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U.S. POLICY AND PROGRAMS IN COLOMBIA

Good morning. Mr. Chairman, members of the Committee, allow me to first express our appreciation for your ongoing interest in and support for our policy toward Colombia. Your willingness to receive Colombian government officials here, and your continued interest in sending Congressional delegations to Colombia, help sustain crucial support for our Colombia strategy.

U.S. policy toward Colombia supports the Colombian Government's efforts to defend and strengthen its democratic institutions, promote respect for human rights and the rule of law, intensify counter-narcotics efforts, foster socio-economic development and investment, address immediate humanitarian needs, and end the threats to democracy posed by narcotics trafficking and terrorism.

This policy reflects the continuing bipartisan support received from the Congress for our programs in Colombia.

My colleague Bobby Charles will be addressing in detail our counternarcotics policy in Colombia. I would like to offer an update on the current challenges narco-terrorism is posing to Colombia, provide you a picture of the progress President Alvaro Uribe is making in confronting those challenges and outline our efforts to help him attain peace and strengthen democracy and the rule of law in Colombia.

Colombia remains central to our counter-narcotics and counter-terrorism goals and, indeed, is important to achieving every goal we have in the hemisphere. Ninety percent of the cocaine, and a significant percentage of the heroin, in the U.S. comes from Colombia. Close to 30,000 well-armed, drug-financed terrorists still operate in Colombia, affecting the government's ability to provide security and services to its citizens. Colombian narco-terror impacts its neighbors in the Andes,

Brazil, Central America, Mexico, and the island nations of the Caribbean. Regional instability resulting from Colombia's internal wars undermines our efforts to strengthen the Inter-American community and foster regional partners who are democratic, stable and prosperous.

All who have met with President Uribe in Washington or Bogotá and know the great progress he has made in the past two years also recognize the unique, reliable partner we have in him. His strength of character, courage and vision provide the foundation for his record of success and popularity in the past two years. Latest polling shows his approval rating at more than 80 percent. These numbers also underscore the widespread popularity of Plan Colombia and the U.S.-Colombian partnership.

The news from Colombia over the past two years is a story of steady progress.

While Bobby Charles will discuss in more detail our counter-drug effort, I want to highlight it as a major success story. For the second year in a row, the U.S. and Colombia have sprayed more than 300,000 acres of illegal coca. Since 2002 close to 760,000 acres have been sprayed. We have every reason to believe we and our Colombian partners can spray all coca acreage currently under cultivation this year - which is not to say we will solve the problem once and for all in 2004. Coca growers are busy replanting, and we still face a multi-year effort.

On the counter-terror front, with the expanded authority provided by Congress, we have been able to assist Colombia's war against the FARC, ELN and AUC. Our support for Colombian efforts to safeguard the essential Cano Limon pipeline has resulted in a precipitous drop in the number of attacks on the pipeline from 2000 to 2004. President Uribe continues to pressure all three terrorist groups, significantly stepping up attacks and arrests, while seeking to negotiate peace with those who accept an immediate ceasefire as a precondition for peace talks. More than 14 FARC commanders have been killed or captured since October 2003. Two were key players in drug trafficking, hostage-taking and other criminal acts against the United States.

President Uribe's Plan Patriota has put the FARC on the defensive. Late last year, the Colombian military effectively cleared the area around Bogotá of terrorist fighters. This year, they have expanded operations into south-central Colombia,

deploying troops into the traditional FARC stronghold, reclaiming municipalities that had long been in the hands of that organization and disrupting important lines of supply and communication.

The military services are working together better than ever to mount joint operations and continue to hit the FARC hard. More than 3,600 terrorists have deserted their organizations since President Uribe took office. Those who have deserted report deteriorating living conditions and plummeting morale among their former comrades. It is becoming harder to recruit new fighters into the ranks and internal discipline is enforced with harsh measures. The FARC has proven to be a tenacious force over the decades and the Government of Colombia will need to maintain pressure on this group in coming years, but clearly it is gaining the upper hand.

These successes have come at a cost and many Colombian lives have been lost. Americans too have lost their lives and been taken into captivity. This past February, we marked the one-year anniversary of the seizure of three American contractors when their plane went down in FARC territory, as well as the murder of their American pilot and Colombian colleague. We greatly appreciate the efforts made by the Colombian government over the past year to recover the three hostages.

Despite loss of Colombian lives, President Uribe and his government have been unwavering in their support and have fully cooperated in ongoing search and rescue efforts. Uribe has been supportive of all actions we are undertaking to secure their release. In December 2003, we implemented the Rewards for Justice program in Colombia, which offers up to \$5 million to individuals who provide actionable information leading to the death or capture of FARC commanders implicated in the seizing and holding of the hostages. We are in constant touch with the families of these brave men to keep them apprised of our ongoing efforts.

While our assistance in support of Colombia's counter-terror operations has strengthened the government's hand, the Colombians have taken ownership of this battle and are substantially increasing the resources they commit to it. President Uribe has made good on his promise to President Bush to devote a greater share of his budget to security. Overall, real spending on defense has increased every year under Uribe. According to the most recent Ministry of Defense and Ministry of

Finance figures, Colombian spending on defense has grown over 30 percent since 2001.

President Uribe also is advancing his efforts to end the threat posed to Colombian stability by the second largest terror group, the United Self-defense Forces or AUC. Peace negotiations with the AUC have been long and difficult, but not without a measure of success. More than 1,000 paramilitary fighters have been removed from the field of battle through negotiated demobilizations.

Last month, AUC leaders accepted, in principle, group concentration in a special zone while further negotiations toward a final peace settlement take place. The Organization of American States established a monitoring and verification mission in Colombia to verify their compliance with this commitment and assist other aspects of the peace process. The Colombian Congress continues to debate the issue of how to hold accountable those leaders and members of the terrorist groups who have been accused of serious criminal offenses, including human rights violations.

The road to a final peace settlement with the AUC has been marked by setbacks and delays. Events such as the possible assassination and disappearance of AUC leader Carlos Castaño call into question the good faith of those within the organization who are compromised by their participation in the illegal drug trade. However, the Government of Colombia is fully aware of the risks of pursuing a peace agreement with terrorists. The Colombian military continues to pursue paramilitary forces that have not entered into peace negotiations as well as those who have not complied with their commitment to cease violent, criminal activities.

From the beginning of the peace process, the United States Government has made clear to the Colombian government that it should do nothing to undermine the excellent extradition relationship our two countries enjoy. Indeed, extraditions are at record levels. More than 115 requests have been granted during President Uribe's tenure. President Uribe shares our commitment to bringing any terrorist or criminal to justice who has been, or may be, indicted for crimes against the United States and U.S. citizens. He has pledged to take no action that precludes extradition of such leaders and has offered no guarantees in the negotiating process. We also have made clear that we want justice for Colombian victims of violent crimes and

human rights abuses, as well as a transparent, verifiable demobilization process.

We have seen reports in recent weeks that the third largest Colombian terrorist organization, the National Liberation Army or ELN, may be considering direct discussions with the Government of Colombia. We call on the ELN to end its attacks on civilians, stop kidnapping and murdering, give up its involvement in the illegal drug trade, and commit itself to a peace process. We also welcome the supporting role that the Government of Mexico has offered to play in a potential peace process between the Government of Colombia and the ELN.

President Uribe's approval rating - and the Colombian public's appreciation of U.S. support for Plan Colombia - remain high because of our joint efforts to enhance the personal security of Colombian citizens. I am happy to say that U.S. assistance has had a positive influence in the creation of an environment conducive to protecting and promoting human rights. We are helping President Uribe's administration implement programs designed to consolidate state presence throughout Colombia, by training and equipping "Carabinero" squadrons, which are rural, mobile police forces. These police officers provide backup for the Colombian National Police units now deployed in every single municipality in Colombia, fulfilling a key commitment undertaken by President Uribe at the outset of his administration.

U.S. assistance also has contributed to the Colombian government's progress in protecting human rights, supported the work of the United Nations Commission for Human Rights in Colombia, protected at-risk labor and human rights leaders, strengthened and expanded the reach of the national Human Rights Unit by establishing mobile satellite sub-units throughout the country and leveraged needed reforms within the Prosecutor General's office. Reinforcing the Colombian government's own commitment to improving human rights and personal security in Colombia, these efforts are paying off. The country's overall homicide rate dropped by 20 percent in 2003. Kidnappings dropped by 39 percent. Terrorist incidents dropped by close to 49 percent, as did the number of Colombians internally displaced by armed conflict and the number of murdered trade union officials.

Colombia still suffers the highest rate of kidnapping in the world; over 2,000 such crimes were committed in 2003. In response, Colombia's U.S.-supported Anti-kidnapping Initiative

was inaugurated in August 2003 and has trained and equipped military and police anti-kidnapping units. These units already have conducted several successful rescue operations, freeing hostages and dismantling kidnapping rings. This initiative complements other U.S. Government counter-terrorism assistance.

Our on-going human rights dialogue with the Colombian government, as well as Colombian and U.S.-based human rights NGOs, together with our support to further develop Colombia's judicial system, and human rights infrastructure will continue in order to sustain these improvements and bolster the rule of law in Colombia. We continue to leverage human rights conditionality to encourage the Government of Colombia to take necessary steps to sever military-paramilitary links and bring to justice military officials involved in human rights abuses and paramilitarism.

President Uribe is looking ahead, already mapping out a strategy to build on the successes of Plan Colombia, originally envisioned as a six-year plan that ends in 2006. We hope to bring to bear increased Colombian resources to the task of ending nearly a half-century of violence and lawlessness. He and his successors will need the continued support of the United States to carry it out.

This year, we are seeking a modest increase in the number of U.S. support personnel in Colombia. In 2002, this body, recognizing the sinister interplay between the illegal narcotics trade and Colombian terrorism, granted the Administration expanded authorities to allow equipment and resources that have been provided for counter-narcotics programs to be used for counter-terror operations. However, the existing caps on the number of U.S. civilian and military personnel contractors allowed in Colombia at any given time are proving too restrictive and in some cases, the ceilings have constrained us from the full implementation of already funded programs. We believe that an increase in the military and civilian contractor support provided to the Government of Colombia during the next two years is essential to maintain the current progress being made by our programs in Colombia. Also, some of the original Plan Colombia programs are only now reaching full implementation. There also are new programs developed since the ceilings were established, such as the anti-kidnapping initiative and the training of prosecutors and judicial police in preparation for the constitutionally-mandated transition to an accusatorial criminal justice system with oral trials, as well as the re-started Air Bridge Denial program.

Accordingly, we have asked for language to be included in the 2005 Defense Authorization bill that raises the number of military personnel permitted to 800 and the number of permitted civilian contractors to 600. While the Administration notes that any numerical limit on military personnel deployments is inconsistent with the authority committed by the Constitution to the President to conduct the Nation's foreign affairs and command of the armed forces, the Administration's request to increase the number of troops and contractors deployable is critical to the continued success of U.S. policy in Colombia and to help President Uribe prosecute a unified campaign against terrorism and drug traffickers. I urge you to support this measure.

Finally, no one recognizes better than President Bush that in the long run free trade, and the jobs and economic alternatives it offers to Colombia's citizens, will provide the foundation of our long-term partnership with Colombia. After several years of recession, Colombia's economy has bounced back and is enjoying robust growth. Employment is up, as is the confidence of Colombians in their economic future. They are poised and eager to forge a strong trade partnership with the United States through a free trade agreement. Formal negotiations began last month in Cartagena. They are continuing this week in Atlanta, Georgia.

U.S. companies will substantially benefit from the elimination of Colombia's relatively high trade barriers. U.S. agricultural producers in particular expect to gain much through improved access to a large, relatively lucrative market. Along with Colombia, Ecuador and Peru are participating in the negotiations, and Bolivia is observing. Expanded trade with all of the countries of the Andean Region supports our many regional objectives, while lowering prices for U.S. consumers and creating opportunities for U.S. exporters.

Through expanded regional trade, bilateral programs and diplomacy, we continue to build more support for President Uribe both regionally and internationally. Many of Colombia's challenges do not stop at Colombia's borders and require a regional solution. Last year, we supported Colombian efforts to secure a UN Security Council resolution and an OAS resolution condemning terrorism and calling on member states to crack down on terrorists operating out of their own countries. In October, we led the effort to obtain a declaration at the OAS Special Hemispheric Security Meeting to strengthen these commitments and

lay the ground work for increase regional cooperation in law enforcement and security. To be sure, Colombia's neighbors have begun to pull their weight in helping fight this transnational threat and help a sister democracy defend her institutions against narcoterrorism.

Thank you again for your interest, and for your commitment to help us help Colombia confront the daunting challenges it still faces. If the recent past provides a guide to Colombia's future, the country's long-term prospects are excellent. Our near-term task is to help consolidate the significant gains made and help Colombians face the challenges that remain. This concludes my formal statement, and I am ready and eager to answer your questions.