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To: Foreign Policy & Immigration Aides

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Principles for addressing the “root causes” of why people flee the northern countries of Central America

As the Congress makes determinations regarding how to approach the factors driving migration from the northern countries of Central America (specifically, El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras), and provides advice to a new administration, the Latin America Working Group Education Fund (LAWGEF) recommends that U.S. policy follow these guiding principles:

1. ***Providing a large package of aid by itself does not necessarily address root causes.*** While assistance is absolutely needed, aid must be carefully targeted and accompanied by the right kind of diplomacy. Much of the assistance should be directed through civil society organizations. The wrong kind of assistance or multilateral loans with weak or misdirected diplomacy can drive migration.
2. ***The right kind of strong, principled diplomacy now is equally important as aid.*** Governance and rule of law in El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras have seriously deteriorated. El Salvador is experiencing a disturbing trend towards authoritarianism; the Guatemalan and Honduran presidents shut down international anti-corruption mechanisms; the Honduran and Guatemalan legislatures have [weakened](#) laws to attack corruption while intensifying laws to block scrutiny of corruption and abuse; drug trafficking and organized crime have penetrated the state in Honduras and Guatemala; security forces in all three countries, and particularly in [Honduras](#), commit gross human rights violations; in all three countries, there is closing space for human rights defenders, journalists, and civil society. Corruption robs the state of resources to satisfy citizens’ basic needs. A [hopeless](#) sense that government, instead of protecting citizens, is corrupt and predatory and that there are no avenues for change is a [factor](#) driving migration.
3. ***Strong, principled diplomacy must: Stand with the civil society actors working for change, not with corrupt, abusive, or authoritarian governments.*** Congress should urge the Biden Administration to have a coordinated, whole-of-government message—including the messages sent in statements and actions by the State Department, the U.S. ambassador, the President, the U.S. Southern Command, and all other U.S. government officials—that the primary U.S. policy goal is to encourage transparent and accountable governments that serve and respect the rights of all their citizens. Addressing corruption and strengthening the rule of law, improving respect for human rights and protecting human rights defenders and independent journalists, building inclusive economies with respect for labor rights, and strengthening democratic norms, including by reversing authoritarian measures, are of paramount importance. A demonstrable commitment and concrete actions to significantly reduce corruption is a precondition for aid directed through government channels.

- a. This kind of diplomacy requires ambassadors who can deliver these messages to governments and stand with the civil society actors working for change, including by visibly showing support through public appearances, social media, and press statements.
- b. The United States should set a visible distance between the U.S. government and the current governments of Honduras, El Salvador, and Guatemala. The U.S. government and military should avoid appearances and statements that appear to signal unconditional support. This should be done while carefully showing support for specific agencies and individuals within governments valiantly pursuing the anti-corruption and human rights agenda (such as some judges, prosecutors, ombudsmen, and specific members of Congress). An increase in targeted Global Magnitsky and other individualized sanctions on corrupt officials should be part of that messaging.
- c. The Congress is a crucial part of the diplomatic message through congressional letters, statements, and social media that reaches the countries' leadership, media, and public. Such messages should focus on the need to end corruption, abuse, and impunity and show that members of Congress stand with civil society actors (and specific individuals or units within judicial systems and governments) working for change.
- d. Diplomacy should also encourage governments to develop inclusive economies, starting with advocating for respect for labor rights as well as for fiscal reforms to raise equitable and sufficient taxes for public investment. Fiscal reforms should be accompanied by transparent budgeting to avoid corruption. Diplomacy should elevate the importance of labor rights from the start by prioritizing freedom of association and an end to impunity for violence against trade unionists.
- e. U.S. policy and aid should encourage governments to pursue balanced citizen security strategies that focus on violence prevention through social, education, and workforce development programs, improving justice systems, and respect for human rights, rather than “mano dura” strategies.
- f. U.S. embassies should regularly consult with a wide range of civil society organizations to ensure they are fully aware of the human rights situation on the ground and the solutions provided by citizens working for change.

4. At the same time, assistance for Central American countries is needed. To start, the Congress and administration should provide generous assistance to address the challenges brought by the pandemic and the devastating impact of Hurricanes Eta and Iota.

- a. **The COVID-19 pandemic.** The USG should immediately fully fund regular U.S. contributions to the Pan American Health Organization (PAHO)—in essence, the CDC for Latin America and the Caribbean, and the World Health Organization affiliate—to strengthen Latin American and Caribbean health systems and contribute to special assessments to address the pandemic. USAID should provide support to health systems, with an emphasis on increasing support for civil society organizations to strengthen community health services for poor and isolated populations. Any government assistance must have safeguards given pervasive corruption in health systems.
- b. **The impact of Hurricanes Eta and Iota.** USAID should provide immediate and medium-term humanitarian and reconstruction assistance to Honduras, Guatemala, Nicaragua, and other

Central American nations affected by Eta and Iota. This aid should largely be channeled through international and national humanitarian organizations given corruption concerns, thus reinforcing the anti-corruption message and empowering civil society. The U.S. government should help to convene a donors' conference for reconstruction, with meaningful participation by affected communities, including indigenous, Afro-descendant, campesino, and poor urban residents, and humanitarian organizations in all recipient countries. Addressing and mitigating climate change must be at the heart of reconstruction efforts.

5. The Congress and administration should develop and launch well-designed and targeted assistance to address the root causes of displacement and migration, restoring humanitarian assistance withheld over migration-related issues.

- a. Aid strategies must be consulted with a wide range of civil society organizations. Congress should encourage USAID to establish a regular, at least annual, process of consultation with a diverse group of civil-society organizations in each country as well as U.S. civil society stakeholders to elicit input and recommendations regarding U.S. assistance strategies and programming.
- b. Assistance should focus on vulnerable groups, including children and youth, women, indigenous and Garifuna populations, and LGBTQ+ persons. Priority areas should include: community-based violence prevention strategies; civil society and multi-stakeholder initiatives that address sexual and gender-based violence against women and girls; programs to address violence against and promote the rights of LGBTQ+ individuals; sustainable and inclusive rural development via the Inter-American Foundation (IAF); efforts to address corruption and strengthen justice systems (via USAID and State Department), including to strengthen the independence and impartiality of attorneys general, judges, prosecutors, and ombudsman's offices in the three countries, and to provide technical and diplomatic support for special prosecutors' units in Guatemala and Honduras to investigate corruption. **A major share of the assistance package should be channeled through each nation's civil society organizations.** The U.S. should also support the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights offices in Guatemala and Honduras and the regional office in Panama to provide strategic human rights advice, recommendations, and reporting.
- c. U.S. policy through USAID, the Development Finance Corporation, and the Millennium Challenge Corporation and through its position in multilateral institutions should be guided by the fact that corruption permeates the private sector as well as the state in these countries. Private sector corruption fuels human rights abuses throughout the region—the murder of indigenous environmental activist Berta Cáceres is just one example. The USG should make aid and loan decisions accordingly. Ensure any aid and loan programs respect and protect the right of indigenous and Afro-descendent communities to free, prior, and informed consent. Finally, guarantee that any aid to the governments has strong oversight and accountability mechanisms to ensure that aid is used for its intended purposes rather than embezzled.
- d. The Congress should encourage the State Department to actively enforce the conditions in State, Foreign Operations law that governments must advance in addressing corruption, protecting human rights and human rights defenders, ensuring accountability for security force violations, withdrawing the military from policing, and strengthening the rule of law. This enforcement should include withholding certification and freezing up to 50 percent of aid to the

central government as circumstances warrant as well as issuing Global Magnitsky sanctions on corrupt officials and individuals.

- e. No military aid should be provided to the three countries, no assistance should be provided to the Honduran Military Police of Public Order, and no assistance should go to joint military-police operations or abusive police forces.

6. The Congress should encourage the Biden Administration to launch, with careful consultation with stakeholders, particularly environmental, indigenous, and Afro-descendant organizations in the United States and Latin America, an intensive campaign to address and mitigate the impacts of climate change. Hurricanes Eta and Iota are just the latest example of the impact of climate change and sustainable, climate-friendly reconstruction must be part of a broader climate strategy. The campaign must include a primary focus on protecting environmental, community, indigenous, and Afro-descendant activists. These are the voices of communities that bear the brunt of climate change and also offer essential solutions.

Please see a complete set of recommendations from LAWGEF, Kids in Need of Defense, Oxfam, Church World Service, Washington Office on Latin America, and Climate Refugees: [Serve Your People: A Roadmap for Transforming Relations between the United States & the Northern Countries of Central America.](#)