



Interview With Carlos Fernando Galan of El Tiempo

John D. Negroponte, Deputy Secretary of State

Bogotá, Colombia

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QUESTION: Since President Uribe first came to office, the Colombian Armed Forces have been able to push back the FARC. However, until now they have not been able to capture any of the top leaders nor force them to go into negotiations. What is your evaluation of that strategy by the Colombian Government? Do you think it is time to rethink some aspects of that strategy?

DEPUTY SECRETARY NEGROPONTE: First of all, I think that a lot has been accomplished since 2002. Security is improved, a lot of traffickers have been caught, maybe not the absolute top leaders of the FARC but there's been a lot of extraditions, 500 to the United States, which is many times more than anything that had been accomplished previously. And the scope of action of the FARC has diminished, so, that is a good thing. I certainly agree with you that every effort must be made to *(inaudible)* on these FARC leaders.

QUESTION: The strategy against drugs also was intended to fight the FARC. For 25 years Colombia and the U.S. have been partners in that war on drugs. However we see that the price of cocaine on the streets is still going down. Do you think that is sign for things to be changed?

DEPUTY SECRETARY NEGROPONTE: I think, first of all, this issue has to be looked at in context, because the more eradication of the hectares, more hectares have been eradicated in recent times, more traffickers have been captured, more. I think there are a lot of different areas where there has been progress. So, I don't think I would take just one measure to judge. And, over a short period of time, you never know, maybe some anomaly that we don't understand or maybe some disruption of demand, I don't know if that is the explanation. I wouldn't take it... It's not the only factor.

QUESTION: One of the objectives of the peace process with the AUC here in Colombia is to reduce the production of drugs, because they were involved in narcotics production. Do you think that in that sense the process has been successful?

DEPUTY SECRETARY NEGROPONTE: First of all, I think the peace process has been very successful in terms of reducing the threat of the paramilitary groups, 30,000 or so have been demobilized, 60 of their top leaders are awaiting prosecution. In terms of reducing the area, well, certainly during my visit here, I've visited several projects, which are designed to teach former paramilitaries and others alternative sources of employment. The first thing I visited yesterday is called Compartir, a project to train people to do something else besides cultivating drugs. So I think yes, it's being successful; fast enough is a matter of judgment.

QUESTION: One of the questions asked by Senator Leahy in Washington was about one of the AUC commanders Diego Murillo (a.k.a Don Berna). Is the U.S. Government going to insist in his extradition to the U.S.?

DEPUTY SECRETARY NEGROPONTE: I think we have requested his extradition. In the meantime I believe the Government has also put some plans under their peace and justice program, so I think we will have to see how that part works first.

QUESTION: As you know President Uribe has made a peace process with the AUC, but he has never rejected (receiving) political support from people being accused of links with those various groups. Do you think that that might be one of the problems the Democrats in the U.S. are seeing as a matter of concern?

DEPUTY SECRETARY NEGROPONTE: First of all, I wouldn't generalize that as the view of the Democrats based on just a few comments and a few stories based on President Uribe's trip up there last week. I think there is a strong support among the Democrats for our relationship with Colombia. I think they appreciate the importance of the relationship.

QUESTION: One of the reasons people are saying here in Colombia that may be an obstacle for passing the free trade agreement in the U.S. is the protectionists' pressure on some sectors in the U.S. Congress against FTA. Is that true, is that hurting the future of the FTA in the U.S.?

DEPUTY SECRETARY NEGROPONTE: Congress, particularly in the House of Representatives, there are always members in the House of Representatives who raise questions with respect to free trade agreements. They *(trade agreements)* don't win in the House of Representatives by large majorities. I think the important point is that President Bush, Secretary Rice and others in the administration are committed to getting the agreement through the Congress. We want to work with the Government of Colombia as partners to get that done, and we think that one of the best ways of getting it done is to get as many facts before our public and before our Congress about what is actually happening in this country, because it is essentially a very good news story.

DEPUTY SECRETARY NEGROPONTE: So besides the U.S. Government asking the Democrats to have an open mind on Colombia, it is going to try to convince them about this?

DEPUTY SECRETARY NEGROPONTE: Well, I think to convince enough Congressmen...we don't see this as a part of the issue. We want to convince enough Congressmen to get the 218 votes that we need to get the agreement passed. There are 435 members of House of Representatives; we need 218 to vote in favor.

QUESTION: Do you think the agreement might be approved within the next year?

DEPUTY SECRETARY NEGROPONTE: Well, that is certainly our hope and intention. We would like to see that approved as soon as possible.

QUESTION: One last question about the region. Do you have any information about possible links between Venezuelan officials and the FARC?

DEPUTY SECRETARY NEGROPONTE: You are asking a question I just don't have an answer for you. It is not a question I anticipated, not a question I've asked myself.

QUESTION: But, what...

DEPUTY SECRETARY NEGROPONTE: What I've heard expressed here is some concern on the part of various officials that some of the narcotrafficking activities spill over the border and enter either Venezuela or Ecuador or elsewhere and that is a cause of concern about that activity. It is certainly something we will probably have to work on.

QUESTION: Is it the view of the U.S. Government that Venezuela is doing enough to fight narcotics in the region?

DEPUTY SECRETARY NEGROPONTE: Well, if you ask me based on what I knew as Director of National Intelligence, my impression is that there is a lot of movement of narcotics through Venezuela and on to Europe. And I think that if they were determined to do something about it they could do more. No question.

QUESTION: You are off to Ecuador. What is going to happen to the Manta Base there?

DEPUTY SECRETARY NEGROPONTE: Well, that is not clear to me at this point, not clear to us. The agreement for the use of Manta is enforced until 2009, so that is still quite *(inaudible)*.

QUESTION: But Ecuador wants to put an end...

DEPUTY SECRETARY NEGROPONTE: Well we will have to see about that.

QUESTION: Thank you.

DEPUTY SECRETARY NEGROPONTE: Thank you.

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