



## Latin America: Helping Colombia is in our National Interest

**John D. Negroponte, Deputy Secretary of State**

Op-Ed

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A decade ago, Colombia teetered on the brink of disintegration. Terrorist groups were taking thousands of citizens hostage. Unfettered drug trafficking was threatening core institutions and the basic cohesion of the state. As I saw first-hand earlier this month on a visit to Colombia, the picture today is strikingly different: A democratically elected government is making great strides in curbing violence and drug trafficking. It has restored the integrity of the state and taken the fight to the terrorists and traffickers themselves. Colombia's rebirth is one of Latin America's success stories.

This progress is due to the courage and industry of Colombia's people and its leaders, especially President Alvaro Uribe. It is also due to our faith in their efforts. Beginning in 2000, President Clinton, with strong bipartisan Congressional backing, committed \$1.3 billion to Plan Colombia -- the country's road map in its fight for drug-free development. President Bush committed another \$3.4 billion from 2001-2006.

Now President Bush proposes an additional \$590 million in his fiscal year 2008 budget request to the Congress to fund the next stage of Plan Colombia. The government of Colombia will pay for the vast majority of the costs with its own funds, but continued U.S. and international support is essential.

Joint U.S.-Colombian funding is paying dividends for a more peaceful Colombia. Exponential growth in Colombia's cocaine production has been stopped. In 2006 alone, combined eradication and interdiction efforts kept approximately 550 U.S. tons of cocaine off U.S. streets. In the past five years, the security situation has improved remarkably, with kidnappings reduced by 76 percent, terror attacks down by 61 percent and homicides down by 40 percent. Colombia has extradited more than 475 drug traffickers to the United States to stand trial. These achievements give Colombians renewed hope that their children will grow up to have better lives. They also benefit everyone in this country, where cocaine has ruined thousands of American lives.

The improved security situation also has led to rapid economic growth and new opportunities for the people of Colombia. Economic growth averaged about 5 percent during the past four years, while the number of Colombians living in poverty dropped by more than 8 percent. U.S. assistance reached 81,000 small farmers and contributed to more than 1,100 infrastructure projects.

Much remains to be done. Colombia must still fight against illegal armed groups -- one of which, the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) has held three U.S. citizens hostage for four years. Criminal groups must be prevented from filling the vacuum left by the demobilization of paramilitaries.

The vulnerable must be protected, including labor leaders, those displaced by conflict and Afro-Colombians. There can be no tolerance for complicity with drug trafficking or paramilitarism, and there must be no shelter or impunity for those who break the law. The government must fully implement the Justice and Peace Process to bring the truth to light and achieve national reconciliation.

President Uribe knows his government must address the charge that it has been negligent in pursuing corruption in its counter-narcotics programs. He has pursued necessary reforms with determination. As information has come from demobilized fighters, he has ordered full investigations of all alleged ties between the government and paramilitaries. He must continue this effort and punish those who have abused the law.

In addition to extending Plan Colombia, President Bush has asked Congress to approve a free-trade agreement with Colombia this year. If passed, an FTA would further investment and growth and help more Colombians climb out of poverty. If Congress does not act, the conflict in Colombia is likely to intensify, undermining years of bilateral effort that are finally paying off. That would be a tragedy, particularly at a critical moment in defining the future U.S. role in the Americas. An FTA with Colombia, as well as Peru and Panama, will underscore our commitment to help the region's people conquer poverty, achieve social justice and live their lives in peace.

We have been good friends to Colombia. President Bush and Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice are committed to helping Colombia accelerate this progress. Significant challenges remain, but the people of Colombia can now envision a much more peaceful future. That is why the United States must reaffirm its support for Colombia and help to make that vision a reality.

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 [BACK TO TOP](#)

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