



Press Availability in Colombia

R. Nicholas Burns, Under Secretary for Political Affairs

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MARSHALL LOUIS: Good afternoon. I'd like to introduce Under Secretary of State Nicholas Burns who will make an opening statement and then take several questions.

UNDER SECRETARY BURNS: Thank you very much. Good afternoon. I hope you can hear me. Can you hear me OK? Good afternoon. It's a pleasure to be here in Bogota. I just arrived from Washington. I was here about a year and a half ago for meetings with President Uribe and his cabinet. I'm very pleased to be back, very pleased to be here with Assistant Secretary of State Tom Shannon, with Ambassador Bill Wood, with our former Ambassador Anne Patterson, and with a delegation of about 15 officials from the U.S. Government, representing six of our government agencies.



The reason we're here is because President Bush and Secretary Rice asked us to come here, to show our support for the Colombian Government and the Colombian people, to maintain our committed partnership with Colombia, and have a series of meetings with the Colombian leadership over the next few days, to review every part of our relationship. We thought this was a good time to do this now that President Uribe is in his second term. The United States has been a substantial partner, as you all know, of Colombia. We have a lot of initiatives underway, we want to review them all and make sure they're working effectively. We also want to make sure that we're sending a message that we're going to meet all of our commitments to the Colombian Government and the Colombian people. We certainly congratulate President Uribe and the Colombian Government, the Colombian people, for everything that has been accomplished here over the last few years: the advances in counter-terrorism, in counternarcotics. Certainly the tremendous economic growth and all that implies, that's positive, for the future, and for the cooperation that we've had in a number of areas.

I'll be meeting with President Uribe, with the Foreign Minister, with the Defense Minister, with the Minister of Interior and Justice, with the Fiscal General, with members of the human rights community, representing the non-governmental organizations committed to human rights here, meeting with members of the Parliament at a reception this evening. So we'll see a lot of different people from Colombian society, both in the government and outside the government.

My message will be that the United States intends to continue its strong support for Colombia, financially and politically, over the next several years. We intend to ask our Congress to maintain the current level of funding, to support Colombia's counternarcotics and counter-terrorism programs, the Justice and Peace Law, the demobilization, our military cooperation, our cooperation to reduce poverty, to alleviate poverty and to increase and enhance social justice.

For the last few years we've been extending about US\$600 million per year to the Colombian people for all these programs. And our Administration in Washington will ask our Congress to maintain that level in 2007, and again in 2008. We're also here to talk to the Colombian Government about an extension of Plan Colombia. We've been talking about that for the last year. We'll be interested to hear the views of the Colombian Government, and how they look at the extension of Plan Colombia, and what their priorities shall be. And we want to be supportive, and I think the United States will be supportive.

We also want to sign, as soon as possible, the Free Trade Agreement between the United States and Colombia, and we're going to ask our Congress to ratify that agreement as soon as possible, and we hope that will be in the shortest possible time. This can be a landmark initiative in the history of the relationship between our two countries. It's going to be a change agent. It's going to lead to, we hope, dramatically expanded levels of trade between Colombia and the United States, and investment. It ought to have real benefits for the people of Colombia, and it will certainly have benefits for the people of the United States. It's in our mutual interest.

We'll also ask the United States Congress to continue the Andean Trade Preference Act in the coming years, because we think that program has been beneficial for Colombia, as well as for the United States, and is in our mutual best interest.

As I said, I'll be meeting this evening, as well as tomorrow morning, with members of the human rights community. I've met with them in Washington; in fact, I met with Human Rights Watch yesterday, along with the International Crisis Group, and meet routinely with Amnesty International.

I'd like to meet with the Colombians working on human rights issues because we admire them. We admire the work they're doing here to promote social justice and democracy. These are difficult issues to deal with in any society, but they're important issues. In every meeting that we have with the Colombian Government, we do draw attention to the fact that there have been a number of human rights cases that have not been adjudicated in many years. They're important cases for any democratic society and I'll be raising those issues specifically with the Government, we'd like to hear from the human rights community their perspectives on these issues, because they're important to our Government, to our Congress and to the American people. We know they're important to the Colombian people as well.

And, of course, we'll have a special emphasis on the two major initiatives where both President Clinton, and now President Bush, have over the last five years, have been trying to support the Colombian people; the fight against narcotics, the production of coca and its trafficking in our hemisphere, and the fight against terrorism. They're substantially important programs for both of our countries, and we look forward to making progress in both areas.

I would conclude by saying we've got a delegation, as I said, comprising six U.S. government agencies, and many of the people with me (Assistant Secretary Shannon, Ambassador Patterson) know Colombia very well. I think all of us are optimistic about the future of our relationship between the United States and Colombia. We have put in place over the last four or five years a foundation that is going to be durable and self-sustaining. And if we can overcome some of the remaining problems in this relationship, it's a relationship that can be as important as any relationship the United States has in Latin America. And so we look forward, with a great deal of optimism, to the future growth of the Colombian economy, and to future progress on the issues that I've mentioned. I'm very pleased to be here. We think the relationship has a great future. I'll be happy to take a few questions, and then I'm going to get on with my program.

MARSHALL LOUIS: Thank you very much. RCN Televisión. Monica Cortes, please? Your question?

MONICA CORTES, RCN TELEVISIÓN: How can you guarantee that Plan Colombia and FTA will continue to receive support in the U.S. Congress after the November elections? And my second question is, what are your comments on the Justice and Peace Law?

UNDER SECRETARY BURNS: Thank you very much. Thank you very much for both of your questions.

I was the State Department's spokesman ten years ago, and I learned a valuable lesson in giving hundreds of press conferences, and that is, never answer a hypothetical

question. You asked me a very good question, and forgive me for not speaking Spanish, but I understand it. I understand what you said, and I should say this. I think there's a great level of bipartisan support in the United States for a strong U.S. relationship with Colombia. The assistance by the United States to Plan Colombia, to President Pastrana, and then to President Uribe, began under President Clinton in 1999. In my conversations on Capital Hill with our Congress, there is strong support in both political parties for a healthy, thriving relationship between our two governments.

So I don't worry. I can't worry about elections that haven't been held. And I can't anticipate what the results of these elections will be in our country. It's going to be up to the American people to decide that. But I am confident that no matter what happens in November in our own elections, you will see a strong American initiative to continue support for Plan Colombia, to continue the fight against terrorist groups, and to continue the fight against the narcoterrorists, and also the production of coca and its illicit sale in our hemisphere.

I should also say that one of the issues that we're very concerned about, I know Colombians are as well, is the fact that there are so many hostages that are being held by the FARC. Three Americans have been held for over three-and-a-half years now. We haven't forgotten them. I've spoken to their family members back in the United States, and I know that many more Colombians are being held. And I can imagine what impact that has had on Colombian families and society. So these are important issues.

The second question you asked is about the Justice and Peace Law?

We've been very pleased to support that law and support the process of demobilization that is taking place here in Colombia. We understand and we've been watching the political and constitutional process that the Court has ruled, that the law has evolved, because the court rulings and the Uribe administration have reacted to all that. And obviously, we'll have a number of questions that we'll want to seek answers to about the implementation of this law, but we admire what President Uribe and his administration have done, what his Cabinet has done, to seek the demobilization of over 30,000 people, and to try to stop the warfare, the civil warfare, warfare underway in major parts of this country.

If there have been some issues concerning implementation, that is a normal process that will be worked out by Colombians. But I think you'll continue to see American support for this process.

MARSHALL LOUIS: Thank you, very much Sir. Associated Press, Joshua Goodman. Do you have a question?

JOSHUA GOODMAN. AP: Thank you very much. First of all, with the extension of the Andean Trade Preference Act, will that include Ecuador... will the Administration also solicit that Ecuador and Bolivia be included even though they haven't yet signed free trade agreements with the United States?

And secondly, and this was the question I had prepared, the State Department has yet to certify the Colombian military's progress on human rights, on which is contingent about 25 percent of annual aid for Fiscal Year 2006. Yet the national human rights groups are concerned that the Army's human rights record is worsening this year, as evidenced by scandals involving the torture of cadets, and the indictment of several officers for the deliberate extrajudicial killing of civilians. I'm wondering, how much would this weigh on the certification process? And will this be part of your conversations with President Uribe?

UNDER SECRETARY BURNS: Thank you very much. On the first question, I said in my opening statement that our Government has decided to ask our Congress for continuation of the Andean Trade Preference Act, which we think has been very beneficial for the countries of this region, and it does include the two countries that you've mentioned, despite the fact that we don't have free trade agreements with them.

We are very, very heartened by the progress we've made on the Free Trade Agreement with Colombia. These were tough negotiations, as you would expect them to be between two countries like our own. But we've made tremendous progress and, as I said, we're looking forward to signing that agreement between our two governments, and then seeking the quickest possible ratification in the United States Senate of the Free Trade Agreement.

So, on your second question, I'd just say this. In any civil and democratic society, a government's first responsibility is to maintain order, and to protect the civilian population from those who would practice violence on it. And so the Colombian Government, under President Uribe and before that President Pastrana, has taken this action. We admire the fact that the Colombian government has taken back so many of the streets of Colombia from the terrorist groups, and such a large part of the country, compared to four or five years ago, is now a safer place for Colombians than it had been before.

But it's also true that there are big concerns raised about possible alleged human rights violations. We're not part of the political debate in this country, but we are a friend of Colombia and so, of course, we raise these issues. When there are allegations made by credible NGO's, whether they're Colombian or international, of human rights abuses, we raise them with Colombian officials, and I will be raising them on this trip. Yes, of course.

EDULFO PENA, EL TIEMPO: President Bush told President Uribe during his last visit to Washington, as reported by the Colombian Minister of Foreign Affairs, that there is a need for reforming counter-drug strategy. President Uribe said recently that he was open to modifying the strategy. Can you comment on what elements of the strategy ought to be modified?

UNDER SECRETARY BURNS: Thank you very much. I think that narcotics and an effective counter-narcotics strategy will be one of the most important issues for our delegation, and I'm very pleased that Ambassador Patterson is here. You all know her very well. She is in charge of our counter-narcotics efforts worldwide now for the United States Government. And she'll be having in-depth discussions with her Colombian counterparts, and I will certainly discuss this with President Uribe and the other ministers of the Government.

This program on counter-narcotics is a Colombian program. It's run by the Colombian Government, for the Colombian people, and decisions about it are going to be made by the Colombian Government, obviously. We are a partner, we're very pleased to provide financial assistance and other assistance from our government, and if the Colombian Government has modifications to make to it, of course we'll listen to that. These are the sovereign rights of the Government of Colombia. And in any counter-terrorism or counter-narcotics campaign, you sometimes have to adjust strategy in order to be effective as conditions change. So, I don't want to speak more specifically than that. But it is true that the two leaders have talked, and it is true that our ambassadors have talked -- our ambassador has talked about this many times. We'll be open to suggestions that the Colombian Government makes. Anything that we can do to support the effectiveness of this program is going to be important. And obviously, the final thing I'd say is that we Americans know that we have a responsibility here. We have a responsibility to try to decrease demand in the United States for heroin and for cocaine in our towns, in our cities. That's our responsibility, that's our self interest, to make sure that our kids are not entrapped by narcotics. So, it's a two-way street. You have to have mutual cooperation to be effective. We think the Colombian Government has really done an extraordinary job of defining this issue, as a priority, and we think that the eradication programs, as well as the other programs (the substitution programs, the employment programs that have been created) have been effective so far. But obviously, if there are further changes that need to be made, we'll be open to discussing that with the Colombian Government.

UNDER SECRETARY BURNS: I think I'll see some of you tomorrow, but thank you very much for coming today. I appreciate it.

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