

# The Washington Times

## Joe Biden's Santa Claus trip

**The money for Central America is not likely to get to the people**

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Vice President Joe Biden goes to Central America next month to meet the leaders of several crime- and poverty-plagued nations, and he's taking millions of dollars to hand out along the way, like a rich tourist from el norte. Disaster is written on the wind from the north.

The Spanish newspaper El Pais reports that \$400 million will go to foster "prosperity and regional integration," \$300 million is earmarked for improving security, and another \$300 million is aimed at improving governance through the "strengthening of institutions."

The desire to help northern Central America is a worthy one. Juan Carlos Hidalgo, a policy analyst at Cato Institute, calls it one of the most violent neighborhoods in the world. Honduras leads the world in homicides per 100,000 inhabitants, and a study by the United Nations finds that a Honduran is 20 times more likely to be murdered than an American. Neighboring Belize, El Salvador and Guatemala rank third, fourth and fifth in the murder rankings. But the American plan to address the culture of violence seems likely to miss the mark.

Most Honduran homicides are committed by young street gangs known as "maras." Military aid, which makes up a large portion of the aid from Washington, won't do much to fix that. In fact, more arms and soldiers in Guatemala, El Salvador and Honduras might make things worse. The website InSight Crime reports that many of the M-16 and AK-47 assault rifles used by the street gangs to kill each other, murder civilians and fight off the police are likely to have been sold to the gangs by the El Salvadoran army.

The aid program will send cash to governments that are notoriously shady with no accounting to anyone. Both Honduras and Guatemala rank near the bottom of Transparency International's index of corruption. The three governments have squandered billions in foreign aid already, failing to make a difference with financial assistance in the past.

"Giving \$1 billion in aid to governments with serious corruption issues just because they are pledging to clean up their act is a triumph of hope over experience," says Cato's Mr. Hidalgo.

"For almost a decade, both El Salvador and Honduras have received hundreds of millions of dollars in U.S. aid ... for supposedly meeting thresholds in fighting corruption and improving governance. However, any observer of Central America would dispute the claim that these countries have better legal institutions today than they did five or 10 years ago."

Mr. Hidalgo thinks giving \$1 billion to governments with a dubious record on transparency and human rights will only empower corrupt officials. The people the aid is intended for won't see much of it. Throwing money at the problem rarely works. If the president goes forward with the aid program as now constituted, the latest largesse is likely to end as gossamer. The people of El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras will be worse off than ever.