

**Counselor of the Department of State, Ambassador Thomas A. Shannon
Testimony to Senate Foreign Relations Committee, July 17, 2014**

Mr. Chairman, Mr. Ranking Member, distinguished Members of the Committee, thank you for this opportunity to testify before you on the “Crisis in Central America and the Exodus of Unaccompanied Minors.” It is an honor to appear before you with my distinguished colleague from the Department of Justice.

We are facing an acute crisis on our southern border, as tens of thousands of children leave Honduras, Guatemala, and El Salvador to travel through Mexico to the United States. Driven by a mixture of motives and circumstances, these children are seeking reunification with their parents, better life opportunities, and, in some cases, safety from violence and criminal gang activity.

The human drama of this migration is heightened by the nefarious role of human smugglers. Smuggling networks exploit these children and their parents, preying on their desperation and hope, while exposing the children to grave dangers, abuse, and sometimes injury and death along a journey of more than one thousand miles.

Last week, in testimony before the Senate Appropriations Committee, the Secretaries of Homeland Security and Health and Human Services laid out the dimensions of this crisis, and its impact on existing resources at the Department of Homeland Security, the Department of Health and Human Services, local law enforcement agencies, state humanitarian and disaster response teams, municipal and state government, and on local communities as they face an unprecedented surge in attempted migration to the United States by unaccompanied children, even as overall migration remains at historic lows.

The President’s supplemental budget request of \$3.7 billion dollars is aimed at addressing this crisis, especially the resource and infrastructure challenges we have along our southern border. The need for additional funding to meet these challenges is great, but it is necessary to ensure that these children, an especially vulnerable class of migrant, are treated in a humane and dignified fashion as we protect our border, enforce our laws, and meet our international obligations.

The supplemental request for the U.S. Department of State and USAID also identifies additional funding to address the factors that are pushing children from their homes in Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador. In tandem with existing resources and programs, this funding would allow us to enhance our engagement in Central America and fashion an integrated and comprehensive approach to the

economic, social, and security challenges that lie behind the current migration crisis.

In my testimony today, I would like to lay out for the Committee our understanding of the crisis, the diplomatic steps we have taken so far to address the problem, the response we have received from the Central American countries and Mexico, and how we would use supplemental funding to counter the underlying causes of the crisis.

The Issue

Migration by unaccompanied children is not a new phenomenon. It has ebbed and flowed for some time. However, what has changed is the size of the migration and the source countries. In the past, most children migrating illegally to the United States were Mexican nationals. Under existing law, these children could be returned to Mexico through expedited removal. In 2008, we returned 34,083 unaccompanied (Mexican) children to Mexican authorities. Vigorous enforcement of our laws, new forms of law enforcement partnerships with Mexico through the Merida Initiative, and efforts by the Government of Mexico to address the factors driving such migration helped reduce by half the number of unaccompanied children from Mexico who were apprehended attempting to enter the United States.

As you are well aware, this decline has been offset by a surge in unaccompanied children migrating from Central America. While we have witnessed an increase in such migrants from Central America over the past several years, more than 50,000 unaccompanied children from Central America have been apprehended along our southwest border this fiscal year. Of these migrants, nearly three-quarters are males between the ages of 15 and 17.

Efforts by the U.S. government, the United Nations High Commission of Refugees, and NGOs to understand the drivers of this migration and information collected in interviews conducted by Customs and Border Protection officials highlight the mixed motives behind this surge in Central American migration. For the most part, these children have abandoned their homes for a complex set of motives that combine a desire to be with their parents and pursue a life of greater opportunity and wider possibility. Underlying some of this migration is a fear of violence in their home communities, and a fear that criminal gangs will either forcibly recruit or harm them.

In short, this migration trend is the product of economic and social conditions in Honduras, El Salvador, and Guatemala. A combination of poverty, ineffective public institutions, and crime have combined to push these children from their homes and to begin an arduous and dangerous journey.

While the United States has been the primary destination of these migrants, largely because family members are already here, the impact of the migration has been felt throughout the region. The United Nations High Commission on Refugees has identified a more than 400 percent increase in asylum requests made by unaccompanied children from Honduras, Guatemala, and El Salvador in neighboring countries.

To address the challenge posed by the migration of unaccompanied children, we have fashioned a five-part strategy designed to stem the flow of migrants, screen them properly for international protection concerns, and then begin timely repatriation. This strategy consists of:

- One: Establishing a common understanding of what is happening and why between the United States, the three source countries -- Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador -- and the major transit country, Mexico.
- Two: Fashioning a common public messaging campaign to deter migration, especially by children. This campaign highlights the dangers of migration, but also counters misinformation of smugglers seeking clients.
- Three: Improving the ability of Mexico and Guatemala to interdict migrants before they cross into Mexico and enter the established smuggling routes that move the migrants to our border.
- Four: Enhancing the capacity of Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador to receive and reintegrate repatriated migrants to break the cycle of migration and discourage further efforts at migration.
- Five: Addressing the underlying causes of migration of unaccompanied children by focusing additional resources on economic and social development, and enhancing our citizen security programs to reduce violence, attack criminal gang structures, and reach out to at-risk youth.

This cooperative effort is defined by collaboration between the United States, Mexico, Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador. It is a new approach to address

migration issues that reflects the ties and common interests created among our countries by demographics, trade relations, and increased security cooperation.

So far, our diplomatic outreach has created a common understanding of the problem of migration by unaccompanied minors and the responsibility of all the countries to address it. President Obama's outreach to Mexican President Enrique Pena Nieto; Vice-President Biden's trip to Guatemala to meet with the leaders of Guatemala, El Salvador, and Honduras; Secretary Kerry's meeting with these leaders in Panama; DHS Secretary Johnson's trip to Guatemala to meet with President Perez Molina; Under Secretary of State Sarah Sewall's trip to Honduras; and my own engagement with the Foreign Ministers of Guatemala, El Salvador, Honduras, and Mexico were all part of intense engagement over the last several weeks.

Our engagement has allowed us to fashion a common public message that has received support from the highest levels of government in Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador. For example, the visits of the First Ladies of these countries to the southern border to meet with unaccompanied children, and their subsequent public statements urging their compatriots not to send their children north or expose them to smugglers have echoed powerfully in their countries. Combined with public messaging campaigns by our Embassies, the governments of these countries and Mexico, we have helped create a new and dynamic debate about illegal migration that undermines efforts by smugglers to entice young people into migration through misinformation about the risks of the journey and the benefits they will supposedly receive in the United States.

The July 7 announcement of Mexican President Pena Nieto of a new Mexican southern border strategy was a welcome step towards improving Mexico's ability to exercise greater control along its border with Guatemala and Belize. Announced in the presence of the Guatemalan president, this initiative is a manifestation of a new willingness to work together along their common border. To match this level of cooperation, we are working to provide support to Mexico's southern border initiative and intend to provide \$86 million in existing International Narcotics Control and Law Enforcement (INCLE) funds, and we are working with Guatemala to improve its border controls, with special focus on building joint task forces that link all agencies with responsibility for border control. On July 15, the Government of Mexico named a coordinator for its Southern Border Initiative. Senator Humberto Mayans Cabral, head of the Senate's Southern Border Commission, will act as a "czar" to oversee and direct the Mexican government's efforts to stem illegal migration across its southern border.

In regard to repatriation and reintegration, Vice President Biden announced during his trip to Guatemala \$9.6 million to improve the ability of the source countries to increase the number of repatriated migrants they can receive and assist in their reintegration. On July 9, DHS Secretary Johnson signed two memorandums of cooperation with the Guatemala counterpart. The first focuses on enhancing cooperation on immigration, border security, and information sharing. The second provides a process to share information on Guatemalan nationals repatriated to Guatemala. On July 14, USAID provided approval to the International Organization for Migration to commence this work. On July 14, Honduras received a repatriation flight of adults with children recently apprehended at the Southwest border.

Our work in Mexico through the Merida Initiative, and in Central America through the Central America Regional Security Initiative (CARSI), has allowed us to build the relationships, understanding, and capacity to help the Central American source countries address underlying causes of migration by unaccompanied children. Our development assistance work conducted by USAID has also allowed us to build assistance partnerships that can be turned to helping our partner countries address the economic and social development issues that also contribute to migration.

Keeping Our Strategic Focus

Our assistance to the seven countries of the region currently falls under the umbrella of CARSI. Since 2008, Congress has appropriated \$642 million on programs that have been predicated on the view that establishing a secure environment and functional law enforcement institutions is the first and essential step in creating conditions for investment and economic growth. We know thanks to a recent independent evaluation by Vanderbilt University that USAID's work with at-risk youth in select municipalities is highly successful in reducing crime and increasing the reporting of it. Likewise, the Department of State's Bureau of International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs has demonstrated impressive results with its Model Police Precinct program in El Salvador and Guatemala. Still, those and other successful U.S. programs are relatively small in scale and should be scaled up with the committed involvement of the countries concerned.

We have learned a lot since CARSI began in 2008, and we now seek to build on those experiences. Specifically, we need to link our work on citizen security with

our efforts to promote economic growth, opportunity, and job creation. Without addressing the economic and social development challenges, we cannot meet the concerns and aspirations of the adolescents and young adults fleeing Central America. Many of the new proposals in the supplemental request are intended to create the opportunity and organization that Central American economies currently lack.

The Supplemental Request

The supplemental request, although focused largely on addressing resource and infrastructure issues along our border, also has an important component focused on the work I have described and designed to be a down payment on that new strategic objective. The \$300 million request allocates \$5 million on public diplomacy and messaging, and \$295 million in Economic Support Funds (ESF) on an initiative broadly grouped under the headings of prosperity, governance, and security.

The \$125 million directed toward prosperity would focus on improving economic opportunity and creating jobs, improving customs and border controls to enhance revenue collection and economic integration, and investing in energy to reduce the cost and improve access to energy as a driver of economic growth and investment.

The \$70 million requested for governance would focus on improving public sector management, fiscal reform, and strengthening the independence, transparency, and accountability of the judiciaries in Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador. The purpose of these funds would be to promote rule of law, attack corruption, and enhance the efficiency and efficacy of government.

The \$100 million requested for security would focus on expanding community-based programs to reduce youth crime and violence, expand national police capacity, attack gangs and transnational organized crime, promote prison reform, and enhance migrant repatriation capacity. These funds would enhance our work with partners to expand and nationalize our citizen security efforts and address the violence that is one of the principal drivers of migration.

We believe this request is reasonable and necessary. It builds on work we are already doing in Central America, takes advantage of existing expertise and experience, and expands our ability to encourage Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador to work with us closely on an issue of compelling human drama and national interest.

Moving forward we hope to work with Congress to broaden the scope of our efforts and deepen our engagement with Central America. We must build a new, comprehensive, and collaborative approach with Central America and Mexico to problems that have an immediate manifestation in migration, but underlie the larger development and security challenges facing our closest neighbors. By working to meet the challenge of illegal migration of unaccompanied children to the United States, we will be advancing broader interests in the region and giving substance to our vision of an Americas where democracy and markets deliver economic and social development. I thank you for the opportunity to discuss the crisis of unaccompanied children with you and look forward to your questions.