

**TESTIMONY**

**CONGRESSMAN ADRIANO ESPAILLAT (NY-13)**

**House Committee on Appropriations**

**Subcommittee on State, Foreign Operations, and Related Programs**

**March 6, 2019**

Thank you for allowing me to testify during today's hearing to lay out my priorities as they relate to the State Department and related agencies. As the first Dominican American to serve in Congress and as a member of the Western Hemisphere Subcommittee of the Foreign Affairs Committee, I know that maintaining our foreign aid and diplomatic commitments builds a strong hand for the U.S. in the region. This is not only in the interest of helping our brothers and sisters in South America, Central America, and the Caribbean, but is also in our best interest to protect our security and improve our economic relations with these countries.

**U.S. Aid to Venezuela**

I would like to begin with a topic much in the news – Venezuela. It is imperative that the U.S. support the right of the Venezuelan people to freely and fairly elect their leaders, and that we support work to end humanitarian suffering in the country. Rampant inflation, lack of access to food and medicine, and the collapse of social services have led to abhorrent conditions into the country, causing more than three million Venezuelans to leave the country. While it is vital for the U.S. to provide necessary support to the Venezuelan people, we must not fall into past patterns of overstepping our bounds in the region.

The U.S. cannot again be a foreign power meddling in the affairs of another country.

**To this end, I urge the Committee to continue funding programs that provide vital support to Venezuela. However, I urge the Committee to include report language that funding be humanitarian nature, and explicitly not intended for use by the military or state police.**

### **U.S. Strategy for Engagement in Central America**

Next, I would by address security assistance to countries in Central America, particularly in the Northern Triangle. The countries of the Northern Triangle, El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras constitute the deadliest region in the world. Widespread violence, poverty, and drug trafficking have led women, children and families to flee their homes, many coming to America for safety.

These immigrants are refugees, and it is imperative that we continue funding programs that focus on good governance, economic growth, and reforming justice-sector institutions in order to ameliorate the root causes of emigration from these countries.

This assistance, through the U.S. Strategy for Engagement in Central America, would provide much-needed support to build upon regional efforts that are contributing to long-term progress. We have seen improvement thanks to continued funding, such as a decrease of homicides in El Salvador from 100 per 100,000 people in 2015 to 60 per 100,000 people in 2017. While this still exhibits a terrible level of crime, it demonstrates that our continued engagement in the region is producing positive results.

**I urge the Committee to increase funding to support the U.S. Strategy for Engagement in Central America, to aid the Northern Triangle in addressing the underlying causes of migration from El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras.**

**Caribbean Basin Security Initiative (CBSI)**

While our efforts in Central America provide vital improvements for the region, it means that crime and illicit trafficking look for other routes – namely the Caribbean. The Caribbean is particularly susceptible to drug trade as a midway point for narcotics produced in South America on their way to the U.S. The Caribbean Basin Security Initiative has been instrumental in providing the funding needed to help combat crime and violence. Per the Congressional Research Service (CRS), crime and violence are on the rise in the Caribbean. CRS reports that, “Homicide rates in several Caribbean countries have increased in recent years because of gangs and organized crime, competition between drug trafficking organizations, and the availability of firearms.”

A recent Government Accountability Office report, requested by several Members of Congress, including myself, highlighted the need to improve data collection and management methods to better monitor the success of CBSI activities, while implementing partners continue to report positive results. In accordance with this report, it is important to develop stronger reporting systems that will build upon the program-by-program successes of the CBSI. I plan to introduce legislation to both develop these vital data mechanisms and to authorize increased funds to expand this crucial initiative.

**As such, I urge this Committee to double the funding to the Caribbean Basin Security Initiative from FY19 appropriated levels.**

### **Investing in Energy Potential in the Caribbean**

According to a study from the World Bank, the average cost of electricity in the Caribbean is four times higher than in wealthy nations such as the United States. High energy costs are a financial hardship for people in the Caribbean and are also a key factor in holding back economic growth and prosperity in the region.

Another report shows that the cost of generating electricity in the Caribbean is higher than much of the rest of the world, which can impede direct investment. In Jamaica, consumers pay 38 cents per kilowatt hour for electricity. In contrast, the average American household pays 10.13 cents per kilowatt hour, according to the U.S. Energy Information Administration.

Investing in new sources of energy, including renewable energy projects such as wind and solar projects in the Caribbean, would mean more clean energy jobs, updated infrastructure, and a more booming economy.

**That is why I ask the Appropriations Committee to increase foreign direct investment in the Caribbean, and to invest in the Caribbean's energy needs.**

### **Emergency Preparedness in the Caribbean**

Another issue I would like to address is emergency preparedness in the Caribbean. As we have seen in recent years, natural disasters, including earthquakes and hurricanes, have become more common and more severe. The countries of the Caribbean are situated in a dangerous location and face annual threats from these disasters, causing increasing devastation to the communities affected by natural forces. As these events occur, I hope that we continue to send aid and assistance to these countries – providing rescue support, humanitarian relief, and help rebuilding.

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While our aid has been critical in supporting our neighbors after disaster strikes, we must do more to preempt and prepare for natural disasters.

By increasing our support for emergency preparedness and investing in building local capacity to respond to disasters, we can help to improve their resiliency and effectiveness in managing natural disasters. This aid can greatly improve the lives of those living in these countries and will also lessen the burden on us when responding to natural crises.

**I urge the Committee to increase funding for emergency preparedness and capacity building.**

**United States Agency for International Development (USAID)**

Finally, I would like to discuss the importance of the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) and the need to continue funding its vital programs. USAID is a premier facet of our foreign diplomacy and its engagement has brought us closer with our neighbors in Central and South America through increasing economic prosperity, promoting good governance, and engaging in clean energy development in the face of climate change. Our assistance to and cooperation with these countries has proven to have positive demonstrable effects. For example, in the last few years Panama has changed from a country receiving development aid to a country that is now providing aid to other Central American countries. Continued investment through USAID will help to make countries become more sustainable and prosperous, which will continue to improve the region in magnitudes beyond our current aid.

**That is why I am asking you to support USAID and increase its funding for programs in Central America.**

Thank you for the opportunity to offer my concerns and priorities to the Committee.