U.S. DEPARTMENT of STATE

Future Engagement and Partnership With Latin America

R. Nicholas Burns, Under Secretary for Political Affairs
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As we approach 2007, the U.S. intends to make the goal of invigorating ties with Latin America as a major priority. You will see the U.S. focus intensively on our agenda of promoting democracy, advancing free trade, and advancing poverty alleviation and social justice.

We believe trends in the region favor these aims. We have seen a series of elections in 2006, with Latin American voters largely rejecting Chavez' brand of radical and irresponsible populism. Instead, in elections in Chile, Brazil, Peru, Colombia, Mexico, Haiti, and Costa Rica, voters chose responsible left-of-center or centrists governments, affirming the democratic vocation of the Americas.

The stage is set for a period of good, productive, harmonious U.S. ties with Latin America – a situation that defies the conventional wisdom of earlier this year. As we look forward to 2007 we will focus on:

- Finalizing free trade agreements with Colombia, Peru and Panama
- Extending the Andean Trade Preference Act
- Helping Latin countries fight the down sides of globalization:
    - Narco-trafficking
    - Terrorism
    - Global climate change
    - International crime
    - Trafficking in women and children
    - Poverty alleviation

In this context, Colombia is one of our most important partners and one of the region's success stories. No country in the region is more important to or a better friend to the U.S. that Colombia.

The U.S. seeks to build on this strong partnership with Colombia, as evidenced by my visit in October along with a delegation of 15 representatives from six USG agencies, and President Uribe's trip to Washington last week.

My recent trip to Colombia was my second since my appointment last year as Under Secretary for Political Affairs.

Colombia presents some of the region's toughest challenges and exemplifies how intimately regional events affect us at home. Roughly 90% of the cocaine and slightly over 50% of the heroin consumed in the United States come from Colombia. In 2003, illegal drugs from Colombia and other countries killed more than 28,000 Americans.

Colombia's narcotics trade fuels a violent conflict that has created the second largest population of internally displaced persons in the world. Narco-dollars finance the operation of an estimated 30,000 terrorists, and have given the FARC an international reach.

The repercussions have spread far beyond Colombia's borders, affecting virtually every aspect of life in the region, including security, economic and social conditions, and the environment.

So, challenges remain for Colombians to take back their country. The U.S. needs to support President Uribe and the people of Colombia to do just that.

The Success Story

The success of Plan Colombia is real and measurable. Plan Colombia has helped Colombia fight narcotics trafficking, terrorism, and transnational crime; promote economic and social development; assist conflict victims; strengthen democratic institutions, including human rights mechanisms and the justice system; and begin a process to demobilize and reintegrate illegal armed groups.

Plan Colombia is a bi-partisan success story; when first developed in 1999 by President Andres Pastrana, it was supported first by President Clinton, and that support continues with President Bush.

From 2001-2005, seizures of cocaine bound for the United States increased by two thirds—even as Colombia's cocaine production declined 22%. Over 450 criminals, most involved in narcotics trafficking, have been extradited to the United States for prosecution.

A majority of Colombians will tell you their quality of life has improved substantially in just a few years. With our help, President Uribe has reduced kidnappings by 72%, terror attacks by 63% and homicides by 37% since taking office. We offer our support to the Government of Colombia in its efforts to secure its people against this threat.

Since President Uribe took office, more than 31,000 members of paramilitary groups have been demobilized. The Colombian government, with our support, is now beginning the difficult process of prosecuting paramilitary leaders, recovering assets to use as reparations for victims, and reintegrating into society those not charged with serious crimes.

The private sector is an indispensable partner in this effort. On November 6, Secretary Rice recognized one of many fine examples of public-private partnership by honoring General Motors with an Award for Corporate Excellence for its work in reintegrating demobilized ex-militants.

The United States and Colombia are also working with our hemispheric neighbors though the Organization of American States to build the foundation of a humanitarian mine action program, with risk education and assistance to victims increasing significantly over the next two years. These are all significant achievements, but we need to do more, particularly in terms of promoting human rights and seeking justice for war victims.

But, there are problems and challenges that still need to be overcome by the Colombian government.

First, is human rights. When I was in Colombia last month, I discussed the human rights situation with President Uribe and members of his cabinet, with several non-governmental organizations, and with a number of leaders from Colombia's civil society. We agreed that there has been significant progress in the human rights situation over the last five to six years, but that significant room for improvement remains.

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.

A recent Gallup Poll shows that 70% of Colombians believe their government respects their human rights. Only two percent of new violations of human rights are reported to be committed by security forces, a sharp reduction from the situation several years ago. U.S. assistance is provided only to those units fully screened for involvement in human rights violations. In fiscal year 2005 we spent $5.6 million in helping Colombia strengthen human rights protections -- our largest human rights effort in the world.

However, the government can and must do better to punish those in the military convicted of extra-judicial killings.

Cases involving human rights abuses languish in the justice system, and impunity for human rights violators remains a serious problem that sorely needs to be addressed.

Second, serious questions about the implementation of the Justice and Peace Law (JPL) remain. The JPL implementing decree was published in September tracks closely with the Constitutional Court decision. It is imperative that this law now be strictly implemented to ensure that captured paramilitaries are held accountable for their actions.

A shortage of prosecutors is making it difficult for the Colombian government to move forward on cases against demobilized paramilitaries. However, it is important to keep up momentum on implementation of the law and to hold paramilitaries accountable for their actions.

Although challenges remain, the improved security situation has encouraged new economic opportunities for the people of Colombia.

Since 2000, the United States has provided alternative development assistance to more than 81,000 small farmers, resulting in the cultivation of over 100,000 hectares of new crops and over 1,100 small infrastructure projects, such as schools, roads, and bridges that have been completed in communities participating in the program. Of course, as Colombians agree, assistance is not a sustainable, permanent solution to Colombia's development challenges; new jobs and rising incomes are.

Our Free Trade Agreement will be signed on November 22. We hope Congress will approve it in 2007.

The agreement will usher in a new era of economic growth and investment as well as a strengthened trading relationship between the United States and Colombia and other countries in the region.

Over the past 15 years the United States has put in place free trade agreements with our priority partners in this hemisphere. They have 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.

Conclusion

Our governments have made a commitment to develop a plan for continued collaboration, building on the progress of Plan Colombia. To secure and advance this progress, it is imperative that the United States reaffirm its political and financial support for Colombia. This will entail a continuation of the assistance that the United States has offered to Colombia since 2000 to combat narcotics and terrorism, strengthen the judicial system and democratic institutions, protect human rights, stimulate economic growth, and improve its military and security capabilities.

This will also entail our efforts to secure Congressional approval for the Free Trade Agreement which we will sign on November 22.

For its part, Colombia is pursuing ways to increase its financial contribution by assuming a greater participative role in our bilateral programs with human resources and expertise. A growing partnership with Colombia is our best investment towards our shared vision of a stable Latin America and a strong hemisphere.

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