



Remarks En route Medellin, Colombia

Secretary Condoleezza Rice
En route Medellin, Colombia
January 24, 2008

SECRETARY RICE: All right, I'll just say a few words and then take your questions. I'm very much looking forward to going to Colombia along with several members of Congress. I think it's important for everyone to get a look firsthand at the situation in Colombia, at the progress that the Uribe administration has made toward providing a more secure environment for the Colombian people, a more just environment and in laying a foundation for greater prosperity. The United States has had a very productive relationship with this administration and with Colombia. It is, in fact, one of our strongest allies in this critical region, our neighborhood.

The President is firmly committed to the positive agenda for Latin American that he laid out for his recent trip there, which is one that encourages open markets and economies, free trade, that encourages democratic leaders to take steps that provide for their people, and also to use whatever we can do in the United States in terms of the tools at our disposal, and certainly free trade agreements are one of them, to help those leaders provide that prosperity for their people.

The President is also, of course, very interested in social justice and I think we'll have an opportunity to look at some of the issues concerning the improvement of the plight of marginalized people.

And so all in all, this is a chance to go and talk to one of our best allies in a democratically elected government that's trying to do the right thing. It's very obvious that just a few years ago, I think you could have said that Colombia was in danger of being a failed state, and it's come back from that. It has -- the Colombian Government has control over its entire territory. It still faces great challenges from narco-terrorists and from terrorist organizations like the FARC. It still faces great challenges in trying to undo the effects of the long civil war there, including carrying out demobilization of the paramilitaries and providing greater security, particularly security for targeted people. But I think it's a very good story of a government that's trying to do the right things. It's been a good ally for the United States and I look forward to having the members of Congress see that with me and to provide a strong argument as to why the United States Congress should pass this free trade agreement as quickly as possible.

QUESTION: Madame Secretary, do you plan to raise the matter of human rights with President Uribe during your talks with him, and especially the problem of the union leaders? There are still some problems with union leaders.

SECRETARY RICE: Certainly, every time we talk with the Uribe government or representatives, we talk about human rights and the need to continue to improve the human rights record in Colombia. I think that most would agree that this has been a high priority for President Uribe himself. He's spoken publicly to it. He's talked about the fact that there will be no impunity for those who engage in human rights abuses. The prosecutions of people who engaged in them in the past as well as people who are being found to do so continue to -- those prosecutions continue to grow.

Many of the human rights abuses were perpetrated by paramilitaries and therefore the whole demobilization of paramilitaries and the prosecution of those who are found to have committed crimes is a very big part of improving the human rights record. So not only do we talk about it, but I think this is a government that has been straightforward about the need for Colombia to address those issues and it's been trying to address them.

QUESTION: (Off-mike.)

SECRETARY RICE: Yes. And on labor, yes, again, the President has spoken -- President Uribe has spoken about this and they have even made some efforts to do what they can to protect people who might be particularly targeted. But I think they want a healthy democracy, and in a healthy democracy people need to be able to associate and to collectively pursue their rights. And the Uribe administration has said they are committed to that, and I think they're trying.

QUESTION: What are the motivations for wanting to attack labor union leaders in Colombia?

SECRETARY RICE: This has a long history, not just in Colombia but in Latin America as a whole. And I don't want to speak to the motivations of people who engage in attacks on people because of political views. We don't accept any just motivation for doing so, so I don't want to try to speak to their motivations, just to say that they -- much of this comes out of a period in Colombia where Colombia was in a state of civil crisis, civil conflict, where, frankly, the paramilitaries were out of control, as were the terrorists; where the institutions of the state were weak, where police did not control whole swaths of territory. We have to remember that the Colombians have only recently -- I think at some -- almost 150 or more major streets and thoroughfares that Colombians -- all Colombians, not just labor leaders but all Colombians -- didn't feel safe traveling along because of fears of kidnapping or fears of bombings. And they've increased police protection along those streets and now people can travel along them.

So this was a country that was in very deep civil conflict and its institutions were not very strong and security forces were not very strong and it didn't control large parts of its territory. And that's what this administration, this government, has been reversing through very tough policies, but also through a very clear focus on making the institutions of government work for the Colombian people, including increasing their ability to prosecute crimes, changing the laws that made prosecution slow. And I think that life and safety for everybody in Colombia is improving, but it's a symptom of a society that was in deep conflict.

QUESTION: Hi. I'm Doug Palmer with Reuters. It almost seems as though the Democratic leadership doesn't really want to be persuaded to vote for this bill. Every time you ask them about it, they say that there are no plans to bring up a vote and the leading Democratic presidential candidates say that they're opposed to the agreement. What makes you think that Speaker Pelosi can be scheduled to -- or persuaded to schedule a vote on a bill that has so much opposition in her party?

SECRETARY RICE: We're going to continue to make the substantive argument about the importance of this agreement, about the importance of this agreement to America's standing in our neighborhood, about what it says about support for one of our strongest allies, about what it says for the ability of democratic leaders who are -- who turn their countries around from civil conflict and civil war and violence with impunity, what it says about our support for people like that. And we're just going to keep making that argument.

I'll, you know, leave the legislative calendar to others for now. But we just have to keep making the substantive argument. And if a country like Colombia, which has come so far back from the brink, which sits as it does in the critical Andean region, which is fighting through and has fought with bipartisan support against the infection of drugs that was of course infecting Colombia but also infecting the United States, fighting terrorists, punishing paramilitaries -- if Colombia is not deserving of support, it's hard for me to see who is.

And I just think we have to keep making that argument. Now, it's not to say that the Colombian governance -- the Colombian situation -- is perfect, but if you look at the

trajectory and where this government has come from, even the year 2000, let alone 1999 when Plan Colombia went into effect on a bipartisan basis and it's been supported on a bipartisan basis, I think I would argue that the United States has a strategy that, thanks to the solidity and strength of this democratically elected, highly popular government in Colombia -- when Colombians have spoken about the Uribe government, they've spoken favorably about it -- and I think you have to argue that on a bipartisan basis we've had a successful strategy. And I hope we're not going to take one of the major cogs out of that bipartisan strategy.

QUESTION: Madame Secretary, so what are your fears if this free trade agreement doesn't pass? What position would that put Colombia in? And also, I just wondered if you could talk a bit about your take on relations between Colombia and Venezuela at the moment, which are under strain.

SECRETARY RICE: On the latter point, I'll leave the issue of Colombian relations with Venezuela to Colombia. I don't think anybody is unclear as to our support for our ally, Colombia, in how it manages its relations with its neighbors. We have, for instance, been very much of the view that it is Colombia's to determine what can and cannot be done concerning the hostage situation. And the President has a positive agenda for Latin America, a positive agenda for each and every one of our allies. And that's what we're going to talk about and that's what we're going to focus on.

In terms of the effect of the failure, I would point you to the statements of many former officials, both -- on both sides of the aisle, former Congress people, sitting Congress people. Look at the op-eds and the editorials that are being written all over the country. And I'll tell you that they say the same things -- the same thing: The United States needs to be seen as a reliable partner for countries that are delivering for their people in Latin America and that are good friends for the United States. And what will it say if a free trade agreement which is clearly a good trade agreement from the point of view of the United States -- almost 90 percent of Colombian goods are already duty-free into the United States -- this, in a sense, evens the playing field going back the other way so that you get free trade on American goods. Secondly, this agreement, like the CAFTA and the Peruvian agreement, have the strongest labor and environmental provisions that really have been sought for many, many decades. These are the strongest provisions you'll find in any free trade agreement.

And so this is a good agreement on the merits. So what will it say if a good agreement on the merits, with a strong ally, democratically elected, winning the fight against terrorism and civil conflict, that the United States can't pass that agreement? That would be a very bad message to the whole region.

QUESTION: (Inaudible) -- the danger almost ten years ago of being a failed state or whatever ?

SECRETARY RICE: The Uribe government actually, frankly, like the government before it, has staked a lot on its partnership with the United States. It has taken difficult decisions, made difficult choices, and done difficult things to bring its country along and deliver for its people, and it's done it with a clear and public defense of the partnership with the United States. And as they continue to try to do these hard things, I think it would be a very big sign -- signal, a very bad signal for the people of Colombia, not to mention the people of the region, that you do difficult things, you work hard, you bring your country back from the brink, and the United States doesn't deliver.

QUESTION: Yes. Nestor Ikeda, an Associated Press reporter. When you depart tomorrow from Colombia, what would you consider your big achievement in this trip and the message you would like to leave for Latin American countries?

SECRETARY RICE: Well, the message that I would to leave is that the United States and I as the representative of the United States, and frankly, a representative of how strongly the President feels about this, that we are determined to deliver on our commitments to Colombia and to the region and that we're making every effort to do so, and that we appreciate what governments like the Uribe government are facing and the progress that they've made. That's not to say it suggests that all the work is done, but that we know that this is hard and that the United States is going to stand with them as they do the hard things.

I also think by bringing members of Congress and having a chance to have people look at this up close, that we're sending a signal that people are open-minded. And as I talk to these congressional members, they're taking time out from their schedules, they're taking time out to come to Colombia and see this firsthand, and that says something about the seriousness of the American Congress in considering this agreement. And I hope that that message will come through as well.

QUESTION: Yeah, Middle East. About the situation in Gaza, do you think the Egyptians are doing enough to control the border in Gaza? Do you think they could do more, and what exactly would you expect from them?

SECRETARY RICE: Well, it's obviously a difficult situation. Let me just say to start that this problem has come first and foremost out of the security situation created by Hamas in Gaza, their unwillingness to stop -- and I'm quite certain that they could if they wish to -- the rocket fire against Israel.

But that said, the innocent people of Gaza are in a very difficult situation and we've stressed with the Israelis to do everything that they can to allow humanitarian aid to continue. And that, of course, resulted in the Israelis permitting again fuel and energy supply, electricity to get to the people of Gaza, and I hope that the ability to keep at least crossings open in a way that could do it. So this is a situation that I think can be in the short term dealt with so that the people of Gaza do not suffer.

As to the Egyptians, I understand that it's a difficult situation for them, but it is an international border; it needs to be protected. And I believe that Egypt understands the importance of doing that.

QUESTION: There is some talk of forcing a vote and Colombia seemed a little hesitant about that. I'm wondering if that makes you more hesitant.

Secondly, is the Administration willing to use like tradeoffs like maybe a little bit of pressure on China as a tradeoff to Congress moving it? And will the stimulus package maybe bring Colombia into it?

SECRETARY RICE: Look, obviously -- let me just say first of all, the President and the Congress are trying to do what they need to do in terms of the economy so that all of us can experience an economy that is continuing to grow. And you know, that's what the stimulus is about and I'm certain that's what my colleague Hank Paulson is focusing on.

We're just going to continue to make the argument about the merits of this case. You know, there will come a time when issues of the legislative agenda, the legislative calendar, are salient. But I think for now, what I want to do is to with this group of Congress people who are coming with open minds, who have taken a chance to come here to have the Colombians address their concerns, to see what is there on the ground, and then to make the substantive case about how important it is to get this free trade agreement done.

Okay, thank you.

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