

Council on Foreign Relations,
New York City,
September 7, 2000

Ladies and Gentlemen:

It is indeed a great honor to return to the Council on Foreign Relations, and I would like to thank all of you for the opportunity to speak here today. For nearly eighty years now, this organization has stood as the most influential center for the study and debate of international affairs, and the United States – and by extension the free world – has been better served because of it.

When it has mattered most, you have served as much more than a forum, but as a voice for concrete action. During the past several months, in response to increased interest in Colombia, this Council has acted as a critical source for understanding our country and how the United States should engage with us at such an important moment in our history.

Most significantly, there is the Council's co-sponsorship, along with the Inter-American Dialogue, of an Independent Task Force on Colombia, chaired by retired General Brent Scowcroft and Florida's senior Senator, Bob Graham. This Task Force added great political and intellectual weight to the issue of whether the United States should support Plan Colombia, my government's strategy for national renewal.

I was quite pleased with the interim report's vote of confidence, especially in terms of garnering congressional support for U.S. assistance, as well as its call for strengthening a more regional approach to the drug problem and improving Colombia's economic prospects through enhancing its trade benefits. I look forward to the Task Force's final report, which should serve as the most comprehensive U.S. study of Colombia's present situation.

President Clinton's visit to Colombia last week stands as powerful proof of the great strides our relations have made over the last two years. He was accompanied not only by the Secretary of State, the Attorney General and the National Security Adviser, but also by a large congressional delegation, led by the Republican Speaker of the House, Dennis Hastert, and the Democratic Senator Joseph Biden.

The very nature of the delegation, as the votes in Congress earlier this year, speaks of a strong bipartisan commitment on the part of the United States government.

It is no exaggeration to say that our bilateral relations have never been stronger. Still, as U.S. assistance has increased, so has media coverage. And with such coverage has come a certain amount of distortion.

On the night before his visit, a taped address by President Clinton was broadcast to the Colombian people. His goal was to allay fears concerning U.S. intentions in Colombia, which was by all accounts successful. He made the crucial point that this is about fighting drugs, not waging a war.

Together at our press conference, we tried to do the same in front of an even larger audience, and I would like to take a moment to do the same here.

Above all, Plan Colombia is a *Colombian* plan that has the support of the United States, and not the other way around. It is a three year 7.5 billion dollar program, with Colombia, which has historically carried the weight single-handedly, providing 4.5 billion dollars. The U.S. assistance for the next two years is 1.3 billion dollars. We have received additional pledges from other nations (in particular, Spain, Japan and Norway) and credits and loans from the international financial institutions.

Both the Colombian and the U.S. governments believe that the rest of the world, especially the European Union, should do more. Strengthening Colombia's democracy, in the face of a truly global problem like drug-trafficking, requires a global solution.

At the same time, too much emphasis has been placed on the military component of the plan. This is about a lot more than just helicopters. Seventy-five percent of Plan Colombia is social and political in nature, not military. It is a plan for peace, prosperity and the strengthening of the State. It is about providing alternative development for subsistence farmers, about modernizing and reforming our judicial system, about environmental protection, and about protecting human rights.

I would also remind you that while the majority of U.S. assistance is earmarked for the Colombian Armed Forces, in terms of hardware and training, it has changed in nature, increasing ten times in the area of social programs from the year before. 240 million dollars is going to support these efforts, as well as to help the internally displaced.

For the first time, the U.S. understands that what is at stake here is the strength of our institutions, requiring an approach far greater than simply drug eradication. It is a mistake to see Plan Colombia as a blueprint for war. Yes, our efforts are anti-drug, but they are also pro-peace.

This is crucial to understanding the long-term goals of Plan Colombia and the nature of U.S. assistance.

Another important point has to do with regional cooperation. As was made clear to me at my meetings with South America leaders in Brasilia last weekend, there is concern among Colombia's neighbors about a spill-over into their territories following a step-up of our counter-narcotics operations. Both the United States and Colombia are committed to working with our neighbors, not only to offset any short-term problems, but to construct a more regional approach to what is a global crisis.

This was reinforced by the Brasilia communique, which advocated support for the Colombian peace process and a regional approach to fighting narco-trafficking. Clearly, a stable Colombia, at peace, is in everyone's interest in the hemisphere.

Our success is dependent on continued U.S. leadership and partnership, both regionally and bilaterally. Our work over the last two years comprise the first hurdle – devising a strategy and securing its support.

But now, as President Clinton steps down and a new President and a new Congress are only months away, it is important to make my government's intentions clear as we approach the second hurdle – implementation.

Given the strong social dimension to Plan Colombia, I am determined to put this into place ahead of the more military component of our counter-narcotics operations. This is particularly true of our push into the Putumayo region – the region that has witnessed the recent increase in coca and poppy cultivation. While the training of our three counter-narcotics battalions are underway, my government will reach out to the subsistence farmers, and offer them sustainable options for alternative development.

We have a window of opportunity here, to demonstrate the sincerity of our plan and to restore confidence in the Colombian government in a region where our presence has been little felt.

Furthermore, my government is committed to seeing that the funds allocated by the international community are implemented properly, and in a transparent manner.

This brings me to the issue of human rights. By taking our case for greater burden sharing in the war on illegal drugs to the world, my government welcomes increased attention on the human rights situation in Colombia. It is critical to remember that the human rights issue has not been imposed on us from the outside, but has been a commitment of my administration since day one.

We welcome this scrutiny, because we are determined to continue with the reforms we have already undertaken. At the same time, we are asking the world to understand the true complexity of our problems.

Guerrilla groups, criminal elements and paramilitary units – who account for over 90 percent of all human rights violations in Colombia – operate outside the arm of the law and act with impunity. We will never control this situation entirely until an end to hostilities is reached, when the Colombian State is made stronger and more accountable, as an arm of protection and stability.

Already, significant progress has been achieved. As part of our military reform initiatives, a law should be passed as early as this month to give military commanders the authority to dismiss any officer who is suspected of human rights violations. We hope to pass a similar law concerning non-commissioned officers in the near future.

Several senior level officers, and numerous members of the Armed Forces and National Police, have already been suspended for human rights charges leveled against them by civilian authorities. And just last year alone, 63,000 members of the security forces received human rights training provided by the International Red Cross.

The Armed Forces are now cooperating more fully with civilian authorities in investigating and charging members in civilian courts. For example, the military judiciary has also turned over 526 cases of possible human rights violations to the civilian judiciary. Still, we will do more, to guarantee complete sharing between civil and military authorities and to pursue outstanding arrest warrants.

With respect to ending ties between the Armed Forces and the paramilitary groups, the military is now engaging in direct combat against paramilitary units. This was unheard of just three years ago. Paramilitaries have been killed in combat with security forces, and more than three hundred have been captured and are awaiting trials.

We also have a new criminal code in place which, for the first time, means the issues of forced disappearance, torture and genocide will be dealt with in civilian courts. We are determined to do whatever it takes to eliminate impunity within the military justice system, and dedicate more resources to the Prosecutor General's office. I should also point out that the Colombian military is in the process of establishing a Judge Advocate General Corps to be deployed among field units, to investigate misconduct.

Progress on human rights is critical to continued support from the world community, as well as the future of our bilateral relationship with the United States. Let me anticipate one of your questions: Do I believe that the next administration or Congress will signal a shift in our bilateral relations? The answer is an absolute no.

Like the rest of the world, we Colombians take great interest in who becomes the next president of the United States, as well as which party will control Capitol Hill. From where I stand, the world is quite fortunate that both candidates believe in the global benefits of further trade liberalization, and in the spreading and supporting of democracies across the globe. Both have pledged their determination to fight the international menace of illegal drugs and to support the government of Colombia in our efforts.

From our perspective, then – and given the strong bipartisan support already shown for Plan Colombia – we are optimistic that the future will be marked by even greater collaboration between our two countries. Our mutual interests require that we follow through with the advances already made, and that we remain actively engaged over the next several years.

Still, as I said, United States support for Plan Colombia should be seen as Phase One in the broader context of our relations. There is no question that combating illegal drugs is, and will remain, of utmost importance, just as negotiating an end to our armed conflict is Colombia's paramount challenge.

Still, we cannot lose sight of the larger agenda – especially the critical issue of economics, foreign investment and trade liberalization. This is one of my administration's top priorities, because no solution to Colombia's most pressing problems can succeed without economic growth – without increased opportunity and prosperity for all our citizens, without across-the-board modernization and reform, without taking full advantage of the new global economy, and without meaningful trade expansion between our two economies.

In our meetings with President Clinton and the U.S. delegation last week, I made clear my absolute commitment to deepen our economic relationship with the United States. Here, a wide range of avenues are open to us, some more immediate than others.

Our first order of business is securing CBI parity for the Colombian apparel industry by the end of this year. Without it, we risk losing as many as 200,000 jobs.

Senators Bob Graham and Mike DeWine have introduced the Plan Colombia Trade Act, which would secure us parity for one year. This will give our apparel industry some immediate relief, while we enter into negotiations to extend the Andean Trade Preference Act, which expires in 2001. This would serve two important purposes: saving jobs in the short-term, while allowing us the necessary time to address other trade issues.

But in the end, our success will depend on Colombians believing once again in themselves. In the two years remaining to me in office, I am determined to leave a legacy which, despite times of great difficulties, will see us reinvigorated and on the road to modernization, with our adversaries at the negotiating table, the drug-traffickers in retreat, and trade liberalization with the United States in the works.

In closing, I would like once again to thank the Council, not only for this invitation, but more importantly for the timely and sustained interest you have shown in Colombia. As we continue to forge closer relations with the United States, whether in an alliance to rid both our societies of the dangers of illegal drugs, to expand already significant economic ties, or to foster peace and stability throughout our hemisphere, we will always look to this institution for its learned advice and as a forum for enlightened debate.

Thank you.