



Interview With Luis Carlos Velez of Casa Editorial El Tiempo

Secretary Condoleezza Rice

U.S. Embassy
Bogota, Colombia
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QUESTION: Ms. Rice, thank you for being with us and for accepting this interview this Casa Editorial El Tiempo. The first question that I have to you: Venezuela. Venezuela recently bought 100,000 rifles, Russian rifles. Is the United States worried, concerned about a potential conflict between the two countries, Colombia and Venezuela?

SECRETARY RICE: Well, we have been concerned about stability in the region and we've been concerned about the Venezuelan Government's activities in the region and we've made that known. And I raised the issue of the 100,000 Kalashnikovs when I was in Russia, just saying to the Russians that this is the sort of thing that doesn't help stability in the region.

We want to have a peaceful region that is democratic, where everyone lives up to the Inter-American Charter and the Democratic Charter, where we believe that governments that were elected are also governing in a democratic way. And here in Colombia, that is clearly happening. We've had concerns about domestic events in Venezuela and we've made that clear. But our goal has to be to have a positive agenda, an agenda of free trade, an agenda of democratic development, an agenda of security for people, which the Colombian Government is working so hard on and we're working with them. We have a positive agenda and I'm quite sure that if we pursue it, and pursue it actively, this region is going to be stable and peaceful and more prosperous.

QUESTION: Ms. Rice, relations between Venezuela and the U.S. have also gone through difficult times. Does the United States have any plan to stop the anti-American movements that Mr. Chavez is promoting in Venezuela?

SECRETARY RICE: Well, we have no problem with the Venezuelan people. The United States and Venezuela have a longstanding tradition of good relations, and this is about the behavior of the regime, both in terms of its domestic -- where domestically, where it has had very bad relations with the press -- where the ability for people to oppose the regime, where there needs to be a sense that the democratic institutions are being protected, and the questions about the behavior and the activities of the Venezuelan regime in the region.

But this is not just an issue between the United States and Venezuela. This is an issue of what kind of hemisphere is this going to be. Is it going to be a hemisphere that is democratic and that is prosperous and where neighbors get along, where neighbors don't interfere in each other's affairs, where people fight drug trade and fight terrorism together actively? That's the kind of hemisphere that we're trying to build and I believe that we have the cooperation and the support of almost all of the states of this region who want to see the same kind of hemisphere.

QUESTION: Ms. Rice, what kind of plan does the United States have in order to stop the FARC, the FARC that is having operations in Ecuador and Venezuela?

SECRETARY RICE: Well, the United States and Colombia have had for several years now a very active cooperation on counter-drug issues and on counterterrorism issues, and I think that Colombia is making progress and its neighbors -- many of its neighbors are very supportive. And I was just in Brazil where I think they want very much to be supportive of what is going on here because this is a country whose democracy was quite literally threatened by terrorism and quite literally threatened by drug lords. It's a tough fight, but the United States has been providing assistance: economic, and military, and police assistance of roughly \$600 million a year. We would hope to sustain something like that because we know that this is a long fight. But we believe that we have a Colombian Government that is being successful in fighting these scourges against democracy.

QUESTION: Ms. Rice, the U.S. wants to strengthen the Colombian economy and democracy through an FTA, right? However, (inaudible) that the U.S. Government and the U.S. negotiating group are not being open to their counterparts. How do you see the prospects for an FTA here?

SECRETARY RICE: Well, we have to work hard. It's not going to be easy to get an FTA because there are a lot of interests involved here, and we're going to have to have courage to get one. We need to open up our markets and truly open them up because free trade means free trade. We need to have an understanding of the structure of each other's markets, but mostly we're going to need the will to make the difficult decisions that need to be made.

The United States is currently -- has some free trade agreements that it has signed, like for instance the Central America Free Trade Agreement and Dominican Republic Agreement, which go together. We're trying to get that through Congress. We're working hard to reenergize the FTAA in the hemisphere. We're all working very hard within the WTO so that the playing field is level across the world for free trade. But we are very interested in and devoted to a free trade agreement with Colombia. We just have to work very hard to get it done.

QUESTION: Let's talk about the Plan Colombia. The initiative is going to reach its end next year and according to a White House report, despite the aerial spraying of the cocaine crops they keep increasing. Is there going to be any change in the Plan Colombia?

SECRETARY RICE: Well, Plan Colombia has been very successful, and if you remember, it had at its root a principle that you had to fight this on a regional basis as well and so there was also work done throughout the Andean region to make sure that when you eradicated drugs in one part of the region it didn't pop up someplace else. It had very important alternative livelihood programs that were associated with it. And so Plan Colombia has been very successful and is still being very successful.

I'm quite sure that because the drug fight is not yet over that we are going to continue our efforts, continue our efforts at support for the Colombian economy, for the training and working with police forces, and for the efforts with the military. These are still important goals for the United States.

QUESTION: Do you think that the economic and military assistance that Colombia receives from the United States is sufficient? Would you increase it? Would you decrease it?

SECRETARY RICE: Well, I think we would like to try and sustain what we've achieved. We've achieved in \$600 million or so, sometimes over -- in order to be able to fund these programs. But what we really need to look at is what do we need to do, and Colombia is in a different stage of its counter-drug and counter-terror fight than it was at the beginning when Plan Colombia started, and so we need to look at what will be most effective. But we maintain our commitment to Colombia to help it fight terrorism and to help it fight the drug trade.

QUESTION: Leftist movements are getting (inaudible) in South America. You see the case of Lula in Brazil, Major Lucio Gutierrez in Bogotá, even Hugo Chavez in Venezuela. Do you think it may be that Latin Americans are getting tired of the North American model?

SECRETARY RICE: Well, (inaudible) put all the things together. I think that in cases like Brazil or Chile, which is a leftist government, you have very successful economic programs, stable and sound economic policies. There is no reason that the United States should not have good relations with democratically elected governments from across the political spectrum. There is no reason that we have to say, oh well, only governments that come from this side of the politics can be friends of the United States. We can be friends as long as governments are democratically elected, as long as they govern democratically. As long as they are not corrupt and they have the aspirations and the needs of their people at the center of what they're trying to do, we ought to have good relations.

Now, there are places where people are giving easy answers, a kind of false populism, I'll call it, where there are easy answers: "We can be out of poverty tomorrow if we'll just do these things." That's not helpful. But when you have sound economic policies and people care about social justice and better lives for their people, the United States is going to be friends with those governments.

QUESTION: How do you see the situation in Ecuador? Do you think it's a bad example for the rest of Latin America?

SECRETARY RICE: Well, Ecuador is a very complicated situation and we are very supportive of the Organization of American States mission that is trying to help the Ecuadorians to make certain that they stay on a constitutional path, that they do what is needed to foster stability. I know that there is a South American group that has also gone to help in that regard. And so we need to help the people of Ecuador through this extremely delicate period of time.

There are some fragile democracies in Latin America. There is no doubt about that. But when you look back at where this continent was just a couple of decades ago, nobody would have thought that we would be in a position where there are 34 now, between North and South America, 34 democracies, members of the Organization of American States, and the only empty chair is Cuba, which has not yet, unfortunately, been able to find a path to democracy for its people. When you look at the fact that there were military dictatorships and there were civil wars and there were armed insurgencies in many, many different countries, this part of the world has made tremendous progress. The United States has been a good partner in that progress and we continue and intend to continue to be as we move forward.

QUESTION: I have to ask you this, and this is my last question. About the American soldiers captured for allegedly trafficking drugs from Colombia. Do you think they could be judged here in Colombia, as the local authorities are asking?

SECRETARY RICE: Well, we have longstanding ways of dealing with this between Colombia and the United States going back decades. They are in custody. It is being investigated. And we believe in holding people accountable for what they do, and the United States will do that. We have to have a process because people should get due process. They have rights. But we absolutely will investigate this and act accordingly with what comes out of that investigation.

QUESTION: Ms. Rice, thank you very much for being with us. We know that you're a devoted pianist so next time you come here, share your music with us.

SECRETARY RICE: Well, if I have a little more time to practice, I'll do that. (Laughter.) Thank you.

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