



Prepared Statement of:
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Hearing before the:
**House Appropriations Subcommittee on
State, Foreign Operations, and Related Programs**
“United States Engagement in Central America”

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Chairwoman Granger, Ranking Member Lowey, distinguished Members of the Subcommittee: thank you for the opportunity to appear before you today to discuss United States engagement in Central America and the progress we are making to address the critical security challenges in the region.

Last year I testified before this Subcommittee to discuss the Bureau of International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs' (INL) important role in supporting two key objectives of the Administration's Strategy for Engagement in Central America: security and governance. Central America was at a critical juncture, with a combination of economic stagnation, weak governance, and political insecurity that created enormous challenges. The Strategy recognized that in the absence of decisive action, security would continue to deteriorate; institutions would be unable to provide basic services to their citizens; millions would be denied security and stability in their homes and communities; and those in poverty would be denied the opportunity for a better life. At the time, the governments of El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras had recently agreed to a joint regional plan, the Alliance for Prosperity, which signaled a growing political will to improve economic opportunity, governance, and public safety, and to also enhance regional collaboration.

Today, one year later, INL, together with our interagency partners across the U.S. government, in cooperation with Central American governments, including the Alliance for Prosperity, are taking steps to confront the region's most pressing security challenges. The conditions in Central America today remain incredibly challenging but the efforts we have undertaken to date are showing results: INL's efforts are contributing to reduced homicide levels in some of the most affected neighborhoods; creating more accountable, effective police forces that have the growing trust of their populations; building the institutional and legal frameworks for effective justice systems; and advancing the reach of operational units in combating transnational organized crime at all highest levels.

Thanks to the strong support of this Subcommittee, with increased appropriations we are implementing programs that build upon efforts that have already proven effective, while also introducing new programming guided by a three-part approach: 1) bottom-up community security efforts to expand our programmatic footprint and effective, accountable law enforcement in those communities and neighborhoods most affected by violent crime; 2) top-down institutional reforms to establish the legal and organizational frameworks necessary for sustainable, professional, and accountable security institutions; and 3) operational coordination with host country law enforcement vetted units and task

forces, enhancing their capacity to interdict and deter illegal trafficking through stronger borders and expansion of operations.

Bottom-Up Community Security Efforts

INL engages in bottom-up efforts to engage with citizens, organizations, and leadership at a local level so they can play an active role in improving security in their communities. Our programs aim to build resilience and cooperation with law enforcement to curb criminal activity and improve access to justice. For example, we are beginning to pilot our bottom-up community security efforts in partnership with the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) through what is called a Place Based Strategy (PBS). This strategy is designed to address specific violence prevention objectives and enhance law enforcement capabilities in the Northern Triangles' most dangerous neighborhoods. INL and USAID are piloting co-location of our PBS programming in these communities to maximize their impact.

Drawing from best practices in community violence reduction, INL and USAID are combining violence prevention and law enforcement interventions in specific communities most at risk of violent crime. We are analyzing how we can best integrate services under one overarching approach to reduce homicide rates and improve security. We seek to do this in a way tailored to each community and its unique challenges including areas of concern related to domestic violence, drug treatment and rehabilitation, gang prevention, youth outreach, law enforcement operations, and more. We will measure progress with vigorous data collection and analysis to adjust our programming to ensure success.

Since INL and USAID began joint PBS efforts in Honduras in early 2015, we have already seen a significant reduction in homicide rates. For example, in the Chamelecon neighborhood of San Pedro Sula there were 287 recorded homicides in 2014, eight times the national average. In 2015 there was a decrease every month in the number of homicides, leading to an overall drop of 40 percent. This is a promising indication that the combination of U.S. government efforts and Honduran commitments are having a positive effect.

Because of the promising evidence we have seen, we are expanding our PBS programming throughout the region. In December 2015, INL and USAID initiated pilot efforts in Mezquital, one of the most troubled communities of Villa Nueva, Guatemala, and in Ciudad Delgado, El Salvador – one of the country's most violent communities and a priority under the Salvadoran government's Plan Seguro.

As part of our community security efforts, we are also focusing on community policing through the expansion of the Model Police Precincts (MPPs) program within PBS communities and beyond. Our MPPs use intelligence-led policing strategies to combat crime at the local level, while simultaneously increasing engagement with civil society and communities served by the police to build trust, accountability, and effective response to local crime. MPPs in Guatemala and El Salvador have reported homicide reductions from 30 to 70 percent over the past two years. A newly established MPP in Honduras, after averaging eight homicides per month before the MPP, experienced 100 consecutive days without a homicide committed in its jurisdiction. In Honduras, the MPP program has reached over 50,000 community members nationwide through outreach events that bridge the trust gap and increase understanding between local police and the community.

In 2015, INL launched PBS-related activities in 25 communities in Central America and began MPPs in 35 more, with a goal of having 137 active MPPs in the Northern Triangle by the end of 2017. We are also implementing many of the best practices learned through our existing PBS and MPP locations, and continuously look to improve the program through monitoring and evaluation. With continued support of Congress, we hope to significantly expand these types of successful community level programs and institutionalize intelligence-based policing throughout the region.

Top-Down Justice Sector Institution Reform

While our bottom-up efforts engage communities at the local level, our top-down approach focuses on building strong, accountable rule of law institutions worthy of the communities' newfound trust. Over the past year, INL's top-down justice sector institution reform programs have gained momentum throughout Central America. These programs improve the professionalism, transparency, and accountability of investigators, prosecutors, and judges through training programs and professional workshops with counterparts in Colombia, Mexico, and the United States. In Guatemala, these programs increase access to justice for women, children, and indigenous populations, while in Honduras, INL's support for the Criminal Investigative School position it as a training center of excellence for police and judicial officials in Honduras and from other regional countries. In El Salvador, prosecutors directly mentored with INL-support maintained a 93.4 percent conviction rate.

INL will continue to support the International Commission Against Impunity in Guatemala (CICIG) as it carries out independent investigations and prosecutions as part of the fight against corruption there. In 2015, CICIG investigations led to

arrests and the dismantling of long-standing, pervasive corruption rings within the Tax Authority, Penitentiary System, National Civil Police Logistics Division, the Social Security Health Institute, and elsewhere. Most notably, in September 2015, then-President of Guatemala, Otto Perez Molina, resigned after losing his immunity following a CICIG investigation which amassed 89,000 telephone taps, nearly 6,000 emails, and 17 raids. We have continued our commitment to CICIG, whose mandate is extended through 2017. In addition to supporting the commission's investigations, we provide technical assistance, and build the capacity of Guatemalan judicial institutions, while related top-down projects make those institutions more capable of adopting CICIG's best practices.

We actively work with interagency partners to tackle capacity development and reform in Central America in the areas of forensics, anti-money-laundering, and asset forfeiture. Examples of major INL engagements taken in partnership with the interagency in the past year include:

- Together with the U.S. Department of Justice (DOJ), INL is placing six Resident Legal Advisors (RLA) in the Northern Triangle. The RLAs support anti-extortion task forces in El Salvador, asset forfeiture/anti-money laundering reform in Guatemala and Panama, and transparency/anti-corruption efforts in Honduras;
- In coordination with DOJ's International Criminal Investigative Training Assistance Program (ICITAP), INL commenced a new program to embed a senior forensics advisor into INL's Central America Police Reform Initiative (CAPRI). With the addition of an ICITAP advisor, CAPRI will improve the capacity of Central American police forces to conduct forensic investigations and manage evidence to assist with prosecutions as the region transitions to an accusatory justice system;
- In El Salvador, INL worked with DOJ to provide training and mentoring to more than 300 anti-extortion police officers and prosecutors, including members of the Business Crime Task Force (BCTF). The BCTF, obtained 165 convictions during 2015, and achieved a 93.4 percent conviction rate. A particularly notable BCTF action included the October 2015 arrest of 59 members of the notorious MS-13 gang who coordinated extortions in one of El Salvador's most popular tourist destinations;
- INL is supporting the Department of the Treasury's Office of Technical Assistance in Guatemala, Panama, El Salvador, and Costa Rica.

- INL is supporting nine U.S. Customs and Border Protection (CBP) advisors deployed to six Central American countries – including all of the Northern Triangle. These advisors provide technical assistance, mentoring, and training to enhance capacity to protect their borders from illegal migration and smuggling and terrorism operations.

Through continued support for institutional development of border enforcement and control professionals across Central America, we are developing a core of professional agents able to investigate and disrupt transnational criminal activities, including human trafficking and youth migration. This also helps them become effective partners for U.S. government law enforcement, particularly when it comes to conducting joint investigations and operations.

Operational Coordination

Operational coordination through interagency support for specialized units in Central America provides critical assistance that reduces criminal activity in troubled areas, providing time and space for the bottom-up and top-down initiatives to take effect. INL supports vetted units through the Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA), the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI), U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement Homeland Security Investigations' Transnational Crimes Unit, and CBP. These units focus on gang, kidnapping, human trafficking, and drug interdiction investigations. They prioritize the crimes of highest concern in Central America and disrupt the leadership and operations of transnational criminal organizations.

In El Salvador, the INL-supported FBI-advised Transnational Anti-Gang Unit (TAG) leads international efforts to target criminal gangs, including MS-13 and the 18th Street gang. TAG's work in El Salvador resulted in identification of the entire leadership structure of the local MS-13 and 18th Street gangs. In Honduras, the tactical operations group (GOET), working with the TIGRES and the Violent Crimes Task force – all INL-supported – successfully executed an operation against the Banegas Band, arresting 18 suspects, including its leader in October 2015. The Banegas Band is responsible for at least nine murders and multiple attempts at extortion throughout Honduras.

INL's Panama-based aviation assets supported drug interdiction operations last year that led in one operation to the seizure of 1740 kilograms of cocaine. These aviation assets also assisted Panama's border protection services in accessing remote areas of Panama in support of their policing efforts, and participated in a nation-wide border security protection operation. INL is currently working with

Joint Interagency Task Force South to develop a concept of operations that maximizes the use of intelligence to deploy the aircraft against traffickers in the region.

Monitoring and Evaluation

As we implement the full spectrum of our programs, INL is improving the metrics and evaluation protocols to ensure we are regularly tracking progress and making necessary adjustments. We continually seek to increase the efficiency and long-term effectiveness of INL Central America Regional Security Initiative programs by using evidence-based decision-making, and by designing programs relevant to local needs, while being cognizant of U.S. foreign policy goals and objectives. This includes aligning our programs with good practices related to gender and human rights; enhancing training efficiency and effectiveness; improving the provision of equipment, and advisory assistance; coordinating effectively with other stakeholders including other U.S. government agencies, donors, and local civil society; and ensuring financial and functional sustainability.

Conclusion

Chairwoman Granger, Ranking Member Lowey, and Members of the Subcommittee: we remain committed to working with our neighbors in Central America to bring about significant positive change. We are already seeing some of that positive change, but the challenges facing the region are complex and require an approach that harnesses the entire breadth and depth of law enforcement, criminal justice, and community violence prevention tools at our disposal. The approach we have put forward does just that. With your continued support, we are confident that we can continue to make systemic, positive change in Central America's security environment so this region, our hemisphere, and the United States are safer and more secure.

Thank you for the opportunity to discuss INL's work in Central America and the progress we are making to address these critical security challenges. I look forward to your questions.