

Message to Biden: More of the Same Won't Work in Central America

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By Alexander Main

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Vice President Joe Biden is a man on a mission. Over the last few weeks, the White House's go-to guy on Latin America has made every effort to persuade Congress to approve a \$1 billion aid request for Central America. In separate op-eds in [The New York Times](#) and [The Hill](#), Biden has argued that this money could help jump start the region economically and pave the way for "the next great success story of the Western Hemisphere." But Biden's billion-dollar plan has already encountered resistance in Congress, and from fellow Democrats no less. "We've spent billions of dollars there over two decades," Senator Patrick Leahy (D-VT) [recently noted](#). "And we've seen conditions get worse in Honduras, Guatemala, El Salvador."

There is no doubt that these three countries – often referred to as Central America's Northern Triangle – could use some outside help. Appalling levels of violence and dire economic conditions have led increasing numbers of Guatemalan, Honduran and Salvadoran citizens, including tens of thousands of children, to flee to neighboring countries and the U.S. The Biden plan's apparent objective is to prevent these countries from spiraling into further economic and social turmoil. But is there anything to suggest that the proposed aid package will work, when past assistance clearly hasn't?

Funding for development assistance to Central America is set to increase by nearly 400% under the Biden plan, with most of the funds going to the Northern Triangle. The White House's [budget request](#)

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[PDF] states that much of this funding is designed to “support the priority objectives” identified in the

[“Alliance for Prosperity” plan](#)

that the Inter-American Development Bank helped the three governments draft last year. Among these objectives are much-needed investments in education, health and housing. But the “Alliance” plan appears to be largely focused on attracting forms of foreign investment that have arguably made life worse for many Central Americans and had little positive impact on the overall economic situation. These include investments in “strategic sectors”—textile manufacturing, agro-industry and tourism—which all too frequently offer workers poverty-level jobs and provoke the displacement of small farmers and entire communities whose rights and historic claims to land are rarely supported by state authorities.

Security assistance would also increase significantly under the White House’s Central America budget proposal. Funding for International Narcotics Control and Law Enforcement (INCLE) aid to Central America would double from \$100 million in FY2014 to \$205 million in FY2016. This assistance, rooted primarily in the U.S. “war on drugs,” includes extensive support for the region’s police and military forces despite abundant reports of their involvement in [extrajudicial killings](#) and other [serious human rights violations](#). All of the INCLE funding would be channeled through the Central American Regional Security Initiative (CARSI), a multilateral cooperation mechanism that is notoriously opaque, leaving the public and members of Congress with minimal information on where and how the funds are actually used.

There is little evidence that U.S. security assistance has worked in Central America; in fact, [many human rights defenders](#)

[PDF] point to the massive impunity around police and military human rights violations and consider that the U.S. has simply been adding fuel to the fire. Dozens of members of Congress have also voiced concern and asked, for instance, for all U.S. security assistance to the government of Honduras to be

[suspended](#)

, so long as authorities fail to investigate and prosecute human rights abuses.

As Biden has recognized, without political will the White House’s Central America plan has no chance of success. He expresses confidence that Northern Triangle leaders are committed to making “the difficult reforms and investments required to address the region’s interlocking security, governance and economic challenges.”

There are reasons to seriously question the Vice President’s analysis. The Honduran government may have committed to expanding healthcare access and education under the “Alliance for Prosperity,” but in practice it has announced [thousands of public sector layoffs](#) and has waged a prolonged assault on teachers’ unions. According to the U.S. Department of Labor,

[Honduran](#)

and

[Guatemalan](#)

authorities have failed to protect basic labor rights, such as the right to organize and bargain collectively, and the right to a minimum wage. Does the Obama administration really want to

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invest in governments that trample workers' rights?

There is also little reason to believe that the governments of Honduras or Guatemala are prepared to genuinely take on institutional corruption and abuses, and fight rampant impunity. Honduras' ruling party [dissolved](#) a respected and independent police reform commission and refused to enact any of the measures the commission had recommended for mending the country's corrupt and broken public security apparatus. Similar backtracking has occurred in Guatemala, with the [annulment](#) of the former dictator Efraín Ríos Montt's conviction for genocide and the constitutional court's decision to prematurely cut short the tenure of the widely-praised independent attorney general Claudia Paz y Paz.

It is good that, as a result of the unprecedented influx of child migrants last summer, the Obama administration is finally paying attention to the crisis that's been raging in the Northern Triangle for years. But rather than simply pouring more funds into a broken system, it should first try to examine why U.S. assistance hasn't been working in these countries.

Biden and other U.S. officials have committed to enhancing transparency and accountability around U.S. aid programs, which would be a useful first step. A second step would be to begin listening to human rights groups and workers in these countries. Their [message](#) has been clear: "Stop feeding the beast." No more security assistance to governments that don't hold police and military agents accountable for criminal acts. And no more development assistance that is channeled primarily toward supporting entrenched national elites and multinational interests, with no consideration for the rights of workers and communities. It's time to re-think foreign assistance to Central America.

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