



Press Conference at Casa de Nariño

R. Nicholas Burns, Under Secretary for Political Affairs

Bogota, Colombia

October 25, 2006

MODERATOR: Good evening, thank you for waiting. Mr. Nicholas Burns, Under Secretary of State, has just finished a meeting with the President. He will give a brief introduction and then will answer four questions. Mr. Burns, welcome.

UNDER SECRETARY BURNS: Thank you very much. We have just concluded two days of discussions with the Colombian Government about all aspects of our bilateral relationship and I must say that we are going to leave here tomorrow convinced that the strategic partnership between Colombia and the United States is in very good shape. We just spent three and a half hours with President Uribe in two different meetings. The final meeting was a meeting of all of our delegation with a great number of members of the Colombian cabinet and senior officials of the Government, both from the civilian side of the Government and the military side of the Government. We consider Colombia to be among our most important partners in this Hemisphere. We talked today about the necessity of continuing the cooperation we've had under Plan Colombia.

We have to now devise a successor to Plan Colombia. We agreed that our two Governments would form a committee to do that over the next several months and that we would present our views to the United States Congress, of course, as well as to the Colombian Congress when that period is through. That would entail a continuation of the counter-narcotics assistance that the United States has conveyed to Colombia now, in its strengthened form, since 1999 -- assistance in the fight against terrorism here in Colombia, assistance to justice and peace programs, and, of course, military and security assistance as well. So it's a comprehensive relationship. We are very proud of the assistance that the United States has given to Colombia and as I said we consider President Uribe and his Administration, and also the Colombian people, great friends of our country. So we leave here satisfied that among all of the discussions we've had with President Uribe, and with the Minister of Foreign Affairs, the Minister of Defense, the Minister of Justice, with the Fiscal General, and many other members of the Colombian Government, we are satisfied that we have this comprehensive relationship (partnership) that is being sustained. We are very optimistic about the future of this relationship.

Having said those few words I'd be very happy to take whatever questions you may have.

QUESTION: Good evening. Is State Department certification of Colombia being delayed by concerns over corruption scandals in the Army, or human rights violations by the Army? If not, what is the delay and if so, did you hear or learn anything in these past few days that will change that?

UNDER SECRETARY BURNS: I think you are referring to the certification process on human rights, if I'm not mistaken? Good. Then that process is on its regular schedule and, of course, our Secretary of State is the person who certifies, and so when the time is right, and when our Government is ready, there will be a recommendation made to her. Now, in what we talked about today in our meetings and yesterday as well, we had a lot of focus on the human rights situation. The meetings we had were with Colombian Government officials, of course, President Uribe and his cabinet, but also with the non-governmental organizations here in Colombia. We had a breakfast this morning with a great number of leaders from civil society. We heard their views on the human rights situation, as well as the views of the Government. I think I can summarize the views of our delegation, certainly my own, by saying that we think there's been tremendous progress made in the human rights situation over the last five to six years. If you look at the figures of abductions of Colombian citizens, of killings of Colombian citizens, and other human rights violations, there has been a dramatic reduction in the level of violence practiced by terrorist groups or by paramilitary groups against the citizens of this country. We heard that from the non-government community, we also heard it from the Government officials.

We also took the liberty of saying that, of course, if there are allegations of abuse by the military, by military forces, security forces of the Police, those allegations should be adjudicated properly and those responsible for those abuses should be prosecuted as in any democratic society. And, of course, there are still a number of cases left; Mapiripán from 1997, San José de Apartadó from a couple of years ago, that we believe should be completed in the judicial system here.

We also had a good meeting with the Fiscal General and spoke to him about this particular issue of human rights, as we did with the Minister of Justice, as we did with all of the officials with whom we met. It's our view that the situation has improved dramatically, of course, since the worst of the violence in this country. But further progress can be made. We will continue to try to be supportive of the Government. Our Department of Justice, as well as the Department of State, has programs of support for various parts of the Colombian Government and we wish them well as they pursue progress and reform in this area.

I hope that answered your question. Sort of? Sorry to disappoint you.

QUESTION: My understanding is that the latest certification on human rights was due in March, and it's October and it hasn't happened, so I do understand that there is a delay.

UNDER SECRETARY BURNS: I was not aware that there was a timetable for these reports and I am looking at the distinguished gentlemen with me and they are corroborating that. But there is an obligation of the Secretary of State to certify that Colombia is meeting acceptable standards, and she has done that before and that recommendation will go to her. But I don't believe there is a specific timetable so therefore I don't believe we are behind in the timetable. I hope that answers your question.

QUESTION: My questions are on FTA and APTDEA. Specifically, did you reach an agreement, what did you talk about with President Uribe on the approval of the FTA and the extension of APTDEA? There is fear within the Colombian business community that the agreement will have to be redone if the Democrats win the elections, and even if the U.S. Government guarantees that this will not happen, that labor and environmental issues will be raised. The second question is how optimistic are you on the signing of the Free Trade Agreement in 2007?

UNDER SECRETARY BURNS: Thank you very much for your questions. We did have extensive discussions while we were here about the Free Trade Agreement and, of course, my Government was very pleased that we made so much progress and that soon we will be able to sign the Free Trade Agreement. Of course, in the American system it's the Congress that has the final say, the Congress of the United States that has the final say, and we would hope that we could get the quickest possible action out of the Congress. But as you know our Congress is currently in recess and we have Congressional elections coming up in the first week of November, so we can't promise action in a matter of weeks. But we certainly have as a very high priority the completion and the ratification of the Free Trade Agreement between Colombia and the United States. We think this agreement is going to be highly effective and beneficial for both countries, and that's why we entered into it, that's why both countries decided to complete it. And we think it should usher in a new era of economic growth and the investment and trade ties between the United States and Colombia and other countries in the region, because you have seen now over the last 15, 16 years we, the United States (many Administrations going back to President George H. W. Bush) have put in place free trade agreements with our priority partners in this hemisphere. It's had a tremendously positive effect on our economic ties with Canada, with Mexico, and with other countries. And we are sure it will as well with Colombia. We did have some discussions today as well about the remarkable economic reforms in this country. Assistant Secretary Dan Sullivan, our Assistant Secretary for Economic Affairs, had specific discussions with his counterparts on this. I know he was very impressed not only by the tremendous growth in the economy, but also in the health of the economy, in terms of the international standards that we look at. We're optimistic that the Free Trade Agreement will not just mean an increase in trade, but also will help to transform the quality of our economic ties in the future.

QUESTION: Good evening Mr. Under Secretary. Last week President Alvaro Uribe, after a terrorist attack presumably perpetrated by the FARC in Bogotá, practically declared war on this guerrilla group, and asked Colombia's friends for military support to confront them. He also made the decision to postpone the dialogue, the talks with that guerrilla group towards a humanitarian agreement. Do you agree on rescuing the people, the three Americans held captive by the FARC? Also, are you willing to provide military assistance with equipment and technology to look for the people who are kidnapped in the jungle?

UNDER SECRETARY BURNS: Thank you very much. We are fully supportive of President Uribe and the Colombian Government in what they have said in the past week about the activities of the FARC. The terrorist attack last week was reprehensible. The FARC, of course, is an organization that we have no relations with; it is a vicious terrorist organization. Most of the democratic countries have the same view. It is our obligation as an ally, and as a friend to Colombia, to assist it in prosecuting this struggle against the FARC here in Colombia itself. We have enormous sympathy for the thousands of Colombian families who've had their loved ones kidnapped and we know that the Colombians have borne the brunt of this, and the FARC by its actions show that it is an organization that has no regard for the lives of these people whom they have kidnapped. It is also true that three Americans were kidnapped nearly four years ago, in February 2003. We call on the FARC to release them, and to release them unconditionally. We wish the Colombian people well, in the struggle to end terrorism on Colombian soil and end violence.

Unfortunately, we live in a time when we Americans know this as well when terrorism is a defining feature of the international landscape. Democratic societies all have a common interest and obligation to unite, and this is what has brought the United States and Colombia together as very close partners over the last few years. So we have complete support for the Government of Colombia, and we wish it well. We hope that in the future Colombian citizens will be able to live without fear of this terrorist group, the FARC. So that's the way I would answer your question. Thank you for asking it.

QUESTION: Mr. Under Secretary, good evening. A couple of queries. You spoke of a sort of 'reorganization'; you spoke of a reorganization of Plan Colombia. I got that impression. I'd like to know, what's going to happen to Plan Colombia in the new dimension that the U.S. Government wants to give to it? And secondly, are there requests of extradition for members of the paramilitary groups that are currently 'on hold', that are on 'stand-by'? But there is one that is on the table: Vicente Castaño, who is fleeing from justice. What does the U.S. Government think of these extradition requests, the ones that have yet to taken place, and the one for Vicente Castaño, who is at large?

UNDER SECRETARY BURNS: Thank you very much. I'm happy that you asked about Plan Colombia, because in our country Plan Colombia is thought of very positively. It was begun by President Pastrana and President Clinton, and now it's being continued by President Uribe and President Bush. In our country, Plan Colombia has bipartisan support in both political parties. It's considered to be the right strategy to help a friend, Colombia, that is undergone so much, so many difficulties over the last generation. We talked about some of the problems in counternarcotics, and in trying to struggle against the terrorist groups on Colombian soil. The original idea was that Plan Colombia would have a finite life-span. Now we understand that there's more work to be done. The United States is a country that wants to meet its commitments to its friends and partners. Colombia is one of those friends and partners. So, what we said today is that we'd like to continue this effort, whereby the United States will support Colombia in all the different areas that have comprised Plan Colombia. Now we need to go to our Congress of the United States, which makes all decisions concerning financial matters in our Government, and we need to convince the Congress that it is the right thing to do, and that there is good work that can be done in the future, in all of these areas. So what we've decided to do is put together a group of people in both of our Governments who work together to assemble an initiative for continuation. A successor, if you will, of Plan Colombia. We hope to have that ready by the early part of 2007, so that we in the United States can present that to our Congress, and you in Colombia can have that debate here. But we're very optimistic that we will continue to work closely with the Government of Colombia, that this is the right policy for our Government, and I think that the Colombian Government feels the same way.

On extraditions, what I would say is that they have been a very effective tool in the fight against narcotics and the fight against international criminals, and also in the fight against terrorism. The Colombian Government has been extremely cooperative in the past, and it continues to be today in extraditions. We look forward to continuing this effort in the future.

So thank you very much for listening to me. It's been a pleasure for my entire delegation to be in Colombia, and we look forward to seeing you again in the future. Thank you.

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