



Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission Hearing

New Government, Ongoing Agenda: Human Rights, Corruption and Accountability in El Salvador

Wednesday, March 13, 2019

10:00 – 11:30 a.m.

2200 Rayburn House Office Building

Opening Remarks as prepared for delivery

Good morning and welcome to the first hearing of the Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission in the 116th Congress on human rights, corruption and accountability in El Salvador.

We are still awaiting the appointment of the Commission's new Republican co-chair, but the human rights problems around the world are such that we wanted to go ahead and get the ball rolling.

I would like to extend a special welcome to our witnesses, all of whom have traveled to be with us today – from El Salvador, San Francisco by way of Boston, and the Eastern Shore. We deeply appreciate the work you do and thank you for your presence.

It has been more than 25 years since El Salvador's internal armed conflict ended. I remember when the 1992 peace accords went into effect, and it was a moment of celebration and optimism. The war had been so brutal and so devastating. More than 70,000 people were killed, Catholic nuns and priests among them. Yet peace was finally at hand.

Except that it wasn't.

As you will hear today, violence in El Salvador is unrelenting. Since the civil war ended, El Salvador's homicide rate has consistently ranked among the top three in the world (excluding countries engaged in armed conflict). And in 2015, it exceeded for the first time the number of annual homicides during the period of the civil war.

In recent years, those homicides have included targeted killings of security forces by gangs, extrajudicial killings of gang suspects by police, and among the world's highest rates of femicides - killings of women and girls.

In addition to the more than 3,300 homicides committed in 2018, more than 3,000 people were reported as disappeared. Many of the disappeared are never found but are suspected dead.

What is going on?

Observers identify a combination of factors that interact and are mutually reinforcing: economic vulnerability, the unintended consequences of anti-drug and anti-gang policies, institutions weakened by pervasive and entrenched impunity and corruption.

In the end, social justice has been elusive. Instead, the human rights of Salvadorans are violated every day, in every conceivable way. No one should be surprised that people flee the country seeking escape.

In fact, some 1.4 million Salvadoran immigrants – one fifth of the country's current populations – live in the United States, of whom nearly half a million are unauthorized and another nearly 200,000 are beneficiaries of Temporary Protected Status (TPS).

In 2017 those 1.4 million immigrants sent home five billion dollars in remittances, 18% of El Salvador's Gross Domestic Product.

El Salvador's growth rate is already the second lowest in Central America. Were half of those immigrants suddenly deported to El Salvador, the economic impact would be devastating.

Where does all of this leave us?

U.S. policymakers have taken steps to respond to the human rights crisis in El Salvador.

Our diplomats have emphasized the importance of addressing issues such as corruption, impunity, and human rights.

Congress has appropriated more than \$2.6 billion over four years to fund the U.S. Strategy for Engagement in Central America to promote economic prosperity, strengthen

governance, and improve security in the region, including at least \$342 million for El Salvador – subject to conditions that require the Salvadoran government to take steps to address corruption and human rights abuses.

The State Department has worked with the Department of Justice to help fight financial crimes, extortion and corruption, protect witnesses and strengthen prosecutorial capacity. The U.S. helped the Attorney General establish a *Gender Unit* that works on cases of femicides, domestic violence, and crimes against LGBTI individuals.

The Human Rights Violators and War Crimes Unit in Immigrations and Custom Enforcement has investigated past human rights violations in El Salvador.

But for many reasons, it's not enough.

It's not enough because, as we are about to hear, the terrible human rights situation persists.

Because as a new president prepares to take office, we're seeing risks of backsliding, such as the legislative assembly's decision not to renew the mandate of former Attorney General Douglas Melendez.

Because the current U.S. Administration has sent mixed signals about its support for creating a CICIG-like body in El Salvador.

And because the U.S. has a moral responsibility to do more.

We armed, trained and equipped the Salvadoran armed forces, including the infamous Atlacatl Battalion, responsible for some of the most notorious human rights crimes committed during the civil war.

We deported Salvadoran youths involved in gang activity in the U.S. without regard for the consequences in El Salvador.

We have supported hard-line, militarized anti-drug and anti-gang policies that failed to stop and instead exacerbated the spiral of violence in the country.

And now the current Administration seeks to deny the right to asylum for those fleeing the violence in El Salvador, including women and children.

So we must do more, and I look forward to hearing recommendations from our witnesses today.