

MARCH 24, 2021

Remarks by President Biden and Vice President Harris in a Meeting on Immigration

State Dining Room

2:14 P.M. EDT

THE PRESIDENT: Well folks, today I have two announcements to make. One, is we've got ourselves a Secretary. Xavier, welcome.

SECRETARY BECERRA: Thank you, Mr. President.

THE PRESIDENT: Thanks for being willing to do this, and I really appreciate. And also today, I've — I said when we became a team and got

elected, that the Vice President was going to be the last person in the room. She didn't realize that means she gets every assignment. (Laughs.)

But the Vice President and I, and all of us here, have been working very hard to — to pass the legislation that — that is going to beat this virus, as well as get people back to work and change their prospects. And so, she's traveling all over the country working that.

In addition to that, there's about five other major things she's handling, but I've asked her, the VP, today — because she's the most qualified person to do it — to lead our efforts with Mexico and the Northern Triangle and the countries that help — are going to need help in stemming the movement of so many folks, stemming the migration to our southern border.

And, you know, back when I was Vice President, I got a similar assignment, but one of the things we did was we made sure that we got a bipartisan agreement with Democrats and Republicans to provide over \$700 million to the countries in the Northern Triangle to determine the best way to

keep people from coming is keep them from wanting to leave.

And the reason why so many people were leaving, we learned, was that not only gang violence and trafficking and cartels, but natural disasters, hurricanes, floods, earthquakes. And so it's not like someone sits around a hand-hewnen [sic] — hand-hewn table somewhere in Guatemala and says, "I've got a great idea: Let's sell everything we have, give the money to a coyote, have him take our kids or us to the border of America, take us across, leave us in the desert. We don't speak the language. Won't that be fun?"

One of the ways we learned is that if you deal with the problems in country, it benefits everyone. It benefits us, it benefits the people, and it grows the economies there.

Unfortunately, the last administration eliminated that funding — did not engage in it, did not use it — even though there was over \$700 million to help get this done. We're reinstating that program. And there are — as I said, there are many factors as to why people leave in the first place.

But this is — this is the — the source of one of the reasons why we've had such a — before we took office, in the midst of the last administration's somewhat draconian policies of separating children from their parents, et cetera, what happened was that we — we found that there were a serious spike in the number of people heading to the southern border, even in the midst of that. And as — as Alejandro can tell you, is that was because there were serious natural disasters that occurred in those countries. They were coming north, and we did nothing to do any — much about it.

So this new surge we're dealing with now started with the last administration, but it's our responsibility to deal with it humanely and to — and to stop what's happening.

And so, this increase has been consequential, but the Vice President has agreed — among the multiple other things that I have her leading — and I appreciate it — agreed to lead our diplomatic effort and work with those nations to accept re- — the returnees, and enhance migration enforcement at

their borders — at their borders.

We're already talking with Mexico about that; she's already done that. We're going to be dealing with a full team now that we have to be able to deal with the problem here at home, but also to deal with it now in terms of in country.

And I can think of nobody who — who is better qualified to do this than a former — this is a woman who ran the second-largest attorney general's office in America — after the U.S. — after the United States Attorney General — in the state of California, and has done a great deal upholding human rights, but also fighting organized crime in the process.

So it's not her full responsibility and job, but she's leading the effort because I think the best thing to do is to put someone who, when he or she speaks, they don't have to wonder about is that where the President is. When she speaks, she speaks for me. Doesn't have to check with me. She knows what she's doing, and I hope we can move this along.

But — so, Madam Vice President, thank you. I gave you a tough job, and you're smiling, but there's no one better capable of trying to organize this for us.

THE VICE PRESIDENT: Well, thank you, Mr. President and for having the confidence in me. And there's no question that this is a challenging situation. As the President has said, there are many factors that lead precedent to leave these countries. And while we are clear that people should not come to the border now, we also understand that we will enforce the law and that we also — because we can chew gum and walk at the same time — must address the root causes that — that cause people to make the trek, as the President has described, to come here.

And I look forward to engaging in diplomacy with government, with private sector, with civil society, and — and the leaders of each in El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras to strengthen democracy and the rule of law, and ensure shared prosperity in the region.

We will collaborate with Mexico and other countries throughout the

Western hemisphere. And as part of this effort, we expect that we will have collaborative relationships to accomplish the goals the President has and that we share.

I also look forward to working with members of the Congress who, I think, share our perspective on the need to address root causes for the migration that we've been seeing. And needless to say, the work will not be easy, but it is important work. It is work that we demand — and the people of our countries, I believe, need — to help stem the tide that we have seen.

So thank you, Mr. President, for your confidence. Thank you.

THE PRESIDENT: Well, thank you for willing to do it. Now we're going to get down to business here. And, Ron, who am I turning this over to?

2:23 P.M. EDT