

March 25, 2021

President Joseph Biden  
Vice President Kamala Harris  
The White House  
1600 Pennsylvania Avenue NW  
Washington, DC 20500

Dear President Biden and Vice President Harris,

We appreciate the administration's pledge to ensure a fair, humane, and orderly immigration system that welcomes immigrants and restores access to asylum. We are encouraged by the first steps your administration has taken to suspend the Migrant Protection Protocols, better known as the "Remain in Mexico" policy, and to process asylum seekers who have been waiting in Mexico. We will work with you to fully restore access to asylum at our border and to rescind all anti-asylum policies, holding your administration accountable to these commitments.

We also welcome initial actions such as the executive order for "Creating a Comprehensive Regional Framework to Address the Causes of Migration" and statements by high-level administration officials that indicate that combating corruption, advancing the rule of law, promoting respect for human rights and ensuring accountability for human rights violations will be included in the U.S. approach. We are convinced that these elements must be absolutely central both to U.S. diplomacy and U.S. assistance.

We urge your administration to consult *with a wide range of civil society organizations in each country and incorporate feedback from these consultations* as it develops and implements this root cause strategy. We counsel taking the necessary time to develop the final strategy so that the United States can transform diplomacy and aid so as not to repeat the mistakes of the past, including the ways in which U.S. policy has contributed to human rights violations and forced migration from the region.

As faith, humanitarian, and civil society organizations, many of which have worked for decades in the northern countries of Central America and partner closely with civil society leaders, indigenous and Afro-descendent communities, grassroots movements, human rights, environmental and LGBTQ+ activists, and religious communities, among other groups, we urge your administration to **develop a root cause strategy that adheres to the following principles.**

- ***The U.S. government should stand not with corrupt officials and abusive security forces but with the citizens and civil society organizations working to build more democratic, just, and inclusive societies.*** Where the United States stands should be made visible by the actions and statements of U.S. ambassadors, State Department officials, and all U.S. government officials.
- The USG must support and amplify civil society calls for governments to address the structural and societal causes driving forced migration, including corruption, impunity, human rights abuses, gang and gender-based violence, poverty and inequality, exclusive economic models,

and climate change. U.S. policy should start from an understanding that corruption, poverty, and human rights violations in these countries are not inevitable but rather are the result of deliberate choices by those in power.

- The USG should, as a top-level priority, insist that the governments of Honduras, Guatemala, and El Salvador end and reverse the closing of space for civil society through restrictive NGO laws, penal codes that criminalize social protest and freedom of expression, false legal cases against human rights defenders, use of force against protesters and social movements, disinformation campaigns targeted at civil society leaders, and attacks against press freedom. There has been an alarming increase in attacks against human rights defenders, including environmental and land rights activists, indigenous, Afro-descendant, and campesino community leaders, LGBTQI+ persons, and members of the press in recent years, some of them by state actors, coinciding with the growing authoritarianism in each of the countries. These attacks are a threat to democracy and governments should be held accountable for any role or complicity in them as well as the failure to investigate, prosecute—and stop them. Addressing closing civic space must be a core strategy to address root causes, both because attacks on civil society leaders drives forced migration and because civil society is a key actor in building sustainable and just solutions to Central America’s systemic problems.
- The USG should urge each government to guarantee and respect the independence and separation of powers of the judiciary, human rights ombudsman’s office, and other government institutions as determined by each country’s constitution. The United States should strongly advise merit-based selection of Attorneys General, judges, and judicial personnel.
- The USG should encourage transparency and access to information, which can help to empower civil society, improve governance, and prevent corruption.
- The USG should urge governments to develop more inclusive economies, starting with fiscal reforms to raise equitable and sufficient taxes for public investment and social programs. The USG should encourage strategies to broaden economies beyond dependence on environmentally and socially damaging extractive industries, including large-scale monoculture. U.S. policy here as in other areas should center on respect for human rights, including the rights of local communities to be consulted in development agendas and projects. Promoting formal employment and addressing gender discrimination are also important elements.
- The USG should encourage respect for labor rights, including freedom of association and an end to impunity for violence against trade unionists.
- The USG should strongly urge governments to take steps to end discrimination against women and LGBTQI+ persons, as well as against indigenous, Afro-descendant, and campesino

communities. The USG should ensure that its own programs and policies proactively address discrimination against these vulnerable groups.

**As your administration develops an aid strategy, we urge you to consider the following:**

- To the maximum extent possible, aid should be channeled through local humanitarian and nongovernmental organizations. Aid to governments should be strictly limited and carefully targeted given corruption concerns.
- USAID should establish a regular schedule of consultation with a diverse group of civil society organizations in each country (not limited to recipients of USG funding or organizations with NGO legal status) as well as U.S. civil society stakeholders to elicit input and recommendations regarding U.S. assistance strategies and programming.
- The administration should immediately address two emergencies, the COVID-19 pandemic and the impact of Hurricanes Eta and Iota, by increasing humanitarian aid and ramping up assistance to manage and recover from these crises. Adapting to and mitigating climate change should be at the heart of reconstruction efforts. A TPS redesignation for Nicaragua, Honduras, and El Salvador, and a new designation for Guatemala is an essential element so as not to further destabilize economies. The State Department should provide additional assistance to the Pan American Health Organization, provide support for health services for poor and isolated populations, and facilitate access to vaccines.
- Assistance should focus on vulnerable groups, including children and youth, women, indigenous and Garifuna populations, and LGBTQI+ persons. Priority areas should include: community-based violence prevention strategies; increasing educational and workforce opportunities for youth; civil society and multi-stakeholder initiatives that address sexual and gender-based violence against women and girls; strengthening local child welfare and protection systems; programs to address violence against and promote the rights of LGBTQI+ individuals; sustainable and inclusive rural development; efforts to address corruption and strengthen rule of law, including to strengthen the independence and impartiality of attorneys general, judges, prosecutors, and ombudsman's offices, and to provide technical, financial, and diplomatic support for special prosecutors' units to investigate corruption and to independent anti-corruption initiatives.
- Programs to address the root causes of migration should be informed by policies that promote gender and racial equality, inclusive development, and children's rights. All State and USAID programs that affect children, including programs under CARSI, should be informed by experts in child development and implemented in a way that recognizes the unique perspective and needs of children.

- The USG should encourage governments to pursue balanced and rights-respecting citizen security strategies that focus on violence prevention through social, educational and workforce development programs, improving justice systems and respect for human rights, and rehabilitation, rather than “mano dura” strategies. The United States should provide no aid for militaries, for the Honduran Military Police of Public Order, for police forces with records of abusive practices, or to militarize borders.
- USG counternarcotics strategy must refocus on the deep linkages between drug trafficking organizations, government and security officials, and business entities. It should prioritize targeting those alliances that are behind trafficking, money laundering, and organized crime—and which drive human rights violations and violence in the region.
- U.S. policy through USAID, DFC, and MCC and through its position in multilateral institutions should be guided by the fact that corruption permeates parts of the business sector as well as the state in these countries. Business sector corruption fuels human rights abuses throughout the region—the assassination of Berta Cáceres is just one tragic example. The United States should ensure any aid and loan programs include rigorous safeguards and oversight, contain strong anti-retaliation/reprisal policies, respect and protect the rights of citizens, and guarantee indigenous and Afro-descendent communities right to free, prior, and informed consent—and should not fund and should vote against projects and loans that violate these terms.
- The administration should launch, with careful consultation with stakeholders, particularly environmental, indigenous, and Afro-descendant organizations in the United States and Latin America, an intensive campaign to address and mitigate the impacts of climate change. The campaign must include a primary focus on protecting environmental, community, indigenous, and Afro-descendant activists. These are the voices of communities that bear the brunt of climate change and also offer essential solutions.

We believe that if the United States government follows these principles and strategies, recognizes that this requires a long-term perspective and commitment, and regularly consults with civil society organizations in each country, U.S. assistance and diplomacy can make a valuable contribution to ensuring the conditions for people to live safe and dignified lives in the region, so that migration becomes just an option—and not a strategy for survival.

Thank you for your attention to these recommendations.

Sincerely,

Alianza Americas  
American Friends Service Committee  
American Jewish World Service  
Bread for the World  
Center for Democracy in the Americas

Center for Gender & Refugee Studies  
Central American Resource Center (CARECEN)  
Central American Resource Center (CARECEN-LA)  
Church World Service  
Columban Center for Advocacy and Outreach  
Disciples Center for Public Witness  
Disciples Refugee & Immigration Ministries  
EarthRights International  
Franciscan Action Network  
Friends Committee on National Legislation  
Global Exchange  
Global Ministries of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) and the United Church of Christ  
Jesuit Conference Office of Justice and Ecology  
Kids in Need of Defense  
Latin America Working Group (LAWG)  
Leadership Conference of Women Religious  
Lutheran World Relief  
Maryknoll Office for Global Concerns  
Mennonite Central Committee U.S. Washington Office  
Missionary Oblates  
Oxfam America  
Presbyterian Church (USA) Office of Public Witness  
Red de Pueblos Transnacionales  
Sister Parish  
Sisters of Mercy of the Americas – Justice Team  
The United Methodist Church - General Board of Church and Society  
United Church of Christ, Justice and Witness Ministries  
Washington Office of Latin America (WOLA)

Cc: Antony Blinken, Secretary of State

Juan Gonzalez, Senior Director for the Western Hemisphere, National Security Council

Roberta Jacobson, Coordinator for the Southern Border, National Security Council

Julie Chung, Acting Assistant Secretary, Western Hemisphere Affairs, State Dept.

Ricardo Zúñiga, Special Envoy for the Northern Triangle

Katherine Dueholm, Acting Deputy Assistant Secretary, Mexico and Central America, State Dept.

Emily Mendrala, Deputy Assistant Secretary, Cuba and Regional Migration, State Dept.

Patrick Ventrell, Director, Central America office, State Department

Mileydi Guilarte, Deputy Assistant Administrator, USAID/LAC