mexico, there is a continued need for community development and an active and coordinated presence of the state not only in law enforcement and the military but in education, health, and justice as well.

Demand Reduction and Treatment Options

At home, the Administration has promised to deliver improved treatment and demand reduction opportunities and to continue to devote resources to dampening usage here in the U.S. Funding for these efforts must continue as demand reduction and treatment options rather than legalization or decriminalization remain the course of action that draws majority public support.

U.S. domestic programs need to be linked continuously to corresponding efforts in the region. The U.S. should make efforts to link its National Drug Strategy with those of our neighbors. We should continue to support Drug Resistance Abuse Education (DARE) programs abroad and work closely with the Community of Anti-Drug Coalitions of the Americas. Utilizing the expertise and modest resources of the Organization of American States, especially the Inter-American Drug Abuse Control Commission (CICAD), remains an essential element of broader cooperation.

President Obama and the White House can raise the visibility of the issue by capitalizing on the President's potential participation in a demand reduction campaign that especially targets the youth and minority audiences which he reaches with such effectiveness.

Regional and International Cooperation and Coordination

The U.S. should do all that is possible to advance regular cooperation between the Central American states and Colombia and Mexico. It must also work at the multilateral level within the OAS, particularly with CICAD and in the United Nations, especially with the U.N. Development Program (UNDP) and U.N. Office on Drugs and Crime (UNDOC) to design and implement development and security programs. The U.S. should also seek to leverage assistance from responsible partners in Canada, Europe, Japan, and from the international financial institutes, particularly the Inter-American Development Bank (IADB).

The meeting of the OAS General Assembly in El Salvador on June 5-7 promises to focus on citizen security and has promised concrete actions to advance cooperation against transnational criminal networks. Follow-up on this commitment is essential.

In late June, Central American states will convene a major conference on security cooperation in Guatemala with the aim of soliciting and coordinating international support to meet anti-crime and development challenges. The expectations of the Central Americans are pitched relatively high. A global figure of \$1 billion in assistance has been mentioned. The U.S. should work with the Central Americans and others to produce achievable outcomes.

Building Economic Health

The thesis that crime is a development issue is widely acknowledged. Without jobs, without educational opportunities, criminality will persist. A central target must be the region's youth. In Central America, where young people between the ages of 15-24 comprise 21 percent of the population but suffer an un- or under-employment rate of as much as 45 percent, youth is a fertile recruiting source for criminal organizations and gangs.

The Administration should focus continued attention on trade promotion, foreign investment, and competitive, market-led innovations that increase the demand for labor in Central America. It should also support educational programs that develop Central America's human resources and improve capacity to enter the global market. Making economic freedom a foreign policy objective will help unleash economic potential in Central America.

Adequate Resources

Given the current expanded action agenda created by CARSI and the Central American Citizen Security Partnership, the roughly \$100 million proposed to support our efforts in Central America appears insufficient. If the overall state of security in Central America is relevant to U.S. national security, then we can ill afford to have our policies and programs determined solely by arbitrary budget figures and a general plea of insolvency.

One facet of the resources question requires a strong Central American response. Like Colombia and Mexico, Central America needs to mobilize fiscal resources to support a major campaign aimed at reducing crime and limiting impunity. It will require raising the amount of GDP states collect in taxes. In Guatemala, for example, tax revenue is 10.8 percent of GDP, a figure that condemns Guatemala to perennially failing to meet many basic needs for citizens and forcing hard choices between spending on either security or human capital investment. Absent adequate tax bases and with widespread resistance to additional fiscal levies, making progress in the fight against criminality and long-term institution building will be difficult.

The U.S. has recently proposed to develop law enforcement and security-related challenge grants for Central America. This idea should be used to obtain host-country buy-in and fiscal participation.

Conclusion

The biggest challenge facing the Administration is to design a comprehensive assistance program that is based upon realistic assessments of needs and supported with hardheaded judgments about capacity to absorb, utilize, and make positive changes with allocated resources, while developing the bureaucratic follow-through needed to deliver assistance in a timely and effective manner.

There is no easy, single pathway forward. Central America's security challenges are formidable. Given several decades of strong U.S. investment in Central America and the region's proximity to the U.S. and its deep demographic connectivity, we cannot afford to ignore the appeals of our neighbors. Central Americans have long looked to the U.S. to play a sustained leadership role in the region. They will continue to do so in these turbulent moments.

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