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Statement for the Record

The State of Exception in El Salvador: Year Five
Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission
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I am one of the few journalists who have ever entered El Salvador's prison systems, including CECOT, which was made for the worst of the worst criminals and dangerous gang members of the country.

From what I saw in the streets of El Salvador, it is something I've never seen before: an entire nation feels like they have been liberated because the criminals and gang members have been taken off the streets. Grandmas are now able to visit their grandchildren who live in distant neighborhoods. Kids can go to the park and feel safe, and families can live peacefully, knowing they won't be extorted by an MS-13 gang member.

As I went into and entered CECOT, it's very obvious how much of a priority it is for the country of El Salvador to make it safe. Just to enter CECOT, you had to pass through multiple security clearances. Once you enter the modules where the prisoners are you do not see a single individual without tattoos covering their entire bodies, I can promise you if any of these individuals were your neighbor, you would feel unsafe. Not because of the tattoos but because of the crimes these individuals have committed. You have people who were proudly members of some of the most dangerous and violent gangs in all of Central America. They made life a living hell for the average citizen of El Salvador while they controlled the streets.

Anyone who is critical of El Salvador's gang crackdown should go and talk to the citizens to see what they have to say now that they can go to the other side of the neighborhood without passing through gang territory.

I think what Nayib Bukele has done has been amazing for the country of El Salvador. If it was not for him and his leadership, El Salvador would still be the most dangerous and the murder capital of the world. I think El Salvador is a good example of putting law-abiding citizens first and treating criminals as criminals.