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During the VII Summit of the Americas held in Panama City on April 10-11, Presidents Otto Pérez Molina of Guatemala, Juan Orlando Hernández of Honduras, and Salvador Sánchez Cerén of El Salvador presented a blueprint for the Plan for the Alliance for Prosperity in the Northern Triangle to UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-Moon, US President Barack Obama, and private-sector representatives.


During his first visit to Central America in June 2014, Biden urged Central American leaders to dispel myths regarding the US government’s immigration policy toward unaccompanied minors, but he also admitted that stemming rising levels of emigration required systemic change and massive investment in security, governance, and social welfare.

In November, Presidents Pérez Molina, Sánchez Cerén, and Hernández presented a plan to promote economic, social, and institutional development in their countries during a conference on investment opportunities in Central America hosted in Washington by the Inter-American Development Bank (IDB).

The actions proposed shaped the Plan for the Alliance for Prosperity in the Northern Triangle, which includes measures to boost economic growth, employment, access to health care and education, and improved security conditions. El Salvador, Honduras, and Guatemala have some of the highest crime and poverty rates in the Western Hemisphere, and as a result of these conditions almost one in 10 of their citizens seek to emigrate, mostly to the US.

In early March, Biden traveled to Guatemala for the second time and discussed the ambitious US $1 billion assistance package. "The challenges ahead are formidable. But if the political will exists, there is no reason Central America cannot become the next great success story of the Western Hemisphere," wrote Biden in a New York Times column published on Jan. 29.

Biden compared the Plan for the Alliance for Prosperity in the Northern Triangle with Plan Colombia and argued that Colombia has been plagued by similar problems, including violence and corruption. However, since the implementation of Plan Colombia 15 years ago, he said, the country has managed to make huge progress in security, governance, and human rights thanks to the US government’s willingness to invest US$9 billion in the plan as well as the Colombian authorities’ political will.
Plan will deepen inequality in region, say civil-society organizations

However, civil-society organizations do not appear to share Biden’s enthusiasm for the plan. During the Summit of the Americas, 75 civil-society organizations throughout the hemisphere sent a joint letter to the presidents of Central America, Mexico, and the US to express their concerns about the proposal.

The letter was signed by human rights, environmental, women’s, labor, religious, and community organizations that object that there was no prior consultation with the target populations and that claim the plan was developed "behind closed doors." The organizations call for a "participatory democracy process of citizen consultation" in the target countries before the program moves forward.

"One of our deepest concerns about the Alliance for Prosperity plan is that it perpetuates the same economic policies that have already resulted in skyrocketing inequality," said Kelsey Alford-Jones, executive director of the Guatemala Human Rights Commission in Washington, DC. "We are especially alarmed by the proposed construction of large-scale infrastructure projects and the expansion of extractive industries, which have caused a lot of forced displacement throughout the region and are often associated with violence against communities that organize to defend their lands and livelihoods."

Civil-society organizations are highly critical of the military security policies associated with the "war on drugs" launched by countries such as Mexico and Colombia and argue that they have led to the forced displacement of millions of people as well as an alarming number of human rights violations.

"One of the greatest dangers posed by the current plan is the proposal to militarize the regional borders within Central America," said Laura Embree-Lowry, program director at the Committee in Solidarity with the People of El Salvador (CISPES). "Not only does it risk violating the human right to free transit, it’s likely to lead to even more rampant abuses against refugees and migrants traveling throughout Central America and Mexico."

As well as civil-society organizations, a number of foreign policy experts have also expressed skepticism regarding the real interests driving the plan and have pointed out that the US has a long history of supporting disastrous interventions in Central America that dates back to support given to military dictatorships during the 1970s and 1980s and, more recently, US support for the coup against Honduran President Manuel Zelaya in 2009 (NotiCen, July 2, 2009, and Aug. 13, 2009).

"The Alliance for Prosperity program has the potential to spur investment and market opportunities for US and international firms. Yet, even though human rights and democracy are core values of US foreign policy, these concepts have been used as rhetorical tools for the US to craft its own narrative in the region to suit its own political and economic agenda," writes Alicia Chavy in an article published by the International Policy Digest.

"Unless the Obama administration and Central American political and economic influencers focus on driving economic and social growth in their countries, the program will become another disastrous US intervention in the region, exacerbating underlying problems of corruption, economic decline, and social inequality," she concludes.