

Congress of the United States
Washington, DC 20515

January 25, 2021

The Honorable Joseph R. Biden Jr.
President
The White House
1600 Pennsylvania Avenue NW
Washington, D.C. 20500

Dear President Biden,

As members of Congress deeply committed to addressing the root causes of migration from Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador, we applaud your plan to build security and prosperity in partnership with the people of Central America. The devastation caused by Hurricanes Eta and Iota, compounded by the ongoing coronavirus pandemic, have only made realizing your vision more urgent. Targeted U.S. assistance will be vital for the region's recovery and reconstruction and for reducing the push factors that are driving a renewed surge in irregular migration. Moreover, the actions you take to respond to these crises can signal that under your administration, the U.S. Government will prioritize the fight against corruption and the promotion of human rights, recognizing that it is in our national interest to help citizens of the Northern Triangle achieve lives of dignity and opportunity in their home countries.

In November 2020, Hurricanes Eta and Iota ripped through parts of Nicaragua, Guatemala, Honduras, El Salvador, and Colombia. Over 9 million people have been affected, with hundreds of thousands remaining in emergency shelters due to flooding and the destruction of homes. The Famine Early Warning Systems Network estimates that at least 3 million people are currently facing crisis levels of food insecurity in Guatemala, Honduras, and Nicaragua. Over 300,000 Salvadorans were already pushed into severe food insecurity earlier in the year due to Hurricanes Amanda and Cristobal. The hurricanes destroyed critical infrastructure—including \$10 billion of damages in Honduras alone—and hit during the coronavirus pandemic, which had already created a humanitarian crisis that outstripped the capacity of health systems to provide adequate care.

The United States Agency for International Development has provided approximately \$53 million in response to these hurricanes, including to support rescue missions and provide water, sanitation and food assistance to Guatemala, Honduras, Nicaragua and Colombia. U.S. Southern Command (SOUTHCOM) and Joint Task Force-Bravo supported 295 missions, rescued 810 citizens, transported 163 rescue and aid workers, and delivered around 350,000 pounds of food, water, hygiene kits, and other life-saving aid. We believe this vital assistance has helped save lives and we deeply appreciate the tireless efforts of USAID and SOUTHCOM. Still, the impact

of these storms will require a sustained and comprehensive response. In the short term, there is a need for increased water and sanitation services and emergency food assistance. In the medium-term, reconstruction funding will be needed to rebuild infrastructure, support the reestablishment of healthcare systems, and restore crop and livestock production. Your administration can also assist the recovery process by issuing new Temporary Protected Status (TPS) designations for Guatemala, El Salvador, Honduras, and Nicaragua, recognizing that the conditions on the ground in all four countries clearly meet the legal standard established under the INA § 244(b)(1)(C) of “extraordinary and temporary conditions” that prevent nationals who are already in the U.S. from safely returning.

These back-to-back hurricanes hit during the already-devastating COVID-19 pandemic, which had deepened conditions of poverty, inequality, insecurity, and lack of economic opportunity. Nearly 60,000 people in Nicaragua, Guatemala, Honduras, El Salvador, and Colombia have died from COVID-19, with the pandemic continuing to cripple the region. The economies of countries throughout the region have contracted significantly and remote learning has only exacerbated inequities among students. Even before Hurricanes Eta and Iota hit, the World Food Program already warned that the pandemic was causing a serious risk of starvation in Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador. The hurricanes forced hundreds of thousands into overcrowded shelters, further undermining efforts to prevent the spread of COVID-19.

The United States’ disaster recovery efforts and assistance for COVID-19 response should go hand in hand with a renewed commitment to aggressively combat corruption in the Northern Triangle. The Trump Administration’s strategy was to turn a blind eye to corruption so long as the region’s governments met its ill-conceived demands on immigration. This was a raw deal for the American taxpayer that disregarded the interests of the people of Central America and ignored the underlying push factors driving migration to the United States. By relegating anti-corruption efforts to the bottom of the policy priority list, the Trump Administration strengthened the hand of corrupt actors in the Honduran and Guatemalan Congresses and allowed President Nayib Bukele to persecute journalists in El Salvador and deploy troops to storm the country’s legislature, with few if any consequences. The Trump Administration’s approach also left courageous anti-corruption advocates in these countries more vulnerable than ever before.

As you know well, corruption in the Northern Triangle must be understood as a deeply embedded system of elite capture, which functions to divert government resources toward advancing the interests of a select few instead of benefitting the broader public. We believe the U.S. Government should use its influence to work collaboratively with civil society organizations, prosecutors, average citizens, and international allies to aggressively dismantle these corrupt networks.

We stand ready to work with your administration in support of the region’s recovery efforts following the destruction left by the hurricanes and the COVID-19 pandemic and in reestablishing the fight against corruption as a top priority. Specifically, we ask that you:

Support Central American communities impacted by Hurricanes Eta and Iota:

- Immediately marshal a robust response and recovery effort to support the region and enhance its resilience to future natural disasters in the wake of Hurricanes Eta and Iota;
- Ensure United States financial assistance is effective by directing assistance dollars to non-governmental actors, civil society organizations, and multilateral institutions — not central governments—and using an inclusive, participatory planning process;
- Employ those within the devastated regions in any recovery efforts and create and provide relevant training for these new jobs;
- Designate Guatemala for Temporary Protected Status (TPS) and issue new designations for El Salvador, Honduras, and Nicaragua.

Expand efforts to assist the region in COVID-19 response and recovery:

- Work with the Pan-American Health Organization, humanitarian aid groups, and local health workers to facilitate the deployment of COVID-19 vaccines in the region and help strengthen public health measures and containment strategies to minimize the spread of COVID-19;
- Support overburdened health systems as they seek to address gaps in health services—including both those existing prior to and those exacerbated by the pandemic—and to minimize the secondary impacts of the pandemic, including for child and maternal health;
- Prioritize foreign assistance programs that address food insecurity and chronic malnutrition and which seek to fill gaps in children’s education caused by the pandemic, including by helping to expand internet access to rural and overlooked areas;
- Target poverty reduction and job creation programs to support women, indigenous communities, and Afro-descendants, who have been disproportionately affected by the pandemic, as well as youth who may be particularly vulnerable to gang recruitment.

Send a strong message to the governments in the region that corrupt actors are on notice:

- Use the Magnitsky Act and the authorities delegated under the recently passed congressional appropriations legislation to sanction corrupt officials;
- Support anti-corruption investigators and advocates both within and outside of government, leveraging the \$45 million Congress appropriated for anti-corruption and rule of law efforts in Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador;
- Appoint Ambassadors committed to combating corruption and protecting human rights in El Salvador and Honduras;
- Engage with Congress and a wide range of civil society actors in developing the legislatively mandated five-year strategy to “advance economic prosperity, combat corruption, strengthen democratic governance, and improve civilian security” in the Northern Triangle;
- Work with governments on fiscal reform, and specifically on ending tax avoidance and evasion by closing tax loopholes and tax havens;
- Urge international financial institutions to implement stricter anti-corruption and oversight mechanisms for all loans and donations supporting economic recovery.

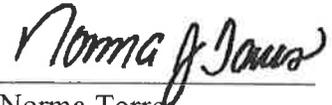
We recognize the vital efforts you have led in the Senate and as Vice President to address the root causes of migration from the Northern Triangle and have every confidence that you will continue that good work as President.

We commit to doing everything we can in Congress to help you achieve these goals.

Sincerely,



Albio Sires
Member of Congress



Norma Torres
Member of Congress

CC:

Antony Blinken, Secretary-designate of the Department of State

Alejandro Mayorkas, Secretary-designate of the Department of Homeland Security

Jake Sullivan, National Security Advisor