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Five-Minute Special Order
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MANY CHALLENGES FACING EL SALVADOR: PRESIDENT FUNES DESERVES U.S. SUPPORT

M. Speaker, in 1992, when the historic Peace Accords were signed ending El Salvador's twelve years of civil war, many of us anticipated a new and prosperous era for that country.

In the following years, political competition flourished and electoral processes matured. The ruling ARENA party maintained its power, base and organization, winning consecutive elections for the next 17 years. But in 2009, the FMLN opposition party won the presidency. It was a watershed moment for El Salvador.

Sadly, many things did not change over these years. The ability of the courts and justice system to hold elites, government officials and members of the security forces accountable for crimes, including human rights crimes, continued to fail, reinforcing a culture of impunity. The newly-created police, although light years ahead of the old security forces, was infiltrated by criminal elements and human rights abusers who blocked investigations and collaborated with criminal groups.

The poor did not benefit from trade and investment and international aid diminished, including U.S. aid. And the migration of Salvadorans to the U.S. is as great or greater as it was during the civil war.

And some things got worse. Little could I have imagined the violence in El Salvador becoming worse after the war, but it has. Criminal networks invaded the country and use it to traffic drugs, guns, human beings and other contraband throughout the hemisphere. Youth gangs are exploited; poor neighborhoods are terrorized; security and judicial authorities are corrupted; and crime, violence and murder have exploded.

This is the reality inherited by Mauricio Funes when he became president 18 months ago. I have had the privilege of meeting President Funes. I find his Administration to be pragmatic, committed to improving the lives of the majority poor, and addressing the crime and corruption that are robbing the country of its much-longed-for peace.

However, there are long-standing institutional problems that remain obstacles to reform, the pursuit of justice, and even the consolidation of democracy. Among them, in my opinion, is the Attorney General's Office – the *Fiscalía* – where countless cases of murder, corruption, drug trafficking, money laundering and other crimes are stymied.

But the Funes Administration is taking courageous and positive steps to confront these challenges. These include naming an Inspector General for the National Civilian Police, Zaira Navas, who is serious about ensuring that an honest hardworking police force is not sullied by corrupt cops.

This month, Inspector General Navas suspended from duty over 150 police officers. These “bad apples” are under investigation for corruption and links to criminal and drug organizations. Rather than embracing this effort to clean up the police, intransigent forces chose instead to create a new commission inside the National Assembly to investigate the Inspector General. This action has been accompanied by renewed death threats against her life.

Last December, Senator Leahy praised the work of PCN Inspector General Navas and the importance of strengthening the rule of law in El Salvador. I agree. I believe Inspector Navas is taking courageous action, and I encourage the State Department and the U.S. Embassy to continue to support her in these efforts.

President Funes is exploring the possibility of establishing an independent commission, similar to the one created in Guatemala under the auspices of the U.N., to investigate drug and criminal networks, and key human rights crimes. This would ensure an independent investigation into many of the criminal cases and charges of official corruption that have languished in the *Fiscalía* for years. It could open new paths to ending impunity.

President Funes is also working with Mexican President Calderon, the Obama Administration, and his Central American neighbors to confront the escalating penetration of the region by major drug cartels and criminal networks. He is seeking coordinated strategies and action, increased aid and assistance, stronger laws and policies, and more effective social investment.

El Salvador has experienced several tragic episodes of violence carried out by gang members, and public revulsion at gang crimes is at an all time high. President Funes is seeking to respond decisively to this terrible situation, while not repeating the mistaken policies of the past that sounded tough but failed to reduce crime or keep young people out of gangs.

He has also established an advisory commission on gangs and gang-related violence. One program that might be a model is the Center for Formation and Orientation at St. Francis of Assisi parish in Mejicanos. It has had success working with young people on rejecting gang life, and providing those who want to leave the gangs with advice, education and training. Its pastor, Fr. Antonio Rodriguez has made important contributions to the discussions about how to address youth violence.

M. Speaker, it is in the best interests of the U.S. to support the Funes Administration as it seeks to strengthen the rule of law, clean up institutional corruption and crime, and help lead the region in breaking impunity and confronting criminal threats.

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