

Opening Statement
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Subcommittee on the Western Hemisphere
Committee on International Relations

Title: *“Keeping Democracy on Track:
Hotspots in Latin America”*

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Over the last several months, the Western Hemisphere Subcommittee has convened hearings on topics ranging from democratization, diplomacy, transparency and the rule of law, gangs and crime, the rise and influence of China in Latin America, and oppression and human rights violations in Cuba. From these hearings and this hearing today, we hope to achieve a better understanding of the opportunities to strengthen U.S. foreign policy in the region.

Today we are convening a follow-up to our first hearing on Democracy in Latin America back in March 2005, to take stock of the state of democracy and dynamics in some of the hotspots. Your testimony today will help the Subcommittee in making an assessment of U.S. policies to advance and reinforce democratic reforms and institutional capacity within Latin America and potential threats to stability.

Over the last ten months, Members of this Subcommittee have closely monitored political developments in Bolivia, Ecuador, Venezuela, and Nicaragua and other countries which are witnessing transitions marred by violence, erosion of freedom, and extra-constitutional mechanisms for succession.

Our friends in Latin America face problems ranging from high unemployment, high crime, narcotics trafficking and related violence, and other social problems that threaten stability. Reducing these problems while at the same time boosting economic output and attracting new trade and investment is essential to creating conditions that foster stable development of democratic institutions and societies. In some Andean countries, political institutions are extremely fragile, the courts are in shambles, there is a lack of political leadership, no contract sanctity, no enforcement, no legal certainty, and no predictability. These conditions allow for the erosion of political freedoms and further weakening of democratic institutions. Conducting democratic elections in this environment is fraught with difficulty.

President Chavez of Venezuela, although democratically elected, is seemingly and deliberately moving away from the democratic principles he once claimed to espouse. Colombia continues to be threatened by drug trafficking organizations and by guerrilla groups. Argentina, Bolivia and Ecuador have had turbulent, extra-constitutional successions of their presidencies since 2000. And Nicaragua is not trailing far behind.

This week I introduced H. Con. Resolution 252 condemning the recent actions of the Nicaraguan Congress. One week ago, the Nicaraguan Congress stripped three Cabinet members, including Interior Minister Julio Vega and Agriculture Minister Mario Salvo, of their legal immunity from criminal prosecution, due to alleged campaign fund irregularities, dating back to the 2001/2002 elections. These latest developments continue to demonstrate the deteriorating political landscape in Nicaragua, between President Bolaños and his supporters, and the opposition “Pact” Members in Congress.

Elsewhere in Central America, in El Salvador, Honduras, and Guatemala, political corruption and a growing outbreak of violent crimes, especially by gangs, have posed serious challenges to these young democracies. Drug trafficking, HIV/AIDS, poverty, lawlessness and crime are straining resources in the Caribbean, already stretched thin by hurricane reconstruction.

Security, democratic reform, and long-term prosperity are becoming elusive goals – yet we must continue to look for ways to rally behind and support our neighbors in Latin America to address the challenges of poverty, political and economic instability, and the many other ills which threaten to undermine the future course of democracy in our hemisphere.

Some observers say the United States is pushing too hard in countries like Venezuela, Haiti, Bolivia, and Ecuador. Others who have testified before the Subcommittee have argued it is a lack of leadership in Latin America, not U.S. intervention or benign neglect, that is to blame. I believe there is some fine tuning to be made in our approach, and I believe this Administration is making progress to better engage in the region’s democratic and economic growth.

Within the last two weeks I met with President Uribe of Colombia, President Toledo of Peru, President Chavez of Venezuela, President Maduro of Honduras, and President Bolanos of Nicaragua. Many of my colleagues joined in these and other meetings with heads of states in Latin America visiting the United States on the occasion of the UN General Assembly. From these meetings I believe we have many common social, economic, and security interests. From these meetings I fully appreciate that we must communicate and cooperate more effectively to realize opportunities to mobilize support of Latin American nations to further democracy and economic progress in the region. When we return from the recess in mid-October, we plan to conduct an oversight hearing of U.S. policy in the Caribbean region. We also intend to conduct oversight travel to Haiti in advance of critical elections scheduled there. I understand Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice and Deputy Assistant Secretary Shapiro visited Haiti yesterday. I look forward to hearing your assessment of the situation there.

In meetings with numerous Heads of State over the last two weeks, I received assurances that they are all committed to political and economic stability. There were also warnings about political and ideological opponents to democracy and free markets.

At our hearing today, we should remember the troubled past in the region, and address potential slippage where it is occurring. One important track that I advocate in this regard, is Congressional passage of the Andean Free-Trade agreement to boost economic activity and opportunity, fuel exports and foreign investment and help to alleviate poverty.