

United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510

October 26, 2023

The Honorable Antony Blinken
Secretary of State
U.S. Department of State
2201 C St NW
Washington, DC 20520

Dear Secretary Blinken:

Last year, following Honduran President Xiomara Castro's historic 2021 election - which was marked by record voter turnout, active civil society participation, and peaceful participation - many of us in the Senate expressed support for U.S. efforts to constructively engage her government on the issue of tackling corruption. However, we have become increasingly concerned about recent developments in Honduras. We request that you continue raising the importance of transparent and accountable democratic institutions in your engagement with all levels of the Honduran government.

Corruption in Honduras contributes to increased irregular migration to the United States, impunity for violence committed against Honduran citizens including indigenous activists and leaders, and inhibits prospects for economic growth by deterring investment, diverting scarce resources away from government agencies, and facilitating criminal co-optation of the country's security forces. Corruption also creates vectors for predatory actors like China or Russia to exert corrosive and antidemocratic influence over Honduran decisions.

We ask that you emphasize to the Honduran authorities the importance of demonstrating their commitment to fulfilling President Castro's pledge to establish the International Commission against Corruption and Impunity in Honduras (CICIH). President Castro formally requested assistance from the United Nations in February 2022, nearly two years ago, and we are concerned about the slow pace of tangible progress as well as unhelpful rhetoric, including against United Nations Resident Representative Alice Shackelford and others. We ask you to strongly urge the Honduran government to refrain from such attacks and instead focus its energy on working with the legislature to undertake the necessary reforms outlined by the United Nations in its assessment, and ensure that CICIH's mandate remains independent and operational. We highlight the observation by the Department and others that the amnesty law passed in February 2022 would likely prevent CICIH from investigating a significant number of cases.

While establishing CICIH is important, lasting progress on anticorruption efforts can only succeed when governments uphold the fundamental freedoms of expression and association for individuals, civil society, and private sector organizations. We are alarmed by threats against Gabriela Castellanos, head of the National Anti-Corruption Council who has been a crucial voice against corruption for many years, including during the previous government. Her efforts to investigate and report on corruption within the Honduran Congress and the current government are vital to increasing accountability and building public confidence in democratic institutions. Recent threats against Garífuna activist Miriam Miranda and others raise similar concerns, as

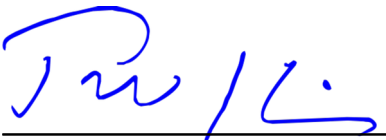
these civil society activists deserve the right to freedom of expression and association without fear for their lives.

In this vein, we request that you press the Honduran government to commit to upholding President Castro's stated priority to increase transparency, and uphold its responsibility to protect human rights and guarantee the physical safety of Ms. Castellanos, the independence of the National Anti-Corruption Council, and other civil society and private sector organizations in Honduras. Equally important will be the Honduran government ensuring that the election of a new Attorney General is based on standards and procedures established in the selection process using objective and independent criteria, and guaranteeing the full independence of that office. This process will be critical to ensuring the success of CICIH, bringing justice to the killers of indigenous human rights and environmental activists killed in Honduras earlier this year, and in strengthening the rule of law for all Hondurans.

The United States and Honduras must maintain a constructive relationship based on mutual respect for fundamental human rights, the rule of law, transparency and accountability, in order to tackle our common interests together. We strongly believe an independent and professional justice system, freedom of expression and association, and a vibrant civil society are essential building blocks of a healthy democracy, and critical to making Honduras more prosperous and secure. As the Congress considers assistance to Honduras, we will continue to support the Department's deployment of all the available tools to promote and protect these values, and request that you take the necessary steps to ensure U.S. assistance to Honduras supports these priorities.

Thank you for your prompt attention to this matter.

Sincerely,



Tim Kaine
United States Senator



Jeffrey A. Merkley
United States Senator



Richard J. Durbin
United States Senator



Peter Welch
United States Senator



Alex Padilla

United States Senator