



Interview With Adriana Vargas of RCN TV

John D. Negroponte, Deputy Secretary of State

Bogotá, Colombia
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QUESTION: Señor subsecretario de Estado de Estados Unidos, señor John Negroponte, muchísimas gracias por atender a RCN. Cómo está?

DEPUTY SECRETARY NEGROPONTE: Sí, gracias.

QUESTION: First of all we'd like to know, is the free trade agreement with Colombia ever going to be a reality?

DEPUTY SECRETARY NEGROPONTE: Well, we certainly hope so. We think it's very important. We think that it's even a strategic agreement which we have with Colombia; we also have one pending with Panama and Peru. And I am traveling to all these countries on this particular trip to send a signal, first of all, that the importance we attached to these agreements, and secondly to bring back a message to our friends in Washington, in the Congress and elsewhere, about the importance that people here, in this part of the Hemisphere, attach to the passage of the Free Trade Agreement.

QUESTION: Ambassador Negroponte, Colombian Vice-President Francisco Santos told RCN News that if the Free Trade Agreement doesn't go through Congress, if it doesn't pass, Colombia probably should reconsider the position as a very close ally to the United States and perhaps change the way they manage the bilateral manner. What do you think about that?

DEPUTY SECRETARY NEGROPONTE: First of all, that's a hypothetical question, isn't it? It's an "if" kind of question and I think the more important thing to say at the moment is that this is a strategic agreement and it has the full support of the President of the United States and the Secretary of State and that we are going to make every effort to ensure that it receives the approval of the Congress and we want to work closely with our Colombian friends to ensure that this happens.

I am somebody who was Ambassador to Mexico when we negotiated the North American Free Trade Agreement back in 1992 and 1993 and people were predicting then that that agreement might not go through the Congress but we succeeded in getting it through. It turned out to be an extremely successful and important accomplishment. I have confidence that that's what's going to happen this time as well.

QUESTION: What would you think, is there any sort of concern in the US Congress, at least, about losing Colombia as a close ally in the Latin American region? Is there like a concern that probably after what may happen with the Free Trade Agreement you may lose Colombia as a close ally?

DEPUTY SECRETARY NEGROPONTE: Let me state it positively. We value Colombia as a friend and an ally in the region. We think Colombia has had extremely successful activities in the area of strengthening its democracy. We think that there are a lot of accomplishments in the area of disarming the paramilitaries and restoring security and law and order to the country. From what everybody tells me the country is much more secure than it was three or four years ago and the economy is growing in 6 or 7 % a year. So, this is a very positive record and we will continue to see Colombia as one of our most important friends in the Hemisphere.

QUESTION: What would you think, this is of course a hypothetical question, President Chavez, for example, would say if the Free Trade Agreement doesn't go through the US Congress and finally we don't have an agreement with the United States, what would you think would be the reaction of President Hugo Chavez, considering that he has criticized so many times this possibility of a Free Trade Agreement.

DEPUTY SECRETARY NEGROPONTE: I'd be reluctant to try to predict what President Chavez would think, but you're right he has not said positive things about the agreement in the past. But I think the important thing is, this is going to be, if you think about it, if these three agreements are approved there will then be three trade agreements between the United States and all the North American countries: Canada, Mexico, Central America, then Panama, Colombia, Peru, and Chile. This is a whole arc of countries in the Pacific coast that I think will form the nucleus of a group of countries committed to democracy, free markets, and a free trade existence, and I think this is very important.

QUESTION: Mr. Undersecretary, --- the Washington Post newspaper dedicated a very tough editorial about Colombia and criticized the President of Congress, Mrs. Pelosi. They said that for some reasons she's supporting what they called dictators, Bashar al-Asad from Syria, but at the same time she was attacking as close a friend as President Uribe whom they see might be the most popular democratic president in the whole world. What is your opinion about that? Do you agree with what the Washington Post has said?

DEPUTY SECRETARY NEGROPONTE: First of all, I believe that Colombia has got a lot of support in the United States Congress and whatever Mrs. Pelosi might have said, let's remember that she met with Mr. Uribe and that there are many people in her party who support the concept of free trade and who support also free trade with Colombia. So I wouldn't just take the event of one week, or one or two stories to be the last word on this subject. I think that this debate has just begun in our country and hopefully at the end, when people look at the facts, look at the benefits and the strategic importance of this agreement, then they will give it the approval that it so strongly deserves.

QUESTION: Do you think that Colombia is in the middle of a (U.S. domestic) political campaign right now?

DEPUTY SECRETARY NEGROPONTE: Well, you know people say that the way Americans deal with foreign policy is that they tend to politicize it, somehow. If you are a big, open society and people debate these issues in the Congress it might look that way to people but I don't know any better way to deal with these public policy issues than to have them thoroughly debated. The important point, from my point of view, is that there be enough debate and that people really be willing to look at all the facts that they don't just listen to one version of events, but are really willing to look at what has really happened. I think that if they take a strong and hard look at what's happened here in Colombia they are going to be very favorably impressed.

QUESTION: Ambassador Negroponte, if you allow me I would like to change the subject. Talking about the position of your Government in front of some companies, for example Chiquita Brand, who have, as a matter of fact they have said yes, they have admitted that they paid to illegal groups for their own safety. What is the position of your Government regarding that matter?

DEPUTY SECRETARY NEGROPONTE: Yes, this is an area where I am not at liberty to make much comment because it's under investigation by our judicial authorities. Our policy is when something is under investigation by our Justice Department or by our prosecutors we cannot make any comments one way or another, because it might affect the judicial process.

QUESTION: The Colombian Government has said that they would like to ask for the extradition if, if it's the case, of someone, the most important enterprise men that

belong to this company. Is that possible, likely would your Government agree to do that eventually?

DEPUTY SECRETARY NEGROPONTE: As I've said, it's a matter under investigation so I am really not in the position to say, I am sorry.

QUESTION: One last question, regarding Plan Colombia and the second phase of Plan Colombia. What do you think is the responsibility and is the US taking all of the responsibility that is part of all the drug trafficking, consumption of course and at the same time...

DEPUTY SECRETARY NEGROPONTE: Are we doing enough to reduce demand?

QUESTION: Yes, exactly.

DEPUTY SECRETARY NEGROPONTE: Well, we certainly work very hard on that in our society but we recognize also that more needs to be done. I believe that we are not the only market anymore for these kinds of drugs, a lot of them go to Europe, a lot of them go to other societies. But it's an issue on which we all need to work, it's a plague in our society that causes a lot of misery and grief, and a lot of economic and social loss. So we recognize that that's an issue that we have to work on, just like we have to work on the question of interdiction and dealing with narco trafficking.

QUESTION: Thank you very much for being with us.

DEPUTY SECRETARY NEGROPONTE: I appreciate it. Thank you.

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