



Committee on International Justice and Peace

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July 24, 2014

The Honorable John Kerry
Secretary of State
Washington, DC 20520

Dear Secretary Kerry:

I have just returned from a solidarity trip to El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras. During my visit I had the benefit of meeting with representatives of the Bishops' Conferences as well as with officials at the U.S. embassies and U.S. AID missions in these three nations.

A number of points surfaced during these visits which I would like to bring to your attention.

First, our journey had as its focus an examination of the role that the extractives industry plays in the economies of this region, and the often calamitous public health and environmental consequences of mining operations by U.S. and Canadian multinationals. However, our concern understandably grew to include the fate of the many thousands of unaccompanied minors journeying perilously from these countries to our border. We cannot separate this humanitarian crisis of migration from the fundamental "root causes" existing in these countries.

Second, we all can agree on the causes in question: violence, gang activity, narcotics, weapons and human trafficking, inadequate institutions of law enforcement and corruption/impunity, poverty, as well as unequal and inadequate economic development. These factors mutually reinforce one another. As Archbishop Wenski and I mentioned in our January letter, these links have implications for the proper allocation of funding pursuant to the Mérida Initiative:

"It is the conviction of the Church in the region and our Committees that expenditures should be concentrated on efforts that aim to protect human rights, strengthen civil society and expand the levels of humanitarian and development assistance. An overemphasis on military assistance can be counterproductive.... While there is a role for security assistance, we also urge that an increased proportion of budgetary expenditures attributable to U.S. international aid be allocated to support the fostering of human rights, a just and humane civil society, and broad-based economic development."

We heard support for this point of view from your colleagues in the U.S. embassies and missions that we visited. The need for improved education, job training, law enforcement and infrastructure was a common thread in each country. We must address the primary actions that will serve the long term resolution of the current problem: these are found in investment in education and jobs.

Letter to Secretary of State Kerry
July 24, 2014
Page 2

My brother bishops in Central America have urged us to encourage alternatives to militarization of U.S. assistance and instead emphasize economic opportunity. The United States must recognize our own contributions to this crisis, and support more effective programs that reduce drug usage here at home. Similarly, the regulation of gun exports, coupled with criminal justice reforms that foster rehabilitation rather than retribution, need to be implemented by our states and our federal government.

Third, as we have done in the past, we continue to question key policies facilitated by our trade agreements and to examine the consequences of these policies in the Central American region. We frequently heard during our visit, from Church leaders as well as representatives of civil society, that the implementation of the Central American Free Trade Agreement (CAFTA), and similar trade policies, has in many cases devastated small agricultural producers and businesses in the region, while depressing labor conditions and wages. As an example, U.S. corporations, receiving significant subsidies and other protections from our government, have been able to export corn and other agricultural products to Central America, driving down local prices for these products and forcing rural families off their lands.

The conduct of U.S. and Canadian mining companies in these countries has contributed to destructive environmental and public health consequences for communities in Central America. We heard powerful testimonies, by civil and Church leaders, of brutality and oppression, including torture and murder. Community leaders and representatives of indigenous communities in El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras, who resisted the unregulated expansion of mining activities in their native lands, have been targeted. Our government, joined by our Canadian allies, must do more to support the claims and interests of these affected communities. It must require that U.S. enterprises operating in these regions abide by the same standards of care for human life and ecology as apply to their operations in the United States.

We were also advised that insistence on international arbitration as a mandatory form of dispute resolution between sovereign nations and private investors has created an unfair environment in which wealthy multinationals at times manipulate these legal remedies. These strategies delay justice and plunder the resources of the countries forced to defend themselves from such capricious claims.

We must recognize that there are correlations between these harmful trade practices and the deplorable conditions that lead to poverty, increased unemployment (especially among the young), violence, trafficking and the resultant push for migration. The crisis on our borders will not be minimally resolved until drugs and arms flows, harmful trade provisions, and other critical economic policies that contribute to violence are addressed and rectified.

Letter to Secretary of State Kerry
July 24, 2014
Page 3

Thank you for your consideration of these concerns related to the root causes of migration. I am available to elaborate on these issues, as well as other points relating to our visit to Central America, if this would be helpful.

Sincerely yours,

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Most Reverend Richard E. Pates
Bishop of Des Moines
Chairman, Committee on International Justice and Peace
United States Conference of Catholic Bishops

cc.: Mr. Ricardo Zuñiga
Senior Director for Western Hemisphere Affairs

The Honorable Michael Froman
United States Trade Representative

The Honorable Max Baucus
Chair, Senate Committee on Finance

The Honorable Dave Camp
Chair, House Committee on Ways and Means

The Honorable Orrin G. Hatch
Ranking Member, Senate Committee on Finance

The Honorable Sander M. Levin
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