



Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission Hearing

Human Rights and Humanitarian Challenges in Central America

November 1, 2017

1:00 – 2:30 PM

2255 Rayburn House Office Building

Opening Remarks as prepared for delivery

Good afternoon and welcome to the Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission hearing on the human rights and humanitarian situation in Central America. I want to thank our witnesses for their presence today and for all the work they do on behalf of the human rights and dignity of the people of Central America.

As some of you may know, Central America is where I got my start working on human rights issues.

Before I was elected to the United States Congress in 1996, I had the privilege of serving for 14 years as a senior aide to the late U.S. Congressman Joe Moakley, from south Boston.

One of the first things Joe did was to send me to El Salvador in 1983 to review first-hand the human rights situation, based on some reports he had received from Salvadoran refugees in his district. And that's how my long relationship with El Salvador began.

In 1989, Joe asked me to help him lead a congressional investigation on behalf of a special commission appointed by the Speaker of the House, and who asked Joe to Chair the commission, into the murders of six Jesuit priests, their housekeeper and her daughter, committed at the Central American University in San Salvador in 1989. The murders took place in the context of the Salvadoran civil war, and we were able to determine that the Salvadoran military planned them and carried them out.

The Jesuit murders were a notorious example of the brutal human rights violations that were committed in El Salvador and Guatemala throughout the 1980s and into the 1990s. Massacres, forced disappearances, torture, rape, and internal displacement were tactics in the conflicts that ravaged those countries – and they were supposed to stop after peace agreements were signed and democracy took hold.

But as we will hear today, signing peace agreements and ending the armed conflicts did not end human rights abuses. Nor did the revolution in Nicaragua. And the 2009 coup in Honduras opened the door to increased abuses.

Freedom House has characterized three of the four countries we are concerned with today as only “partly free.” Yes, elections are held, but formal democratic institutions are fragile or ineffective.

People who exercise their freedom of expression and association are at risk: journalists are attacked for doing their job, and human rights defenders are threatened, subjected to legal harassment or killed – especially those like Berta Cáceres who stand up for indigenous, land and environmental rights.

We will hear today about the very high levels of violence in the region – violence by gangs and criminal networks, arbitrary or unlawful killings by police and military forces, and widespread sexual and gender-based violence. The most recent State Department *Country Reports on Human Rights Practices* for Guatemala cited “lethal violence against women” as a principal type of human rights abuse in that country. El Salvador also suffers from the highest rate of femicide in Latin America.

We will hear about pervasive corruption at the highest levels of government that opens the door to the influence of organized crime.

And we will hear about the continued marginalization of indigenous people and small farmers, the unending struggle for land rights, persistent impunity, and forced internal displacement – all issues we were talking about 30 years ago, when the armed conflicts were raging.

I don’t want to give the impression that nothing at all has changed, or that there is no good news.

There is some progress on accountability. Just a few days ago, on October 13, the criminal trial against former Guatemalan dictator Efraín Ríos Montt and his intelligence chief resumed. They are charged with the murder of 1,771 Maya people, the violent displacement of 29,000, and rape and torture committed in connection to 15 documented massacres.

In September, the Salvadoran government established a commission to search for the remains of people who were forcibly disappeared during the civil war. This achievement is due in large part to the efforts of organizations like Our Parents' Bones, whose members are children of the disappeared, including Salvadoran-Americans, who hope one day to be able to give their parents a decent burial.

And there are other indications of progress: the growing independence of the Public Ministry in Guatemala, and its success, alongside CICIG, in prosecuting key corruption cases; and the decision of the Salvadoran government to ban all metal mining in order to protect communities' water sources.

But in spite of these bright spots, the terrible reality is that last fiscal year, U.S. authorities at the southwestern border apprehended nearly 200,000 unauthorized migrants from the northern triangle of Central America. More than half were unaccompanied children or families, and many were seeking humanitarian protection. People are fleeing for their lives, leaving behind their homes and their countries.

So something is very wrong, as we in Congress recognized when we funded the new U.S. Strategy for Engagement in Central America. Implementation has just begun. It is too early to know how well it will work. And achieving lasting results will require time and sustained commitment on all our parts, in region and here in the United States.

Today we need to examine the reality on the ground in Central America, and remind ourselves why people might take great risks to flee in such large numbers.

We need to examine the capacity of the Central American governments to respond to the humanitarian crisis caused by the ongoing violence. What's happening to the hundreds of thousands of people in the region who are being displaced internally? Are the governments complying with their obligations under international law?

What will happen if Temporary Protective Status is not renewed in the coming months for Salvadorans, Hondurans and Nicaraguans? Do these governments have the capacity to absorb tens of thousands more deportees? Are the minimal conditions in place for people to return? If not, would the United States be out of compliance with – violating – its own obligations under international law?

The U.S. has long played an oversized role in Central America; our histories are intertwined. We need to remember that history. We need to acknowledge it. And we need to make sure that our policies really do contribute to the ongoing process of building an enduring peace and respect for human rights throughout the region.