

Statement of Cynthia Telles
Nominee for U.S. Ambassador to the Republic of Costa Rica
Before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee
September 22, 2021

Chairman Menendez, Ranking Member Risch, distinguished Members of the Committee, it is an honor to appear before you today as President Biden's nominee to be the U.S. Ambassador to Costa Rica. I am grateful and humbled by the trust placed in me. If confirmed, I look forward to working with you to advance our nation's interests.

I would like to introduce my husband, Joe Waz, and my son, Raymond Jimenez. Their invaluable support and love mean the world to me.

I would like to thank to my beloved parents, Raymond and Delfina Telles, who are with us in spirit. My father taught me by example that public service is a noble cause to which he dedicated his entire career. He served as the first Hispanic elected mayor of a major American city in 1957 and, subsequently, as the first Hispanic United States Ambassador when President Kennedy appointed him to serve in Costa Rica in 1961. If confirmed, I will be deeply honored to follow in his footsteps.

I spent several years of my youth in Costa Rica, which came to have a special place in my heart. I became very familiar with its people, its culture, and its challenges. I am committed to using that experience to enhance America's enduring bonds with Costa Rica and, thereby, to further our mutual interests.

The United States and Costa Rica have enjoyed an exceptional partnership across decades ---one based, not only on mutual interests, but on shared values of democracy, good governance and human rights. This strong partnership is critical --- now more than ever. We face an unprecedented convergence of challenges in Central America: increasing drug trafficking by transnational criminal organizations; disruption from climate change; economic downturn exacerbated by the pandemic; a related uptick in irregular migration; and foreign influence that threatens to undermine democracy and our priorities in the region.

In addressing these challenges, Costa Rica has been, not only a reliable partner, but an effective role model. If confirmed, I will work closely with Costa Rican people to promote our shared interests throughout the region.

Costa Rica has been a strong ally in migration management through participation in our Comprehensive Regional Solutions Framework. It has been a regional leader in welcoming vulnerable migrants and guest workers and providing international protection for refugees and asylum seekers, including more than 80,000 Nicaraguans and 30,000 Venezuelans in recent years. Through the U.S. funded Protection Transfer Agreement, Costa Rica hosts individuals with urgent protection needs from Guatemala, El Salvador and Honduras, while they undergo refugee processing for resettlement. If confirmed, I will work with the government to help strengthen its asylum system, support temporary worker programs, expand its efforts to deal with migration and protection issues and, very importantly, to address the root causes of migration.

The United States and Costa Rica collaborate closely to combat transnational criminal organizations that move illicit drugs to the U.S. and engage in human trafficking. Costa Rica is critical to this shared mission, given its strategic location, which positions it as the largest transshipment hub for South American cocaine bound for the U.S. In 2020, Costa Rica interdicted a record 71 metric tons of narcotics, demonstrating, not only its capabilities, but also the enormous challenges it faces. If confirmed, I commit to strongly support Costa Rica's counter-narcotics efforts.

For decades, Costa Rica has been a strong champion of democracy. Recently, its government demonstrated a commitment to pressure Nicaragua's Ortega-Murillo regime to hold fair and free elections and to release political prisoners. Costa Rica has repeatedly called for a peaceful return to democracy in Venezuela and accountability for corruption.

In addressing the climate crisis, the United States has no stronger ally in this hemisphere than the Costa Ricans with their longstanding commitment to protecting the environment, conserving biodiversity, and reducing carbon emissions, in fact, outlining a pathway toward net zero emissions by 2050. If confirmed, I look forward to partnering with them to advance these shared goals.

Although Costa Rica has enjoyed a relatively stable economy, there are recent signs of strain evidenced by high unemployment, untenable public debt, and stress on the public health system due to COVID-19 and increased migration from Nicaragua. In addition to the human toll, these vulnerabilities can be exploited by our competitors and adversaries. If confirmed, I commit to strengthening our economic relationship with Costa Rica to promote mutual prosperity. In the near term, I will support Costa Rica's efforts to fight the COVID-19 pandemic, which has greatly impacted the country, now in its fourth major surge. U.S. support to date has included a donation of half a million Pfizer vaccines.

If confirmed, I look forward to leading our Embassy team in San Jose and to working closely with you.

My highest priority will be to protect U.S. citizens and to champion our interests in cooperation with our strong partners in Costa Rica.

Thank you for the opportunity to appear before you today. I'm happy to answer your questions.