



## Interview With Juan Manuel Ruiz of RCN Radio

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

Bogota, Colombia

July 27, 2005

**QUESTION:** Mr. Nicholas Burns, welcome to Colombia and welcome to RCN, Colombia's radio station. We would like to talk with you about some of Colombia's most important issues. We appreciate that you accepted RCN's invitation. First, we would like to ask you about a current issue, about President Uribe's proposal of paying rewards or incentives to 'campesinos' that provide information on illicit crops. What's your opinion about this proposal, do you think it can produce a positive result?

**UNDER SECRETARY BURNS:** Thank you very much. First let me say, if you allow me, this is my very first visit to Colombia. I am very pleased to be here. Colombia is one of the most important friends, partners of the United States anywhere in the world. We have no better friend in all of Latin America. And we are very proud of the partnership we have developed: the support that Colombia has given the United States on many important issues, the support we have been able to give the Colombian people -- to help the Colombian people overcome the problems of narco-trafficking, terrorism, and human rights violation, and rural development. We are very proud that President Bush will be hosting President Uribe at President Bush's ranch in Crawford, Texas, next Thursday on August 4. Our President does not invite many leaders to Crawford. This is a special place for him, it is where he invites his closest friends, and I know he considers President Uribe to be a very close partner and close friend. I think the state of our relationship is excellent and we look forward to continuing that in the months and years ahead.

On the question of narcotics trafficking, I think that there has been tremendous progress made by the Colombian Government to combat this very difficult problem. Our programs to assist the Colombians we think they have also been successful. The progress made in 2005 exceeds progress in any other year. The goal of Plan Colombia, of both the Colombians and the United States, has been to reduce coca production by 50%, and that is now close to being accomplished. That is historic.

On the particular question that you asked, I have not had a chance in my brief visit here to have extended discussions on this issue with the Colombian Government. I do not think it will be fair for me to comment publicly until we fully understand what proposal the government is making. We will do that. We will have those conversations. And then we will be ready to discuss this issue.

**QUESTION:** On that topic, how do you perceive the evolution of the denominated "war against drugs?" Do you really think it can be won? Because President Uribe's proposal would be part of the global strategy against drugs, how do you see this strategy?

**UNDER SECRETARY BURNS:** You know the war against drugs is not a national war by Colombia or by the United States. It is an international effort. And it is going to take an international campaign to resolve it. So, Colombia can't win on its own. The United States can't win on its own. We know that a great percentage of the cocaine and heroine in the streets of the United States comes from Colombia. But we know that there has to be a joint effort to win.

On the part of the United States we have to make progress in our society to reduce demand, by our young people on the streets of our cities and towns. We also, of course, want to support the efforts of the Colombia Government to fight the narco-traffickers, to eradicate the coca growing in the fields. I know that in this year alone over one hundred thousand hectares have been destroyed in aerial eradication. That is a 20 percent improvement on last year. And we are only part way through the year. We are close to the Plan Colombia goal of reducing coca production, as I said before, by 50 percent.

We are very confident of the commitment of the Uribe Government has been making; we think we have a good cooperative program in place. But this is a global problem. We are fighting this problem in Afghanistan. We are fighting it in Southeast Asia, as well as here in Latin America and in my own country. And so, our commitment to Colombia is to be a good partner, and we know that these efforts will benefit the Colombian people. We hope that efforts that we have made for alternative development -- and I think we have contributed \$70 million to try to help those growing coca to find another way to be farmers, another way to succeed, another way to gain their livelihood. This is also an important part of the overall effort to fight the drug wars, in my country, and in your country.

**QUESTION:** Mr. Burns, I would like to mention that there are some important issues that generate uneasiness in our country, maybe you have some information about them. One of them deals with the current process that involves the Colombian Government and the paramilitaries, through the mechanisms contemplated by the Justice and Peace Law. Do you have an opinion on the evolution of this process? What's your perspective of what's happening?

**UNDER SECRETARY BURNS:** Well, I was able to have a very good conversation with President Uribe, with the Fiscal General, and with the Peace Commissioner just this morning about this issue. And we understand that a historic process is underway. It is terribly important for the future of Colombia that the paramilitary organizations are demobilized, that people who once took up arms put them down, that these people return to civil society, that they become responsible members of society once again. And that is an objective which we agree very much with the Colombian Government that must be achieved.

We also believe, obviously, as your government does, as most Colombians I am sure do, that there has to be a balance between justice and peace. We believe very strongly that there has to be justice, that those members of the paramilitary organizations that have committed grave crimes must be held responsible for them. And we understand that in the new Justice and Peace Law there are provisions for prisons, for prosecutions of paramilitary members, and of jail sentences for them, for those that have committed these types of grave crimes, and we will support that.

In our view, we are not here to second-guess the Colombian Government. We are not here to give any specific advice, but as one of the friends of Colombia supporting this process we hope that this law will be implemented in a very energetic, committed and aggressive way. Because while we understand the need for reconciliation, for return to civil society of those members of the paramilitary who have been in the outside, we also believe very strongly that people need to be held accountable for their crimes. And that is important to the victims, and the families of the victims of these crimes. There has to be accountability. And so we understand this is a Colombian process, not an American process. But as we are asked to support this process, that is our point of view. There has to be punishment of those who committed atrocities and we are confident that the Colombian Government will find the best way to implement this law in the future. But we have respect for the Peace Commissioner, for the Fiscal General, and of course for President Uribe. They have taken on a very difficult problem here, they faced it squarely, and we will support their efforts to implement this law in the most effective and committed way.

**QUESTION:** Mr. Burns, this is the view regarding the paramilitaries. What's your opinion about what is happening with the FARC? It's evident that they now have international presence. What is your opinion about the situation of this group, which is now apparently linked to the narco-traffickers?

**UNDER SECRETARY BURNS:** Well, we have a very clear view of the FARC. We think it is a vicious terrorist organization. And you now the FARC is playing a double game. It pretends to be concerned about the 'campesinos'. They pretend to be concerned about releasing some of the people who have been held. And yet, this double game is not really cooperating in this effort. It is not releasing the many, many people -- Colombians, as well as Americans, the three Americans who been held, as well as the German prisoner or Mrs. Betancourt -- it's not releasing them. It's playing a very, very insincere game, and we think cynical game of pretending to be concerned about the rights of these people and yet doing absolutely nothing to release them, when they have control over these hostages.

So, we are not naive about the FARC, we understand what it is -- it's a failed organization. It is not helping the Colombian people. It's victimizing the Colombian people and we very much support the efforts of President Uribe and the government to combat the FARC. The FARC is, as we look at them, it's an example of an organization that you saw throughout the world during the 90's, 60's and 70's, that pretended to be idealistic, to have a political agenda, to help people and yet, has used the most base cynical and destructive methods: terrorism, hostage-taking, kidnapping, extortion, bribery, narco-trafficking. This is what the FARC truly is and so we have no reason to believe that they'll be a change of behavior on the part of the FARC.

We very much believe it is important for the government to succeed and have support for the people here to combat this organization. We also wonder about FARC activities in Venezuela and Ecuador and certainly the responsibility of those countries to make sure that the FARC is not being given refuge in Venezuela or refuge in Ecuador. All countries that are democratic must stand up against this organizations all over the world but including here in Latin America and defeat them.

**QUESTION:** By the way, Mr. Burns, every day there's more information on Venezuela, country that you just mentioned. Different information from the press talks about how Venezuela has Cubanized and talks of an alleged complicity between President Chavez and the illegal groups, complicity always denied by Chavez. Even now, they launched a TV channel, Telesur, what is your view about Venezuela in this regional context and the implications it could have on the region's destabilization?

**UNDER SECRETARY BURNS:** Our major partners in Latin America are Colombia and Brazil, and Chile and Argentina and Mexico, and all of the other countries with which we have very good, friendly, respectful relations. And these are the countries who have committed themselves to democracy, to the rule of law, to sensible policies on trade and economic development the will promote business creation and justice as well, and these are the countries that are part of the solution to the problems of Latin America, the ones that I mentioned, and all the other partners of ours in central America as well as in South America.

I'm not here to judge the Venezuelan Government. But all I can do is watch in terms of foreign policy what they do. It's not them, the Government, that has been in the forefront of trying to resolve the problems of narcotics trafficking or terrorism. It's not a government that has committed itself fully to the democratic process as Colombia has, as Mexico has, as Brazil and Chile just to name a few countries have certainly done. And so we are going to concentrate our attention not on Venezuela. We are going to concentrate our attention on our friends and partners who we believe are the real future of Latin America -- countries that are fully democratic, countries whose leaders submit themselves to the rule of law and to fair elections and free elections. And where power in a society in all of these countries that I mentioned is distributed fairly and equally and where people are held accountable -- that's not always the case in Venezuela. And so we prefer to see, in our view, the great hope for the future of Latin America would be countries like Colombia or Brazil, or the others that I mentioned. They set the best examples for a modern, fully pluralistic and free democracy.

**QUESTION:** On the topic that I just mentioned, I understand that the U.S. Government is somewhat worried about Telesur, and what could happen if that channel attacks U.S. interests. What would be the limit of that uneasiness?

**UNDER SECRETARY BURNS:** I can tell you we are not losing sleep every night over what Chavez is doing or not doing. He is not the center of our political universe. We have many more important relationships with countries in Latin America, but if when it comes to Telesur the only comment I'd make would be to say: it's very important in the twenty-first century that people receive open, free information -- not information that is tainted by politics or by the particular concerns of the government. But the press needs to be free. The press needs to be free to say and to write what the press believes. In a democratic society that is fundamental and our only question about Telesur would be: is it going to be free or is a going to simply parrot the line, of a particular regime, a particular leader, a particular government? We would like to see journalists truly free to say what they believe, to write what they believe, without fear of repercussions, without any penalties, without any pressure from the government. And I think it remains to be seen whether Telesur is going to be truly free and open. I know that Telesur even had some photographs of the FARC leader Marulanda. This is provocative. And why would you want to, why would any free, democratic, open radio or television station want to favor or give prominence to a terrorist leader. These are just some questions that we have. But we are confident that the most important radio and T.V. stations on this continent are going to be democratic ones, free ones not ones that are overly politicized.

**QUESTION:** Mr. Burns, because of the time limits in your schedule, I would like to ask you a last question on the reach of your visit to Colombia and your meetings with President Uribe. For example, what other type of programs will be reinforced after your visit? Human Rights? Justice?

**UNDER SECRETARY BURNS:** Well, let me say that President Bush is very much looking forward to welcoming President Uribe to Texas next week. I think this is going to be a very successful meeting. It's going to be positive. President Bush is going to indicate once again -- as he did in November of 2004 when he was here in Colombia, in Cartagena -- he's going to indicate the very strong support of the American people and the American Government for Colombia. And that means that were are going to continue to support Colombia on the process of peace, of finding peace after four decades of war, on the demobilization effort.

I think we certainly will want to continue the American assistance programs that have been so effective, we believe, over the last four, five years under Plan Colombia. In the meetings that I had here I also raised human rights issues and raised the imperative of the need for an expeditious prosecution of those who are guilty of human rights abuses. I'm thinking of the abuses committed at San José de Apartadó and the other more prominent cases of human rights abuses. Obviously, there needs to be a democratic process, people have a right to have a trial, people have a right to have representation, but it is very important that the international community see that the attention to human rights is complete, that these cases are being prosecuted on a very effective and determined basis that the process is quick so that the families of the victims can note the justice was done.

There is a lot of focus now on human rights and we in the United States believe that this is an area of particular interest and concern. And I think that issue also is part of the fabric of the U.S.-Colombian relationship right now. But I know that the meeting next week is going to be positive, supportive, between two friends, and that they are going to look into the future and they will determine further ways that our two countries can be friends and cooperate together.

**QUESTION:** Mr. Burns, thank you four accepting this interview with RCN, Colombia's radio station. We wish you success, and be always welcome to our country. We hope these contacts allow for better understanding between our two countries. You are very kind.

**UNDER SECRETARY BURNS:** Can I just say to you how impressed I've been in my visit here to Bogotá. It's a beautiful city, I had a little bit of a chance yesterday to see the city center, the old center, to see the beautiful town hall, to see, of course, the presidential palace, and to see the beautiful cathedral. I was able to visit the cathedral. In my next visit, of course, I would very much like to get out side of Bogotá, see other parts of the country. But, Colombians, in my opinion, you should be very proud of the democracy here, and of the country that you are building and of the problems you're overcoming. So it's been a great pleasure to be here. Thank you very much, and thank you for letting me talk to all your listeners.

Released on August 8, 2005

 [BACK TO TOP](#)

Published by the U.S. Department of State Website at <http://www.state.gov> maintained by the Bureau of Public Affairs.