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TOM LANTOS HUMAN RIGHTS COMMISSION
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Introduction

Co-Chairman McGovern, Co-Chairman Smith, and Distinguished Members of the Commission: thank you for the opportunity to testify on behalf of the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) on food security in Central America. We are grateful for the Commission's bipartisan support for our work in the region.

This topic is of particular interest to me, as I began my career working on food security in East Timor in 2006, which, at the time, was considered the youngest democracy in the world. It was there, as part of the United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, that I authored the *Right to Food in Timor Leste*, the nation's first manual designed with and for civil society organizations, so they could monitor the right to food and ensure that the newly formed government adhered to its responsibilities as signatories of the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

Development Context

Today's hearing is an important and timely one. Food insecurity in Central America, specifically, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, and Nicaragua, is a growing concern. The challenge has been exacerbated in the past two years by the far-reaching effects of COVID-19 and natural disasters, particularly last year's back-to-back devastating hurricanes, Eta and Iota. According to the Famine Early Warning Systems Network, food insecurity in El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras continues to increase due to these factors, with up to 5 million people in need of humanitarian assistance in 2021. These challenges are made even more acute by poor governance and corruption that weaken service delivery and prevent social assistance programs and resources from reaching those in need.

These countries have also experienced economic declines, largely due to the second-order impacts of COVID-19, including shutdowns, loss of employment, and other non-health consequences of the pandemic. The International Monetary Fund estimates that the Salvadoran, Honduran, and Guatemalan economies all declined in 2020, with the Salvadoran economy alone contracting by nearly 8.6 percent.

Nicaragua faces its own set of food insecurity challenges. However, the Ortega-Murillo regime has refused to acknowledge the gravity of the situation, which puts the lives and livelihoods of Nicaraguans even further in peril.

It is also important to emphasize that the impacts of climate change are already being felt across the entire Central America region, and are expected to worsen. Temperatures are more volatile and extreme, and sea levels have risen at a faster rate than the global average. Both urban and rural areas are under water-related stress, impacting the quality and quantity of water. Across the region, there has been an intensification of natural disasters, such as floods, droughts, heat

waves, and hurricanes, directly impacting crops and jeopardizing livelihoods and food security. For example, prolonged drought, flooding, and lack of crop variety have caused high levels of food insecurity in the Dry Corridor of Honduras, leaving up to 2 million people in need of emergency food assistance.

Each country's unique context requires a tailored set of programs to adequately address this challenge. However, no matter the specific approach, one thing is certain -- we must seek to promote opportunities for low-income populations. In addition to making farming more viable, USAID is providing greater opportunities to increase incomes by looking at value-add solutions, such as processing and expanding access to both regional and export markets. By diversifying their portfolios so that they are not reliant on only one source of income, these farmers are less vulnerable to shocks such as hurricanes or natural disasters. This diversification of income is critical, as our analysis shows that a lack of buying power by the poorest of the poor, rather than food availability, is the most significant hurdle to food security in this region.

Combating Food Insecurity in El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras

At the direction of the Biden-Harris Administration, USAID is redoubling our efforts in El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras to help make these communities more resilient, safe, and prosperous so their citizens are able to build a better future for themselves and their families in their home countries.

We understand that food security plays an essential role in a country's stability and that many seek to migrate to be able to provide for themselves and their families. For these reasons, the White House has made food security a core element under Pillar 1 in the Strategy for Addressing the Root Causes of Migration in Central America. Under this recently launched strategy, USAID is proactively addressing long-term needs surrounding food security. Under Line of Action 1 "Stabilize Populations with Acute Needs" and Line of Action 3 "Expand Access to Protection in Countries of Origin of the Administration's Collaborative Migration Management Strategy, USAID provides life-saving humanitarian support through emergency food and nutrition assistance, and handwashing campaigns and hygiene supplies. The Agency also supports economic recovery programs to help people rebuild their livelihoods, assistance to smallholder farmers, and support to communities to build resilience to future shocks. USAID will also expand its support for improved agriculture production and income generation to reduce food insecurity while supporting sustainable food systems. For example, we are working with rural farmers to help improve crop resilience, adopt environmentally and economically sustainable agricultural practices, and improve land and water management. We work with local governments to improve the resilience of residential, commercial, and public buildings and core public infrastructure. And we work with communities to mitigate the impacts of and support a more rapid recovery from hurricanes and other severe weather events that threaten lives, homes, and crops. Ultimately, under the Root Causes Strategy, we aim to strengthen host government accountability to bolster service delivery and security by curtailing endemic corruption, preventing violence—including sexual and gender-based violence, reducing poverty, and expanding economic development opportunities.

El Salvador

In El Salvador, as many as 500,000 people are experiencing acute food insecurity due to ongoing drought, the impacts of tropical storms, and COVID-19. While food insecurity in El Salvador is less widespread than in Guatemala or Honduras, the factors that lead to this insecurity are similar: many of the most vulnerable households are unable to purchase adequate food for their families due to a lack of income and job opportunities.

Since April 2021, USAID has provided more than \$16 million to support partners and meet the urgent needs of vulnerable populations by providing food assistance and supporting the implementation of agriculture, food security, and water, sanitation, and hygiene interventions. These activities are promoting climate-smart agricultural practices in drought-prone areas of the country. For example, to help promote resilience in agriculture, USAID is supporting training in water-smart agriculture to 1,000 vulnerable farming families, including 500 extremely vulnerable families in western El Salvador. This training empowers families to increase crop production and enhances community resilience to droughts and extreme rainfall.

Guatemala

As a result of high poverty rates, natural disasters, and other environmental shocks, Guatemala currently has the highest level of chronic malnutrition in the Western Hemisphere and the sixth highest level in the world. Approximately 47 percent of Guatemala's population is stunted; in parts of the Western Highlands, this number rises to almost 70 percent.

USAID is taking a comprehensive approach to ending poverty, hunger, and malnutrition in Guatemala. Since April 2021, USAID has provided nearly \$54 million in new humanitarian assistance to meet the immediate needs of vulnerable Guatemalans. This funding aims to provide life-saving assistance to over 400,000 Guatemalans through the delivery of cash assistance for food as well as prevent and address malnutrition among food-insecure households. Additionally, USAID partners are supporting smallholder farmers and other agriculture-dependent households to ensure appropriate and timely inputs for planting and growing seasons—such as farming tools, fertilizer, and seeds—to improve food security. USAID partners also provide training on climate-smart farming practices such as drip irrigation, diversification of crops, and soil management to increase crop production and build resilience to future climate shocks.

In addition to urgent humanitarian food assistance, we are addressing long-term food insecurity and increasing incomes in more than 2,500 communities in the Western Highlands through the United States Government's Feed the Future program to end global poverty, hunger, and malnutrition. In Guatemala, Feed the Future focuses on communities that suffer from the highest rates of poverty and chronic malnutrition, yet have strong potential for economic growth. We are also collaborating with Guatemala's private and public sectors to strengthen both agricultural and non-agricultural value chains, support small and medium-sized businesses, increase incomes, and create jobs for Guatemalans.

For example, USAID and Agropecuaria Popoyan, a Guatemalan agribusiness, have joined forces through a public-private partnership to design, construct, and equip the Modern Agriculture Center for Prosperity and Opportunity (CAMPO) in the Western Highlands. CAMPO trains smallholder farmers — including many who are returned migrants — on modern agricultural

practices that improve crop production, increase incomes, and create market linkages to help sell their crops.

CAMPO, which was inaugurated this past February, does not seek to supplant a community's traditional farming customs. Rather, it complements these practices with innovation and generates sustainable development. The modern, 60,000 square-foot center located in Chiantla, Huehuetenango, combines traditional classroom work with hands-on experience in 10 on-site greenhouses. Here, farmers observe, learn, and have practical engagement with other producers and technical experts in their community, empowering the farmers to advance a sustainable future in agriculture. To date, the Center has trained approximately 2,000 farmers, who have since integrated new agriculture practices, such as greenhouses and rainwater reservoirs, into this season's crops. By the end of 2022, CAMPO Chiantla is expected to benefit as many as 36,000 farmers and their families.

Honduras

As in El Salvador and Guatemala, rural Hondurans are more likely to be food insecure. Forty-nine percent of Hondurans live below the poverty line, with a disproportionately high concentration of these poor living in the Dry Corridor, which covers western and southern Honduras. The impact of COVID-19 on the local agricultural sector has been dire. By October of last year, prior to Hurricanes Eta and Iota, Honduran agribusinesses had already experienced a 73 percent drop in sales and laid off nearly a quarter of their workforce.

In response to these compounding effects, since April 2021, USAID has provided nearly \$55 million in humanitarian assistance in the form of cash transfers for food, food vouchers, and in-kind assistance to food-insecure households, as well as providing critical agricultural support to smallholder farmers. Approximately 21,470 individuals have directly benefited from improved agricultural production through improved farming practices in the departments of Francisco Morazan, Choluteca, and El Paraiso.

USAID, through its Feed the Future programming, is strengthening the resilience and sustainability of Hondurans' food sources through climate-smart farming practices, diversification of crops, and training to help families increase the production of nutritious foods and generate additional income. Through Feed the Future programs in Honduras, we have provided assistance to 251,000 people.

In Western Honduras' Dry Corridor, where shifts in rainfall and other climate impacts can undermine livelihoods, USAID helps farmers increase production while building resilience to the changing climate. With USAID support to diversify and include higher-value crops, convert to new technology, access climate data to inform crop management, and using watershed management practices to ensure water availability, these farmers are able to minimize climate impacts.

For example, to help increase the incomes of poor rural households, USAID is linking small farmers to market opportunities. To date, we have catalyzed more than \$30 million in private sector investment for more than 50 partnerships in the agriculture sector. By increasing household income with modern, small-scale commercial agricultural investments such as the

production of higher-value crops and connection to markets, USAID programs have almost tripled the average income for the poorest families in Honduras and are expected to create more than 30,000 new jobs.

Nicaragua

Nicaragua is a low-income country and one of the poorest in Latin America. Agriculture, the country's primary economic activity, engages almost 70 percent of the population and contributes to 20 percent of the country's GDP. Until 2012, USAID's strategy had a robust economic growth program that included food security. For example, USAID's rural and agricultural development activity worked with small and medium-sized Nicaraguan farmers to enhance competitiveness, increase incomes, and improve food security. The activity promoted nontraditional crops such as black beans, mini-vegetables, and papaya, and introduced technologies like drip irrigation, micro-spraying, integrated pest management, organic fertilizer, and greenhouses.

As a result of the increasingly oppressive actions of the Ortega-Murillo regime, the U.S. Government has not provided direct assistance to the Government of Nicaragua since 2012. The regime's actions continue to make Nicaragua a politically restrictive environment, making it difficult for USAID and other donors to work in other sectors. At this time, USAID's bilateral assistance in Nicaragua is focused on democracy and human rights programming, supporting civil society, human rights defenders, independent media, and other democratic actors.

Despite these restrictions, USAID continues to support the Nicaraguan people in their time of need. Last year, due to the COVID-19 pandemic and the devastating effects of two hurricanes, Nicaragua's food insecurity further increased with damaged crops, loss of employment and economic opportunity, and government inaction.

To help address urgent humanitarian needs, USAID is providing \$2 million through the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations to support the recovery of livelihoods and income generation of artisanal fishers affected by the hurricanes in the North Caribbean Coast of Nicaragua. This assistance will directly benefit 4,000 fisher families and have a special component to support trade led by women. In addition, USAID provided \$4 million in humanitarian assistance to implementing partners to address acute food and other basic needs through the provision of emergency food and multipurpose cash assistance, as well as agriculture support to help families recover from the impacts of the hurricanes. USAID provided another \$5 million in humanitarian assistance in 2020 to alleviate food insecurity and reduce the spread and impact of COVID-19 throughout the country. With this funding, USAID, through our partner, was able to distribute more than 7,000 food vouchers to vulnerable families severely food-insecure families.

Conclusion

It is clear that food insecurity is a longstanding challenge in Central America that has worsened in recent years. USAID is committed to providing assistance that creates jobs, increases incomes, promotes access to markets, strengthens the agricultural sector against climate shocks, and addresses so that these countries can prosper.

While we recognize that there are natural pressures, such as hurricanes and droughts, that contribute to food insecurity, we also know that these challenges are worsened by weak governance and lack of economic opportunities. We also recognize that the magnitude of these efforts exceeds the resources of these countries, and that there will be a long-term need for the United States and other countries to contribute additional resources for humanitarian and development purposes.

Access to high quality food is essential to healthy, strong, and prosperous countries and an issue USAID is committed to addressing across the region. We call on the governments of the four countries to enact the laws and policies that ensure this access. Ultimately, we seek to help the people of the region to lead healthier, more prosperous lives in their home communities.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify. I look forward to your questions.