

March 15, 2011

Dear Honorable Member of Congress,

As faith-based organizations, humanitarian agencies and nongovernmental organizations, we urge you not to turn your backs on the most vulnerable people in Latin America nor abandon wise investments that create lasting peace and security for our hemisphere as you make difficult choices on the final FY2011 and the FY2012 budgets.

In Latin America, significant U.S. aid programs protect those at risk from natural disasters, deadly disease and conflict. International Disaster Assistance saves lives in the immediate aftermath of devastating earthquakes, as in Haiti, or catastrophic flooding, as in Central America. Global Health and Child Survival helps prevent the spread of HIV/AIDS, malaria, and other preventable diseases and provides maternal and newborn health care. Economic Support Funds build capacity in Haiti to deliver health care in the midst of a cholera epidemic. In Colombia, they also help provide relief and rebuild livelihoods for the world's largest internally displaced population, while Migration and Refugee Assistance funds emergency shelter for Colombians crossing borders to flee their nation's conflict.

Well-targeted U.S. aid programs also help impoverished people raise themselves to a better life. Development Assistance supports training so poor farmers can increase agricultural production and strengthen local markets to reduce hunger and grow economies. McGovern-Dole International Food for Education helps provide lunches to pre-school and primary-school children. Peace Corps places Americans in communities to work in partnership on health care, farming, and education. The Multilateral Debt Relief Initiative (under the International Development Association) funds U.S. commitments to reduce the debt burdens of some of the hemisphere's poorest nations, allowing these countries to invest more resources in poverty reduction. The Inter-American Foundation's compact budget supports small-scale self-help programs.

U.S. assistance programs can also reduce the threats that come from drug trafficking and drug-related violence that directly affect the communities that you represent. Development Assistance supports efforts by Andean farmers to abandon growing coca, the raw material for cocaine, and turn to food crops instead. Economic Support Funds help Mexico, Colombia and Central American nations strengthen courts and prosecute drug trafficking mafias. The U.S. Institute for Peace's innovative programs encourage new approaches to ending protracted conflicts, as in Colombia. All of these programs in the long run are less costly and provide more sustainable solutions than emergency military programs to address drug-related violence.

President Obama's proposed FY2012 budget makes cuts in foreign assistance programs worldwide, including in Latin America programs. Economic assistance to the region is reduced by 5 percent. Sensibly, after over a decade of U.S. investment in Colombia, the proposed budget begins to shift responsibilities, as long scheduled, for military aid and equipment maintenance to the Colombian government. With big-ticket purchases for equipment for Mexico completed, the proposed budget continues substantial, and more effective, rule-of-law assistance to Mexico at a lower cost. One of the programs we believe is still underfunded in the President's budget is Migration and Refugee Assistance for the Western Hemisphere, which provides aid to tens of thousands of refugees fleeing the conflict in Colombia and living in perilous conditions.

We understand the need for responsible budgeting and believe that there are programs in the President's FY12 budget that merit further cuts. Hefty military assistance programs to a hemisphere that is largely at peace are excessive and should be reduced. Aid that encourages militaries to carry out internal security roles is particularly damaging, as is assistance to security force units that commit gross human rights violations with impunity.

As the Congress considers tough choices regarding the budgets for this year and next, we urge you to preserve already very limited economic and institution-building programs for Latin America. These programs protect the most vulnerable; help farmers grow food, not coca; provide immunizations for deadly diseases; strengthen courts, and help those fleeing from wars and recovering from disasters. Their impact on the U.S. budget is minimal, but their return, measured in increased goodwill, citizen security, and protection for human rights, is substantial. These programs strongly benefit U.S. interests by building support from our neighbors in the hemisphere, showing that the United States can be a partner willing to lend a helping hand.

Sincerely,

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