

Statement of John Barsa
Nominee to be Assistant Administrator for Latin America and the Caribbean
United States Agency for International Development
Senate Committee on Foreign Relations
December 4, 2018

Chairman Corker, Ranking Member Menendez, and distinguished members of the Committee, I am honored to appear before you today as President Trump's nominee to serve as the Assistant Administrator for Latin America and the Caribbean (LAC) at the United States Agency for International Development (USAID). I am deeply grateful to the President and USAID Administrator Mark Green for the support and confidence they have placed in me with this nomination. If confirmed, I look forward to working closely with the U.S. Congress to ensure that USAID's programs in the region advance U.S. national security and geopolitical interests.

As I begin my remarks, I would like to recognize the outstanding leadership of Sarah-Ann Lynch and Steve Olive, who have headed USAID's LAC Bureau for the past two years. Thanks to their efforts the LAC Bureau has been able to continually and successfully function in sometimes challenging times.

I would also like to take this opportunity to thank my wife, Lisa, and my daughters, Camille and Olivia, who are here today, for their unwavering love and support.

Throughout my career, I have been blessed with the opportunity to work with many talented and inspiring leaders. I would also like to thank these mentors, too many to name here, who have made me a better public servant, manager, and leader.

I truly am humbled to have been nominated to lead the men and women of USAID's Bureau for Latin America and the Caribbean. I cannot agree more with Secretary Pompeo who just last week said the Administration considers "our relationship with South America, Central America and Mexico to be central to American success." In addition to furthering our national interest, it's also the right and moral thing to do. If confirmed, I will use my experience -- coordinating with other Agencies, collaborating with Congress, leading teams in a results-driven manner, participating in disaster responses and coordinating with the military -- to lead USAID's Bureau for Latin America and the Caribbean.

My interest in Latin America and the Caribbean is not purely academic. It is quite literally in my blood. My mother was born in Santiago de Cuba, to a middle-class family that never harbored any desire to leave their country. They were not political in any sense of the word. Like just about everyone else, my mother and her four siblings simply sought educations, careers, the ability to start and support their own families, and the opportunity to provide an even brighter future for their own children.

As the nightmare of Fidel Castro's communist revolution descended upon the island, it became clear that not only were their highest aspirations no longer possible, their ability to live in safety with the most basic of freedoms was in jeopardy as well. Members of my family were placed in jail for the crime of possessing U.S. dollars. Family properties were seized. Jobs were lost. People they knew were being summarily executed for not supporting the revolution. For my family's own survival they felt they had to flee the island. And so they did.

When my mother and most of her immediate family settled in Miami, they were able to restart their lives as is only possible in America. It was there in Miami that she met my father. It was there that I was born and raised as a fully bilingual and bicultural individual. And it is there that I graduated from Belen Jesuit High School, and it was there that I received my B.A. in International Relations from Florida International University. And throughout it all, I was not only surrounded by first- and second-generation Cuban refugees, but also by first- and second-generation refugees and immigrants from Haiti, Nicaragua, Guatemala, Colombia, Venezuela, and other countries throughout the Western Hemisphere.

Growing up among immigrants and their descendants does not make me unique. The vast majority of Americans are the descendants of immigrants. But because I grew up in Miami as the son of a Cuban refugee and surrounded by other immigrants from across Latin America and the Caribbean, my understanding of the forces that deny people the ability to live in freedom, prosperity, and safety in their own countries isn't just something I know because of academic studies. It is part of my history. I know it innately and viscerally.

The Jesuit ideal of "being a man for others," which I was taught at Belen Jesuit High School, was something I first put into practice in 1987, when I joined the United States Army Reserve, where I ultimately became a member of the 11th Special Forces Group, and later served in a Civil Affairs unit. It was while I served in Civil Affairs that I first learned about the unique partnership between USAID and the Department of Defense, and U.S. Army Reserve's Civil Affairs in particular. If confirmed as Assistant Administrator for Latin America and the Caribbean at USAID, I will use this unique understanding of the organization and role of the

military in general, and Civil Affairs in particular, to ensure continued USAID-Department of Defense partnerships to advance U.S. foreign policy goals.

My next instance of public service occurred in 1993, when I joined the personal staff of Congressman Lincoln Diaz-Balart (R-FL). It was there that I developed a deep appreciation for Congress' oversight responsibilities. While on Congressman Diaz-Balart's staff, I also learned the critical importance of working in a bipartisan manner for the greater good of the country. Perhaps no better example of this was the 1997 passage of the Nicaraguan Adjustment and Central American Relief Act (NACARA), which was the culmination of countless hours of bipartisan negotiations and interparty discussions. I believe it remains a great testament to what Congress can achieve regarding immigration reform, and I am extremely proud to have played a very small part in its passage.

I am also extremely proud to be continuing my public service today, in my current role as the Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary for the Office of Partnership and Engagement (OPE) at the Department of Homeland Security (DHS). DHS OPE coordinates the Department's outreach efforts with critical stakeholders nationwide, including state, local, tribal, territorial (SLTT) governments, SLTT elected officials, SLTT law enforcement, the private sector, and academia, ensuring a unified approach to external engagement. OPE advocates and represents the interests of these stakeholders through the Department's policy making process and as a conduit for the Secretary to engage with stakeholders or share information.

Early in the Administration, when I arrived at OPE as the Acting Assistant Secretary, I found

that my organization was in charge of three separate public awareness campaigns: the “If You See Something, Say Something” campaign, the “Blue Campaign” -- the unified voice for Anti-Human Trafficking efforts throughout DHS -- and a Cyber Security Awareness campaign given to DHS by the 114th Congress. All three campaigns had different reporting structures and mechanisms. It was clear to me that for each of the campaigns to grow and flourish they needed to operate out of their existing silos and share resources and information. I merged all three campaigns into one “Campaign Office” within OPE. I hand-picked a political appointee to lead this new office, and together we helped realize multiple efficiencies and benefits for all of the campaigns. Perhaps most importantly to this Committee, under my tenure at DHS OPE, the Blue Campaign to raise awareness about human trafficking has grown remarkably.

Another aspect of my professional experience is also relevant to the position for which I have been nominated: disaster response. I have worked on disaster responses for Hurricanes Katrina, Irma, and most recently, Maria. When I deployed to Puerto Rico in the aftermath of Hurricane Maria, I was asked to set up an intergovernmental affairs operation within the FEMA response framework that would somehow establish communications and regular contact with each of Puerto Rico’s 78 mayors. Even today, it is hard to fathom just how extensively Puerto Rico was impacted. Not only was the physical devastation severe, but traditional means of communication were virtually non-existent.

I arrived in Puerto Rico not fully knowing exactly how I was to accomplish this mission. However, upon seeing the familiar Civil Affairs patch on the arm of some soldiers at FEMA’s Joint Field Office, I knew that the Army Reserve’s Civil Affairs would be part of my solution.

And they eventually were. A Civil Affairs Battalion, mostly fluent native Spanish speakers, became part of my team which included other fluent Spanish speakers from the U.S. Coast Guard and a myriad of other civilian agencies. My teams established regular contact with local government leaders, allowing improved disaster response and life-saving efforts. This -- the largest and most complex intergovernmental affairs effort in FEMA history -- has been lauded by FEMA and military leaders as an example for future post-disaster cooperation. I am proud that my knowledge of just how civilian and military organizations can work together helped to contribute to this success. If confirmed, I will bring this experience to USAID, the U.S. Government lead on international disaster responses.

However, as we know, meeting the development and prosperity challenges in the Western Hemisphere necessitates more than just disaster response. Each country has unique challenges as they move forward on what Administrator Green has eloquently described as the Journey to Self-Reliance. In the Northern Triangle of Central America, challenges include weak democratic governance, corruption, a lack of economic progress, and a dearth of job opportunities for those who desperately seek them. Taken together, these challenges darken the future of those living there and all too often drive them to undertake a treacherous journey north and seek to illegally immigrate to the United States. USAID programs in the Northern Triangle, such as programs in El Salvador that target communities with high homicide rates, and programs in Honduras and Guatemala that combat corruption, seek to directly take on these challenges.

In Haiti, USAID continues to help the people of Haiti to gain stability and prosperity so that they can build their futures at home. In Colombia and Peru, USAID and its partners must continue

promoting rural economic development so that we can curb the flow of cocaine into our country and mitigate the effects of illegal mining and resource extraction. For those countries further along on their Journey to Self-Reliance, such as Mexico, Chile, and Brazil, USAID's relationship has gone from strictly donor to one of partnership. If confirmed, I look forward to strengthening and expanding these current partnerships, to further the prosperity and security of the entire Western Hemisphere.

And as Administrator Green has repeatedly noted and as National Security Advisor Bolton recently said in Miami, there are three countries that stand out among others. These countries -- Cuba, Venezuela, and Nicaragua -- are led by regimes who daily show their disregard for human rights, the rule of law, and the betterment of their own people. Cuba, in particular, is not just oppressing its own people, but is exporting their brutal techniques and expertise to support the tyrannies in Venezuela and Nicaragua. With Cuba's support, Maduro's repression of his own people has led to the greatest migration crisis in the history of the Western Hemisphere. To date, approximately 3 million people have fled the brutal dictatorship to seek refuge in neighboring countries, putting fragile democracies at risk. USAID is contributing life-saving humanitarian and development assistance to Venezuelans throughout the region and the countries generously hosting them.

Right now, USAID's programs in Venezuela, Nicaragua and Cuba maintain a crucial lifeline to independent media and civil society in these countries who are under threat from their own governments. If confirmed by the Senate, you will have my unwavering commitment to build upon USAID activities to further the cause of freedom in Cuba, Nicaragua, and Venezuela.

I believe in Vice President Pence's vision -- echoed by Administrator Green -- of a Hemisphere of Freedom in which all people have a voice in their governments. If confirmed by the Senate, I will ensure that USAID programs continue to address the root causes that hinder prosperity and freedom throughout the Western Hemisphere.

Mr. Chairman, Members of the Committee, thank you for the opportunity to testify before you today. I am honored to be here, and I thank you for your consideration. I welcome your questions.