

Congress of the United States

Washington, DC 20515

May 10, 2023

Joseph R. Biden, Jr.
President of the United States of America
The White House
1600 Pennsylvania Avenue NW
Washington, D.C. 20502

Dear President Biden,

As you witnessed firsthand on your January visit to El Paso, Texas, migrants are arriving to the United States at levels not seen for at least two decades.ⁱ As members from border states, states that have received increasing number of migrants, and others from across the country, we strongly agree with the views expressed during the Summit of the Americas in June 2022 that we “need to identify the root causes of irregular migration and forced displacement” and commit to “supporting countries across the Western Hemisphere to create the conditions to improve quality of life, especially in marginalized communities.”ⁱⁱ While the number of migrants coming to the Southern border has dropped somewhat from its peak, experts both inside and outside of the Department of Homeland Security expect arrivals to increase sharply with the expiration of Title 42 on May 11. We must go beyond ineffective deterrence policies and find sustainable and humane solutions to fix our broken immigration system, and that includes—and should start with—legislative reforms by Congress.

We also urge you to use your executive authority, however, to continue to focus on the root causes of this dire humanitarian crisis and reverse callous and counterproductive policies that have both served as push-factors and contributed to the current increase in migrant arrivals. Your administration’s efforts to address the root causes of migration from Mexico and northern Central America have coincided with a 43 percent reduction in the number of encounters of migrants from the northern Central America.ⁱⁱⁱ While this progress has been offset by the unprecedented number of migrants and asylum seekers arriving from Cuba and Venezuela, your expansion of legal pathways has been successful in producing a temporary 72 percent decrease among arrivals from these countries.^{iv}

Cuba is experiencing the largest migrant exodus in its modern history, with more than 220,000 Cubans fleeing the country in 2022, far exceeding both the 1980 Mariel boatlift and the 1994 rafter crisis.^v Venezuelans, meanwhile, currently comprise the second-largest group of displaced people in the world, with more than 7 million having fled the country since the start of its economic crisis.^{vi} Venezuelan migration to the U.S. border increased to more than 189,000 crossings last year, up from roughly 4,500 in 2020.^{vii} While your administration enacted new temporary parole programs over the last year for both Venezuelan and Cuban migrants outside of the United States – and these programs have allowed a limited number of eligible Venezuelan and Cubans to be paroled into the country for a temporary period of up to two years^{viii} – migrants continue to leave their home countries because of instability and dire economic uncertainty. Additionally, dangerous seaborne migration to the U.S. has persisted and the number of migrants traveling through the Darién Gap on their way north so far in 2023 is 127,687, six

times more than during the same period last year, including more than 55,000 from Venezuela. The suffering that has been endured by these migrants is often unimaginable: leaving behind friends, families, and homes; traversing deserts, jungles, and treacherous regions like the Darién Gap,^{ix} risking life and limb only to be met, in some cases, with closed doors and even violence upon arriving at the border. The decision to risk such hardship is not one that is taken lightly — it is made out of necessity.

There are many factors contributing to the economic and humanitarian crises that continue to drive Cubans and Venezuelans to the United States — including the ongoing toll of COVID-19, wider global economic shocks, climate-related disasters, and, certainly, the actions and policies of their own governments, which include massive crackdowns on democratic dissent, far-reaching corruption and gross economic mismanagement, all of which we emphatically condemn. But experts widely agree that broad-based U.S. sanctions — expanded to an unprecedented level by former President Donald Trump — are a critical contributing factor in the current increase in migration. In light of their grave humanitarian toll on the peoples of those countries, and the significant logistical challenges that the resulting increase in migration is causing for federal, state, and local authorities, we urge you to act swiftly to lift the failed and indiscriminate economic sanctions that were imposed by the prior administration, and engage in a broader review of preexisting sanctions policies that your administration inherited, which exacerbate hardship for innocent civilians and serve as additional push-factors for migration.

In Cuba, Trump’s reversal of President Obama’s thaw in diplomatic relations with a tightening of the U.S. embargo,^x new sanctions on travel and remittances,^{xi} and the baseless designation of Cuba as a State Sponsor of Terrorism,^{xii} have all contributed to the country’s economic decline, including its 10.9 percent economic contraction in 2020, the largest decline since the collapse of the Soviet Union.^{xiii} The sanctions regime on Cuba imposed by Trump was the harshest in U.S. history, and came on top of the embargo that the UN’s regional economic commission for Latin America estimates has cost the island \$130 billion over decades. Despite nominal humanitarian exemptions, U.S. sanctions on Cuba inhibit Cubans’ ability to access food and medicine;^{xiv} to prepare for and respond to natural disasters such as Hurricane Ian; and to repair and maintain an energy grid, resulting in devastating and increasingly frequent rolling blackouts;^{xv} all of which contribute to the desire of many Cubans to emigrate.

In Venezuela, broad financial and sectoral sanctions imposed by Trump in 2017 have had profound reverberations for the entire economy, contributing to difficulties in accessing food;^{xvi} the deterioration of social services and public goods from healthcare to energy to water;^{xvii} delays in importing essential vaccines;^{xviii} increases in poverty and malnutrition;^{xix} and, ultimately, tens of thousands of deaths.^{xx} According to a UN expert, sanctions on Venezuela have “had a devastating effect on the people, especially the most vulnerable – such as women, children, the elderly, people with disabilities or life-threatening or chronic diseases, and indigenous communities.”^{xxi}

While ending these indiscriminate economic sanctions regimes is an indispensable part of addressing the migrant crisis, there are also strong moral grounds for their elimination. Trump administration officials made clear that they intentionally aimed to cause widespread suffering for innocent civilians,^{xxii} and sanctions’ proponents acknowledge that “impos[ing] hardship on the population [is] the most effective way for the U.S. to gain concessions.”^{xxiii} According to testimony from a Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission hearing on sanctions, broad-based economic sanctions immiserate civilian populations,

rarely achieve their stated political goals of promoting democracy and human rights, and regularly backfire.^{xxiv} While the U.S. must never hesitate to stand up in defense of democratic values and human rights, we must seek to avoid policies that exacerbate the suffering of the innocent people whose freedom we seek to advance.

Rather than re-imposing Trump-era deterrence policies, we must demonstrate a sharp contrast with these approaches by showing compassion towards migrants and upholding our asylum obligations, while simultaneously seeking to curb the broad-based sanctions that contribute to widespread suffering and spur increased migration.

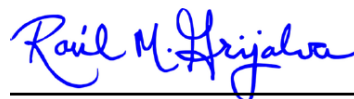
We are heartened by recent steps that your administration has taken in this direction, but most of the Trump administration-imposed sanctions remain and continue to exacerbate our challenges at the border.^{xxv} We hope that dialogue with regional partners like your meeting with Colombian president Gustavo Petro will communicate a willingness to consider a new approach.^{xxvi} You have a historic opportunity to help mitigate economic push-factors driving migration and affecting our border and many of our cities, while reorienting U.S. policy in the hemisphere towards a more holistic approach that eschews destructive sanctions policies to focus on peace, stability, and prosperity for all inhabitants of the Americas. We hope you will continue down this path.

Thank you for your leadership and consideration.

Sincerely,



Veronica Escobar
Member of Congress



Raúl M. Grijalva
Member of Congress



Greg Casar
Member of Congress



Nanette Diaz Barragán
Member of Congress



J. Luis Correa
Member of Congress



Jesús G. "Chuy" García
Member of Congress



Yvette D. Clarke
Member of Congress



Sheila Jackson Lee
Member of Congress



Jamaal Bowman, Ed.D.
Member of Congress



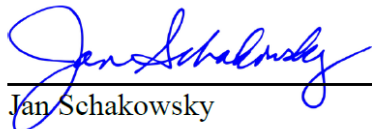
Juan Vargas
Member of Congress



David J. Trone
Member of Congress



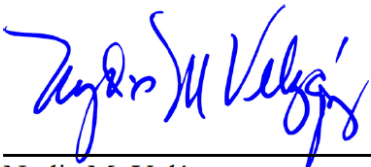
Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez
Member of Congress



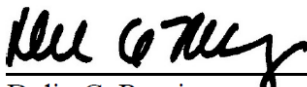
Jan Schakowsky
Member of Congress



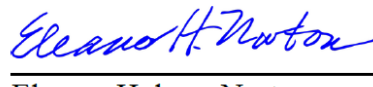
Rashida Tlaib
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Nydia M. Velázquez
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Eleanor Holmes Norton
Member of Congress



Bonnie Watson Coleman
Member of Congress



Ro Khanna
Member of Congress



André Carson
Member of Congress



Cori Bush
Member of Congress

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