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One Hundred Sixteenth Congress
U.S. House of Representatives
Committee on Foreign Affairs
2170 Rayburn House Office Building
Washington, DC 20515
www.foreignaffairs.house.gov

April 29, 2020

His Excellency Nayib Armando Bukele Ortez
President of the Republic of El Salvador

Dear President Bukele:

As you know, we are longtime supporters of a strong U.S. – El Salvador relationship and believe much can be gained from our continued partnership. As the world confronts COVID-19, it is essential that leaders protect public health while also upholding human rights and respecting democratic institutions. In this regard, we are concerned by several recent actions that you have taken which jeopardize the human rights of the Salvadoran people and your country's democracy. We respectfully ask that you reconsider these actions and not use COVID-19 as a pretext to undermine the Salvadoran constitution and international norms.

On April 15th, El Salvador's Constitutional Court ruled that your government could no longer detain individuals accused of not complying with a mandatory household quarantine nor confiscate their vehicles or property. According to the Office of the Human Rights Ombudsman of El Salvador, this practice contributed to 778 reports of abuses by Salvadoran security forces. Rather than complying with the Constitutional Court's ruling, at least 60 detentions have been carried out since the decision was made. We urge you to adhere to your country's constitution and respect the authority of El Salvador's legislative and judicial branches. Policies that promote social distancing are essential, but they must also ensure the protection of fundamental human rights.

We were also extremely disturbed by recent actions taken against the Salvadoran prison population which could contribute to the spread of COVID-19 in your country's prisons. As the *Washington Post* noted, photos released by your office this week "showed hundreds of inmates stripped to their shorts and jammed together on prison floors as their cells were searched. Some wore face masks, but most had little protection against the possible spread of the coronavirus." We are concerned that recent steps taken in your country's prisons not only will do little to stop the spread of violence in El Salvador but also will encourage the spread of COVID-19 within the prisons, among prison staff, and eventually in the community. The released photographs are also

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unnecessarily degrading. We understand the need to stop gang violence in El Salvador and to hold the masterminds behind all homicides responsible. At the same time, we believe that combatting organized crime must be done in a manner that upholds international norms and does not contribute to the spread of illness.

Finally, we would be remiss not to state our belief that any policies regarding the use of lethal force must be carried out in accordance with international standards, and any abuses must be investigated by the Office of the Attorney General.

At this difficult moment, we express our solidarity with the Salvadoran people as our two countries grapple with the challenges posed by COVID-19. While we are all in uncharted territory, we believe that respect for democratic institutions and fundamental human rights is more important now than ever.

Thank you for your attention to this urgent matter.

Sincerely,



ELIOT L. ENGEL
Chairman



ALBIO SIRES
Chairman
Subcommittee on the Western
Hemisphere, Civilian Security, and Trade