

December 9, 2020

The Honorable Michael R. Pompeo
Secretary of State

The Honorable Chad Wolf
Acting Secretary
Department of Homeland Security

The Honorable John Barsa
Acting Deputy Administrator
USAID

Dear Secretary Pompeo, Acting Secretary Wolf, and Acting Deputy Administrator Barsa,

Two historic, back-to-back hurricanes have devastated communities in southern Mexico, Central America, and parts of the Caribbean. While we recognize the assistance already channeled via USAID, the magnitude of this disaster—which is affecting over [5.2 million](#) people—merits a much more robust aid response. In addition, we urge the administration to immediately suspend deportations to these countries, which are reeling with the combined impact of the hurricanes and the global pandemic.

On November 3, Hurricane Eta made landfall in Nicaragua, resulting in massive flooding, mudslides, and devastation in that country and in Honduras, Guatemala, Belize, Panama, Costa Rica, the Colombian islands of San Andres and Providencia, and Mexico. El Salvador experienced high winds and mudslides and is still recovering from earlier tropical storms. On November 17, Hurricane Iota reached category 5 levels, the strongest hurricane of the season, before making landfall near the same location as Eta.

Iota compounded the destruction of Eta, bringing heavy rainfall and resulting in landslides, flash flooding, and power outages. Homes and crops have been destroyed and there is an urgent hunger crisis. Many people lack access to potable water. Hundreds of thousands of families have been displaced, and nearly two hundred deaths have been recorded to date. Roads, bridges, schools, health clinics, and other essential infrastructure have been damaged or swept away. Isolated communities, particularly in Nicaragua and Honduras, remain cut off without help.

Families are forced to stay in crowded shelters, placing them at even greater risk for contracting and spreading COVID-19. These countries have been amongst the hardest hit by COVID-19 and its economic fallout. The effects of the pandemic and the hurricanes also exacerbate existing problems, including widespread gang and organized crime violence and pervasive gender-based violence.

Emergency humanitarian assistance is urgently needed for search and rescue, evacuation, medical attention, food, shelter, and personal protective equipment to prevent spread of COVID-19. In the medium term, aid is needed for rebuilding housing, schools, clinics, bridges, and roads, and helping farmers replant and recover. Like Hurricane Mitch in 1998, the impacts of these storms will be felt for decades and require long-term commitments in development aid and climate change mitigation programs to help region recover.

At the same time, given severe levels of corruption among some governments and security forces in the region, assistance must be carefully channeled, monitored, and delivered largely through international and local humanitarian and civil society organizations. The United States and other donors should insist that any medium- and long-term reconstruction projects proceed only with meaningful consultation with affected communities, particularly with the indigenous and Afro-descendant communities, small farmers, and residents of poor urban areas who were so harshly affected by the disasters.

In light of these disasters, Central American governments, [such as Guatemala](#), are requesting relief from the ongoing deportations and expulsions that have [accelerated during the pandemic](#). The U.S. government should respect these countries' requests and immediately suspend all deportations and expulsions to the region.

We urge the administration to lead an effort to ensure that urgent relief is delivered, medium-term recovery is launched, and no individual is returned to danger during this crisis.

Sincerely,

AFL-CIO
Alianza Americas
Alliance of Baptists
America's Voice
American Federation of Teachers (AFT)
Americans for Indian Opportunity
Center for Democracy in the Americas
Center for Gender & Refugee Studies
Central American Resource Center
Chicago Religious Leadership Network on Latin America - CRLN
Church World Service
Committee in Solidarity with the People of El Salvador (CISPES)
Evangelical Lutheran Church in America
Global Health Partners
Kids in Need of Defense
Latin America Working Group (LAWG)
Maryknoll Office for Global Concerns
Mennonite Central Committee U.S. Washington Office
Missionary Oblates
Network for Solidarity with the People of Guatemala (NISGUA)
Refugees International
Robert F. Kennedy Human Rights
Service Employees International Union (SEIU)
SHARE Foundation
Sister Parish, INC
Unitarian Universalist Service Committee
U.S. Committee for Refugees and Immigrants
Witness at the Border
Women's Refugee Commission (WRC)