

COMO UN SERVICIO A SUS ABONADOS, LA AGENCIA ANCOL REPRODUCE EN INGLES LAS PALABRAS DEL PRESIDENTE DE LA REPUBLICA, ANDRES PASTRANA ARANGO, EN LA CONFERENCIA DE LA ASOCIACION NACIONAL DE GOBERNADORES

Washington D.C., feb 25 (ANCOL).- :

"Governors and distinguished guests, ladies and gentlemen:

I would like to begin by thanking you for the timely invitation to speak here today, at your mid-winter conference. It is indeed an honor. In particular, let me thank Governor Parris Glendening, of Maryland, and Governor Jim Gilmore, of Virginia, for their help in arranging this event.

As the elected leaders of each of the fifty United States, you represent the vast size and unique diversity of this land, encompassing European, African, Native American, Asian and Hispanic influences that have defined the American experience. Your Founding Fathers showed real wisdom in creating a truly Federal government, but also by giving substantial power and responsibility to the states.

In this era of rapid globalization, the role of a governor is changing. In addition to confronting domestic challenges, today you lead trade missions abroad, and compete for foreign investment at home. You operate as much like an ambassador as a chief executive.

This eye to abroad is particularly strong in the areas of trade and investment. But other international issues are a part of the everyday business of governing a state. These include immigration and the environment, transnational crime, and the very real danger posed by international narcotrafficking.

I have come here to talk about my homeland, a place of striking beauty, a determined people, notable accomplishments, and tough challenges. We have thrived, often in the face of great odds, because of our commitment to democracy. Ours is the oldest democracy in Latin America.

When I came to office two and a half years ago, pessimism was rampant. Our economy had entered its first recession in almost seventy years. Narcotraffickers looked as powerful and threatening as ever. There were no negotiations in place to put an end to the nearly 40 years of violence and armed conflict. We felt isolated from the United States and the international community.

Today, however, there is reason for a renewed optimism. Our economy is in recovery. We are dealing a heavy blow to a new generation of narcotraffickers. We have brought guerrilla groups to the negotiating table. And we have forged stronger bilateral relations with the United States and the international community.

Critical to this relationship is, without question, our shared role and responsibility in the war against illegal drugs. As governors, you see first-hand the impact of illegal drugs in your communities and schools. You understand the complexity of this problem from addiction, treatment and law enforcement, to corruption, violence and the need to forge an international response to this threat.

At the international level, we must maintain our efforts to reduce supply at one end and demand at the other end efforts that complement and reinforce each other. We must be vigilant against the criminal element of this business. But we must show compassion towards those who suffer from

problems of addiction and abuse here in the United States, and towards those in Colombia who are forced literally to survive through the manual harvesting of the coca leaf or the poppy plant.

In Colombia, drug trafficking continues to be a direct, frontal assault on our democratic way of life. No part of our country has been unaffected by it. Thousands of brave Colombians soldiers, police, judges, political leaders, journalists, and even presidential candidates and ministers have given their lives to stop the flow of drugs.

Our economy has been harmed, as the violence this industry generates scares away foreign and domestic investment. Resources we need to address the many needs of our population from education, to health care, to economic development have been invested instead in fighting narcotraffickers.

Large portions of Colombias Amazon forestlands the very lungs of the world have been destroyed by traffickers as they have moved further into rural Colombia to escape our efforts to shut them down.

Drug trafficking is a global business marked by violence and ruthlessness, and driven by obscene profits. This is why, despite our success in defeating the Medellin and Cali drug cartels in the 1990s, the industry has re-emerged in the remote Colombian countryside, where the presence of the state is scarce.

My Governments response to this challenge is Plan Colombia. The international press tends to refer to Plan Colombia as a military operation, but this is inaccurate. Plan Colombia is, by and large, a social and political strategy to strengthen public institutions and the rule of law, achieve peace, strengthen the economy, and fight illegal drugs. Our goal is not to punish peasants who cultivate coca, but to offer them a real alternative to support their families and develop their local communities.

Even before the majority of the U.S. aid arrives, Colombia is moving vigorously ahead with a two-track approach to counter-narcotics. A voluntary eradication program is being offered to all farmers who grow coca on small individual plots. If they agree to eradicate their coca crop, we will provide them with cash recompensation and the tools they need to move into legitimate farming such as seeds, equipment and technical support. The response has been overwhelming.

At the same time, we are spraying large industrial coca plantations, protected by illegal self-defense forces, guerrilla units or drug traffickers. For them we have shown no quarter, spraying approximately 25,000 hectares since December 19. This is enough coca to produce 200 to 225 tons of cocaine, or roughly one third of the annual world supply.

In 1995, when the Government made a similar attempt to eradicate the coca fields in Putumayo, local farmers rose up in unison and battled security forces. This is not happening now. There are no protests or demonstrations, because today we are offering a positive government presence, not simply the back of our hand. We are also making significant investments in Putumayo in the form of schools, health clinics, social services and infrastructure.

Still, despite these efforts, many here in the United States are concerned about U.S. involvement in Colombia. They express a fear that America will be dragged into a prolonged military conflict in the Andean region. They make comparisons with Americas experience in Vietnam.

Let me answer this concern directly, and firmly. The United States will never get bogged down in Colombia's armed conflict. For starters, this would not have the support either of the Colombian president or the Colombian people. This is reinforced by the fact that neither the U.S. Government nor its citizens support such a move. In short, it is not on the table, not now or in the future.

That said, the United States still has an important role to play in helping Colombia put an end to almost forty years of violence. One way is to curb demand for drugs here in the United States, which will weaken those in Colombia who profit from this business. Another way one that has worked elsewhere, in Northern Ireland, Central America, and the Middle East is for the United States to stand behind the Colombian peace process.

This should not be seen as simple, one-shot deal. Where American peace initiatives have succeeded elsewhere in the world, it has been because of a long-term commitment and a strategic vision, even in the face of difficult and complex negotiations, and occasional setbacks.

The Colombian peace process has had its ups and downs. One cannot wipe away forty years of conflict with an enlightened sweep of the hand. But I believe it has recently gained new momentum. Earlier this month, I traveled to meet with the leader of the FARC, the larger of two guerrilla groups. There, in a remote jungle, during two tense days of dialogue with the sworn enemies of the Colombian State, we were able to put the peace process on a fresh track.

There is one dimension missing here, and that is the economic component. It is no secret that economic prosperity has a positive impact on political stability. With one hand we must deal with the problems that confront us with violence, drug trafficking and armed conflict. But with the other hand we must offer hope and opportunity to our citizens.

This means investing in roads and hospitals, education and infrastructure. It also means looking for new export markets for Colombian products and commodities, and attracting new investment from abroad. Convincing guerrillas to lay down their arms, and getting peasants to move from coca cultivation into the legitimate economy, means we have to create jobs for tens of thousands of Colombians.

Here, too, the United States can make a substantial contribution. Our relationship in the area of counter-narcotics cooperation is key, and we must persevere. But it is not the entire picture not by a longshot.

Trade and investment offer long-term benefits to everyone. This is why my government, like most governments in Latin America, support trade liberalization. For us, this means the immediate renewal and enhancement of the Andean Trade Preference Act, which expires in December.

By extending and enlarging ATPA, we can build on the success of this agreement, which has created 140,000 direct jobs in Colombia over the past 10 years. At the same time, we can work toward a broader hemispheric free trade agreement by the year 2003.

Our bilateral trade in 2000 reached \$10 billion. This benefited both our economies. Trade with Colombia is responsible for thousands of jobs here in the United States. Nine states in the U.S. each export more than \$100 million a year to the Colombian market.

Historically, Colombia stands as Latin America's strongest economic

performer. We have never defaulted on a loan, always honored every debt, and never suffered from hyper-inflation. We have emerged from a recession our first in nearly seventy years and my government is building the foundation for long-term, sustained economic growth.

Central to our economic policy is developing new export-oriented industries and attracting new foreign investment. Colombia is one of the most open markets in Latin America. Nevertheless, we are improving our foreign investment regime in many ways, in order to be an even more attractive partner to U.S. companies.

I would like to invite all of you here today to visit Colombia. Nearly 100 United States senators and representatives have done this over the last two years, and some as recently as last week. Such visits have been crucial in building the strong bipartisan consensus that marked last years debate in Congress over U.S. assistance for Colombia. I hope you will come as the head of a state trade and investment delegation, so that we can explore ways of expanding trade and commercial opportunities for both our economies.

We are a lot closer than you might think. A flight from Bogota to Miami takes the same time as a flight from Miami to New York. I make this invitation because I believe that if our situation is to improve, leaders like you must better understand the Colombia behind the daily headlines.

In closing, thank you for the opportunity to speak here today, and touch upon these issues which, in one way or another, affect all our lives. I would be glad to answer any of your questions".

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