



## Remarks to the Press at U.S. Embassy Bogota

**R. Nicholas Burns, Under Secretary for Political Affairs**

Bogota, Colombia  
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**UNDER SECRETARY BURNS:** Good afternoon. Good morning, I should say, ladies and gentlemen. It is very nice to be with all of you. I am going to say just a few words, to start off, about my visit here over the last two days and I am looking forward very much to responding to any questions you may have.

Let me say first that the United States has no closer partner in Latin America than Colombia. We have an excellent relationship. It is a relationship that is comprehensive; it has to do with our very fine counter-narcotics program, and counter-terrorism. We also have a partnership here in the Hemisphere on the broader strategic issues that have united both of our countries. And we look forward, and I know President Bush looks forward very much, to welcoming President Uribe to Crawford, Texas, next Thursday August 4th for a meeting. Secretary Rice will be there for that meeting as well. And that meeting will, of course, focus not just on the current relations between our countries, but on the future of our relationship. It will be a positive, supportive meeting because President Bush and Secretary Rice believe that President Uribe and his government have put in place policies that are working for the Colombian people and that are very much part of what the United States also feels as important for the region.

I met with President Uribe; Ambassador Wood and I met with President Uribe for an hour and a half yesterday, we met with Defense Minister Ospina just now, this morning. I also met with the Prosecutor General yesterday afternoon and had an excellent conversation with him about the demobilization process, about human rights issues, and also met with the Peace Commissioner this morning about those issues, and had a session yesterday afternoon with four Colombian human rights organizations. I wanted to hear from them about their perspective on these issues. I was very gratified to meet with them; we have great respect for the work they are doing here.

I will just say a few words on some of the specific issues that we discussed. On counter-narcotics my Government is very pleased with the work that the Colombian government has done, and we are very pleased to have been part of this in our assistance to the Colombian government. Over 100,000 hectares have been eradicated this year, and that is well ahead of the record pace of 2004. We (Colombia and all of its partners) are now very close to the Plan Colombia goal of reducing coca production by 50%. That is a significant achievement for the Colombian government and the Colombian people, and we congratulate the Colombian government on that achievement.

On counter-terrorism, we can tell you we have excellent cooperation with the Colombian government. And the United States very much supports Plan Patriota and the efforts to try to weaken and eventually defeat the FARC movement. The FARC in the eyes of my government is a vicious terrorist organization. It is an organization that unjustly holds so many people, Colombians, hostages, it has victimized thousands of people around this country. It also holds a German citizen, and it holds three U.S. citizens. We think about those three U.S. citizens every day. They should not be held by the FARC. The FARC has a responsibility for their safety, for their health, and they should be released immediately, along with all the Colombian hostages, of course.

We also discussed during my visit the process of demobilization. And I was very impressed to hear that nearly 14,000 people from a variety of groups have been demobilized in the last two years. Of course, the United States has watched as Colombians have debated the demobilization law, and we hope very much that this law will be implemented in an aggressive way, in a way that would lead to effective implementation of the program; that will serve the interests of the Colombian state and the Colombian people. There is certainly an historic opportunity available in all the people with whom I spoke, both inside the government and outside. They agreed on this, a historic opportunity perhaps to return Colombia to a state of peace in the future. And as a friend of Colombia that is what we want, very much.

Let me also send congratulations to Ambassador Luis Alberto Moreno, to the Ambassador of Colombia in the United States, our great congratulations on his election this morning as the new President of the Inter-American Development Bank. We are delighted for him, delighted for Colombia and delighted for the Inter-American Development Bank. Ambassador Moreno has been, by a wide margin, one of the most effective ambassadors of any country in Washington. I know him quite well. I work with him very closely. He had the strong support of the United States. He had our vote; he had our support. We know how hard the Colombian government led by President Uribe worked to attract the support of other countries. And we are very pleased by the wide margin of his victory in this particular race, and we are pleased for Colombia and pleased for the IDB as well.

So my trip here ends on a very positive note with Luis Alberto's election and I am happy to take any questions that you might have.

**QUESTION:** I want to ask you about Venezuela. Very recently President Chavez launched a new television cable network designed to spread his message to Latin America. He is also proposing to buy up \$500 million worth of Colombian debt. Clearly these are indications that he is out to spread his influence in undermining the United States in the region. How worried are you about that?

**UNDER SECRETARY BURNS:** We are not losing any sleep over what Mr. Chavez may or not may be doing. The focus of our efforts here in Latin America are our friendships and partnerships with the successful democratic states of the region: with Mexico, with all of our friends and partners in Central America, with Colombia, with Brazil, with Chile, with Argentina, our friendship for Ecuador and Bolivia. These are the countries that are the focus of U.S. policy. These are the countries that are addressing effectively the needs of their populations. These are the countries that are arguing for peace and reconciliation in our hemisphere. And these are the countries that have a positive agenda for our hemisphere. The United States wants to have a positive outlook on this hemisphere. And we do. And we want to work positively and productively with all our friends. And that is what we do.

I think the challenge really is for Venezuela to join this majority group of us that have the same views. Venezuela is often kind of on the outside; has different views. I will say with Telesur, you asked about Telesur, we think there should be a free press. Free TV and free radio and print. That reporters like you should have a right to question the government. And there should be no repercussions when you do that. And that is part of the democratic system. So is Telesur an arm of the Venezuelan government basically giving the position of the Venezuelan government, or will it be totally free? We will see in the future. But Venezuela is not the center of the universe for the United States. We are working hard with our friends and our allies in this region. And we are working very well with them. And this is where the main focus of the U.S. is going to remain.

**QUESTION:** Good morning. You have mentioned that the FARC must respond for kidnapped victims, not only for the Americans, but for all. The Colombian government is speaking now about humanitarian agreement with the FARC. Would you back that humanitarian agreement, and if it is a positive answer, would you also request to include the Americans who have been kidnapped?

**UNDER SECRETARY BURNS:** Our strong wish is that all the hostages will be released. The Colombian hostages, some of whom have been held hostage unjustly for so many years, the German hostage, certainly Mrs. Betancourt, and all of the American hostages as well. The focus of your attention and our attention has to be on the



FARC. It is the FARC that has held these people unjustly, against any notion of basic human rights. And people in countries all of the world are critical of the FARC for its terrorist actions. The United States holds the FARC responsible for the welfare of our hostages, for their safety and well-being. There's no justification to hold them; they should be released immediately and unconditionally.

**QUESTION:** Good morning, Mr. Secretary. Two questions: One, you said you spoke yesterday with President Uribe and I want to know what did he tell you about his proposal of buying coca in Meta, and what is your position about it? And two, if the U.S. economic support for Colombia is in danger by the Justice and Peace Law for paramilitary groups?

**UNDER SECRETARY BURNS:** Let me say, first of all, that Ambassador Wood and I had an excellent meeting with President Uribe. We have the greatest respect for him. He is a successful leader. He is someone who is resource-oriented. He is someone who speaks very clearly. He is a lot like our President in the United States in that respect. It may be one of the reasons why they get along so well together. And I have every reason to believe that next week's meeting between President Bush and President Uribe is going to be positive and successful and mutually supportive.

I will respond here to your second question: the relationship between our two countries is excellent. It is excellent across the board. And the United States is going to continue its assistance to Colombia: our assistance on counter-narcotics, our assistance for alternative development, our assistance for counter-terrorism. We are committed to help the people of Colombia in a positive way. We have a positive agenda to make the kind of progress you want to make. So there is no danger of the United States withholding or stopping its economic assistance.

Plan Colombia is coming to the end of its life. But the United States is very interested in now working with the Colombian people, the Colombian government and our Congress to see what we can do to continue the successor of Plan Colombia in the years ahead. We cannot stop our efforts to help the Colombians now, when you are so close to achieving historic results on counter-narcotics, and we hope in counter-terrorism, so I think you will see a great commitment by my Government to continue the assistance that we have made.

And there has been a lot of discussion in Washington in the Congress, in the Government, in the press about the demobilization law, the Justice and Peace Law. And we certainly support the major intention of that law. And that is to end the fighting; it is to bring demobilized paramilitary forces and others from terrorist groups to civil society. We believe that it is very important that justice also be done. That those who are guilty of great crimes be held accountable for them, that they have their day in court. But they be held accountable and have the time to serve time in jail for what they have done, for the crimes they have committed.

And the message that I brought on this trip was that we hope that there will be a very effective and aggressive implementation of this particular law. We also had discussions about human rights. I told you that I met with four Colombian human rights organizations. I am also in touch with human rights organizations in my own country; Human Rights Watch, for instance. And we have great respect for all these organizations and the work they do. I think it is fair to say that the United States would like to see an expeditious prosecution of some of the outstanding cases that are all well-known to all of you, where allegations have been made about brutalities, and about murders on the part of either the paramilitary forces or the military forces. And we think that cases like San José de Apartadó should be prosecuted with great speed and greater urgency, so that issue came up, the issue of human rights as well as the demobilization issue.

I must say to your first question, I did not have the opportunity to have any kind of extended discussion about the coca issue to which you refer, so I just do not have enough knowledge about what the intentions of the Colombian government are. I am sure the Embassy will have those discussions, and it might be in the position to comment once we have a full understanding of what the intentions of the government are.

**QUESTION:** Allow me to insist in an issue. Would the United States government be willing to back a possible humanitarian agreement with FARC guerrilla, and would you be willing to serve as international warrantors?

**UNDER SECRETARY BURNS:** It is very important that you understand our position. The United States believes that the three U.S. citizens are being held unjustly. They were here on a program to help the Colombian people. They have now been held for two and a half years. The FARC is responsible for their well-being. We will hold the FARC responsible for their safety and well-being. And the FARC should understand that. And they should be released immediately; all the hostages should be released immediately. Any of us that have Colombian friends, and I have Colombian friends, understand the incredible pain and hardship inflicted upon your society by terrorist groups. I spoke to one Colombian last night who said that 17 members of his family have been taken hostage at one time or another over the past years. This is unique in the world, this phenomenon. The FARC is responsible for it. And all of you, as well as we, should hold them responsible. The pressure should be on them: the responsibility is on the FARC to release the Colombian hostages, the American hostages, and the German hostage.

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