

Statement of Ranking Member Tom Carper
“Ongoing Migration from Central America: An Examination of FY2015 Apprehensions”
Wednesday, October 21, 2015

A as prepared for delivery:

I want to thank Chairman Johnson for calling this hearing on the ongoing surge of Central American migration we’re experiencing at our southwest border. This is an important challenge for the region and for our country, as well. I look forward to working together with the Chairman and the rest of my colleagues toward lasting solutions.

Last summer, we were shocked by the flood of migrants arriving here from Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador, particularly the thousands of unaccompanied children and families with young kids. When they arrived, most did not try to evade Border Patrol agents but instead sought them out for protection. Some of their stories – and those of migrants who did not survive the journey – were heartbreaking.

Our government took emergency steps to shelter and process these individuals, but also put into place strategies to stem the flow. These included public information campaigns on the dangers of the journey, expedited court hearings, an increased focus on human smuggling and trafficking rings, and support for Mexico’s efforts to better police its own southern border.

I was pleased that these efforts had an impact for a time in slowing migration. But many observers warned that as long as the Northern Triangle countries remained mired in violence and poverty, migration would continue. And that is exactly what appears to have happened. This time, we should not be surprised.

Although for a number of months significantly fewer Central Americans were apprehended at our southern border, the flow never really stopped. In fact, much of the decrease was due not to fewer people fleeing the Northern Triangle, but from unprecedented new enforcement efforts by Mexico on its southern border with Guatemala.

Between July 2014 and June 2015, for example, Mexico reportedly apprehended nearly 157,000 Central American migrants – a 70 percent increase compared to the same period for the previous year.

But since this summer, even this enhanced effort on the part of our Mexican partners has not been enough. Border Patrol apprehensions of Central American children and families began slowly climbing toward last years’ levels early in 2015. In August, they surpassed the number of new arrivals in August of 2014.

September arrivals remained relatively high as well. This is particularly striking given that apprehensions usually peak in spring and decline over the summer and early fall. There are different theories as to why we are seeing more Central American migrants again, particularly children and families. Some people point to increased violence in El Salvador, others to drought conditions that have worsened poverty for many in the region. Still another theory is that the

smugglers have found new routes that have allowed them to get around Mexico's enhanced apprehension efforts and our own.

Of course, there are also pull factors, particularly a desire on the part of migrants to reunite with family members who are already here. Smugglers may also be marketing real or perceived changes in our immigration policy – such as current litigation calling into question family detention – to persuade migrants that now is the right time to make the trip. We will discuss some of those factors today, and also what we can do to try to change the dynamic.

I think the increased apprehensions we are seeing this summer and fall are an important reminder that we must – in addition to ongoing efforts to better secure our borders - work with our partners to address the root causes of Central American migration.

The governments of Guatemala, Honduras and El Salvador have joined in an unprecedented regional agreement, called the Alliance for Prosperity, that seeks to change the underlying conditions on the ground that compel so many people to flee.

Our own government has proposed \$1 billion in foreign aid in the current fiscal year for initiatives to complement the Alliance for Prosperity. These funds are intended not only to improve security, but also to provide more economic opportunity for the citizens of the Northern Triangle and improve the rule of law in the region.

This is clearly a daunting undertaking that will not yield immediate results, yet we cannot continue to neglect the underlying conditions that have led to the current migration crisis.

It is also worth remembering that it is our appetite for drugs that fuels much of the violence and corruption in this region. As a result, I believe we have a moral obligation to try and help undo that damage.

Several of us on the Committee will be traveling to the Northern Triangle soon to explore more fully what is fueling this ongoing migration and how U.S. engagement in the region might help turn the tide.

I think our efforts and those of others working on this issue are very much in keeping with the valuable message Pope Francis delivered during his recent visit. We need to see these migrants as people, not simply numbers, and work in partnership to try to alleviate the desperate conditions that cause so many to risk life and limb to flee to the United States.