



## Joint Press Conference With President of Colombia Alvaro Uribe and Congressman Eliot Engel

### Secretary Condoleezza Rice

Medellin, Colombia  
January 25, 2008

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**PRESIDENT URIBE:** Madame Secretary of State, Dr. Condoleezza Rice, Representative Elliot Engel, distinguished representatives of the United States Congress, Mr. Tom Shannon, Undersecretary for Western Hemisphere Affairs; very distinguished Ambassadors Carolina Barco and William Brownfield, distinguished members of the U.S. delegation, Mr. Governor of Antioquia, members of the Colombian Government, and very appreciated journalists.

Madame Secretary, Congressmen, our voice of gratitude for your interest in Colombia, your affection for Colombia, your permanent efforts, and this new visit. Many people told me in Davos that the Secretary of State was there, and that she had to follow a very tight schedule, and had to run, and had told everyone, "I'm in a hurry because I have a very important visit to Colombia. This morning when I came here many people in Medellin told me "call Dr. Rice." And I said, 'why?'. Because last night she gave a very generous speech to Colombia, very generous to Medellin, very generous to the Administration, and with the Government you represent. Thank you very much, Dr. Rice.

We know Colombia is not paradise, that we have many problems we need to solve. We have made important accomplishments and we will not lose a minute in doing what we can to improve in three areas: security, based on democracy; investment, based on social responsibility; and social cohesion, based on freedom.

Once again, thank you, and I leave you in the company of this group of journalists.

**SECRETARY RICE:** Thank you very much, thank you, Mr. President, and I want to thank very much the people of Colombia, the Government of Colombia, the Administration of Medellin, and the people of Medellin who I know have, unfortunately, had to put up with a lot of disruption. I've seen the long lines of cars waiting for us to go by, but it has been a really wonderful visit to Medellin and I am very grateful to the members of Congress who accompanied me here. The United States and Colombia have a good and strong friendship. It is a friendship that is based on democratic values and on our desire for a Western Hemisphere -- a neighborhood -- that is democratic and prosperous, where social justice can reign.

I said last night, and I want to repeat, that Colombia is an inspirational story not just to the people of this region but to the people around the world who are trying to overcome years of civil conflict, who are trying to overcome their differences, and who are trying to do so in a democratic framework. Mr. President, you and your Government have always been generous, not just with your time, but you have been generous in spirit, in your transparency, in talking about difficult circumstances that you are trying to overcome. We have been able to talk about human rights, we have been able to talk about labor rights, we have never found your Government to be unwilling to answer difficult questions, and we've found the same today. And I want to say to the many Colombian citizens with whom we met, labor leaders - some of whom are opposed to the FTA, others whom favor the FTA, members of the civil society, members of the business community, workers, it has been a joy to be together with you in this great democracy. We know that Colombia has many challenges but I want to assure you that you will have a good friend in the United States as you go through those challenges. The Bush Administration believes very strongly that the Free Trade Agreement that we have signed, that provides some of the strongest protection for labor and the environment that has ever been included in a free trade agreement between the United States and any country. That free trade agreement is deserving of the American Congress' support and we are working very hard toward that end. Again, I want to thank my fellow Americans and members of Congress, wherever they stand they have come here to see first hand Colombia and what you are doing here. But again, to the people of Colombia, the achievements and progress made here in Colombia are due to, in great part, to the leadership of President Uribe and the democratic leadership here. I want to close by saying that the kind of reconciliation and progress that we've seen could not have come about without strong commitment and courage and the dedication of the people of Colombia itself and so, the progress that you've seen is more than anything because of the people of Colombia. Thank you very much. And if I may, I would like to turn to Congressman Engel of New York. He is the chair of the subcommittee on Western Hemisphere Affairs of the United States House of Representatives, Foreign Affairs Committee.

**REPRESENTATIVE ENGEL:** Thank you, Madam Secretary, and thank you for letting us travel with you. This is my (inaudible) trip to Colombia in three months, the delegation, I know, feels as I do and we are quite impressed by what we saw. One cannot come to Colombia and not feel impressed. The progress that has been made here in the last few years amidst so many issues of security, narco-trafficking, this movement towards democracy, this country has made great strides. And another thing that is important to all of us that we rarely take time to appreciate and cherish is the friendship and the partnership between the United States and Colombia. And we appreciate the wonderful job that President Uribe has done. We had a very, very frank discussion, he sat with us for a long time and answered our questions and we spoke about Colombia and the United States. We really do appreciate that. We are leaving Colombia as soon as this press conference ends, but I know that for me and many of my colleagues we will be back because we really do value the partnership between our two countries. We share the same hemisphere, we have a vision of the future which is unlike some of the visions that some others may have in this Hemisphere. I know that by working together, the U.S. and Colombia, democracy will prevail and our friendship will be continued. Thank you for your hospitality.

**QUESTION:** A number of the members of Congress traveling with you, Madame Secretary, have expressed concern about possible reactions from Hugo Chavez. They do not approve this deal. Are they right to be right? I ask the same question to President Uribe, and also ask Congressman Engel, how much is this issue, the relationship with Venezuela, weighing on your mind?

**SECRETARY RICE:** From the point of view of President Bush and our Administration, there is one issue here, and that is future progress for Colombia in democracy, in security, in economic prosperity, and in social justice. That is the President's agenda for the Western Hemisphere; it's the agenda that has been shared with democratic leaders like President Uribe. It is also, by the way, an agenda that he shares with democratic leaders that come from the left of the political spectrum. The United States has no ideological test for its friends. President Lula of Brazil is a good friend. President Bachelet of Chile is a good friend. We have many good friends, President Vasquez of Uruguay, who come from the left side of the political spectrum. So what unites this Hemisphere is a belief in democracy, that it is the only way that human beings can be prosperous, belief in prosperity through open trade, free trade, and open economies, and the good environment for investment. But to understand that it is not enough to grow economies that have free trade, but that those benefits need to be available to the population, including marginalized population, and that is why I was very pleased to see the work of USAID here in helping in the flower growing region that we visited, the flower growing farm that we visited, where USAID is contributing to a program for the reintegration of displaced people. We met with two women who fled violence with their children and they now are working in the flower industry, and it is partially funded by a USAID program. That's what this is about, this has to do with a positive agenda for Latin America, and that, from the point of view of this President, is the only issue. A Hemisphere that is democratic and we will work with anyone who rules democratically, governs democratically, and is devoted to the well-being of the people.

**QUESTION:** Do you think that this visit and your interview with union leaders will be able to slightly change the intention of the Democrats to vote and would you take the risk to submit the FTA now in March, knowing that maybe you do not have the majority of the votes, or are you going to wait after the elections? We will also like to know our President Alvaro Uribe's thoughts.

**SECRETARY RICE:** What we are doing here is concentrating on the substance of the issues, but I cannot speak for anyone but the Administration. There are people

who currently support the agreement. There are others who we hope that when we subsequently explain that they will support the agreement. The legislative agenda, the legislative calendar we will worry about later. The issue right now is for the United States Administration which is proposing this agreement to the Congress for their ratification -- that we make available all of the arguments for this agreement. That is why we are bringing people here with your support, that we make clear that from the point of view of the Administration, supporting a strong ally like Colombia, that is doing the right thing after many, many years of conflict, is at the center of a smart and wise policy for the region, and that's what we are doing here and that's the case that we are going to keep making.

**QUESTION:** This is a question for President Uribe. Mr. President, you are pressing for approval of FTA this year? Why is it so urgent while the Democrats in the U.S. Congress have so many concerns about human right and labor issues in Colombia. And I have also a question for Madame Secretary. Could you give us a reaction to the bombing in Lebanon? And do you see the hand of Syria behind it?

**SECRETARY RICE:** I am going to answer the question on Lebanon and then perhaps the president can close so that we can stay focused on Colombia. Obviously violence in Lebanon of this kind continues on a very unfortunate and disturbing pattern in Lebanon where continued efforts of intimidation are robbing the people of Lebanon of the sense of security and the environment of progress that they should have. It's far too early to know who might have been behind it, but we have seen this sort of thing before. The one thing we can do is condemn any bombing as a terrorist activity. But we also call again for all involved, and that means Lebanon's neighbors in particular, to support a process in Lebanon by allowing the people of Lebanon to elect a president, and to do so freely, and to do so without intimidation, and to do so by their own processes. Lebanon has suffered too long from foreign interference in its affairs, and this must be stopped. We hope that the international community will continue to send a very strong message to those who are standing in the way of Lebanon's election of its president. That is simply unacceptable.

**PRESIDENT URIBE:** I do not want to deprive you or us of the opportunity of asking questions to Madame Secretary of State and Congressman Elliot Engel. However, briefly I will answer the question of the journalist from the international community. I can say the following. Do you understand my Spanish?

We practice security policy based on democracy. In many nations in Latin America there was security under dictatorships. That is what marks the difference. For us, security policy is sustainable only if it is democratic for all Colombians, and it is credible. In order to be credible it has to be effective and transparent. And transparency is a matter of respect for human rights.

Why the urgency of getting the FTA approved? Because it is an important step to increase investment in Colombia, and more investment allows creating good jobs with wages and social security. I want to convey this message to the workers? The more integrated the country is with the international community, the more protection of labor rights, job opportunities improve. If the country stays isolated, and does not advance trade agreements, the more difficult it will be to protect labor rights. From the labor point of view only, every trade agreement is a step towards investment, creating jobs, creating the conditions for demanding labor rights protection.

**MODERATOR:** Thank you.

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