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"PROSPECTS FOR PEACE IN COLOMBIA"

Davos (Switzerland), January 27th, 2001

I. Introduction

- If we were to open a Colombian newspaper any day this month, or a month ago, and go straight to the news on public order, we could easily find the following headlines:
- “10 people kidnapped at a guerilla check point on the Bogota-Medellin road.”
- “Self-defense group massacres 25 peasants in village in Sucre.”
- “ELN (National Liberation Army) announces an armed stoppage in Arauca.”
- “15 FARC rebels killed in combat by the Army in Santander. 20 more surrendered. Half the insurgents are not yet of age.”
- “Rebels blow-up electric-power towers in Uraba. 7 villages left in the dark demand a solution.”

- “The displaced peoples’ never-ending saga.”
- “Talks with FARC are still in the “freezer””
- “Guerrilla raids the town of Granada, only debris left standing, survivors flee to neighboring areas”.
- “President of the Peace Commission of the House of Representatives assassinated.”

- These are all very impressive and painful news that bewilder even the most indifferent people.
- This is the news of violence, the news produced by the intolerant, by those who do not believe in the tools of civilization and democracy.

- However, if we were to read the same newspaper any closer, we would find news that reads:
- “Governors and mayors elected by the people last October are sworn into office.”
- “Exports increased by 17%.”
- “The Fairs of Manizales, Cali and Pasto were a colorful carnival of joy and flowers.”
- “New legislation for reactivating construction of social housing.”
- “The economy grew 3% in 2000 and is expected to grow 4% in 2001.”
- “Colombians awarded human rights prize in France.”
- “Agricultural credit lines extended.”
- “Inflation in the year 2000, the lowest in thirty years.”
- “Bogotá more beautiful than ever.”

- This is the news of the other Colombia, the news that is never seen on international newscasts, because this news is not smeared in blood.
- This is the news that 40 million Colombians want to watch, because we are tired of 40 years of senseless violence.

- This explains why 10 million of us voted in October 1997 for the peace mandate, a mandate that is binding on all political rulers. This mandate orders whoever rules the country to work for peace, through a political negotiation with those in arms.
- I have devoted all my energy to fulfilling this mandate, with the support of all political forces and civil society, because the policy for peace in Colombia is not a government policy, it is a true State policy.

II. The Peace Process Today

- We are not living a civil war in Colombia: this is a war against civil society, where less than 0.1% of the population, that is, less than 40.000 members of guerrilla and self-defense groups terrorize 40 million countrymen who do not support them.
- I have personally been at the forefront of the peace process with insurgent groups, accomplishing in 2 years what had been impossible to achieve in 2 decades.
- In spite of all the news of pain and blood produced by the guerrilla, we have gradually laid the foundations for a true and lasting peace.
- We have accomplished the following with FARC, the biggest and oldest guerrilla organization:

- We defined a demilitarized zone for the peace talks
- We agreed an agenda of subjects for discussion
- Government and rebel negotiators traveled to Europe to exchange views and look at other development and social coexistence models.
- We held public hearings where thousands of Colombians from all sectors and regions had the opportunity to contribute their views on matters such as employment and the economy.
- We exchanged proposals to cease fire and hostilities that are presently under discussion at the negotiation table.

- Even though FARC froze the negotiations unilaterally in November, we are working to avoid loosing what we have accomplished to date.
- In any event, we cannot disregard what we have achieved to date, even more so when one bears in mind that there have been no serious talks with this rebel group in 10 years.
- We have to put things into perspective. Peace processes such as those undertaken in Central America also took many years, but today we see the result of deploying continuous and patient efforts, with the decided support of the international community.

- As for the ELN (National Liberation Army), the second biggest guerrilla group, we have made initial contacts with the assistance of friendly nations such as Switzerland, our host,

and I can report that we are very close to an agreement that will allow us to initiate negotiations in the very near future.

III. Strengthening of our Security Forces:

- In spite of the unquestionable willingness to achieve peace shown by this administration, the guerrilla insists on its violent means and continuous to assassinate, kidnap, blackmail, raid modest villages, recruit minors, and destroy the country's electric infrastructure.
- The so-called self-defense groups -established illegally to combat insurgency– also massacre civilians in a manner that goes against the very concept of humanity.

- Let there be no doubt that the brutal acts committed by the guerrilla and self-defense groups will be combated by the Military Forces with equal force and energy.
- No State can allow illegal groups to assassinate, coerce, and rob its people, and Security Forces have the duty to defend the people.
- We cannot be asked for the absurd: that we not strengthen the country's legitimate Armed Forces so they can defend unarmed citizens from violent aggression.
- Of course we want peace, but not at any price. And the price cannot be the extermination of Colombians nor our sacrificing the rule of law.
- That is why besides strengthening and modernizing our Military Forces, we enhanced the Armed Forces' operational capacity and effectiveness.

- And let me be very clear: there is no contradiction between undertaking a peace process and strengthening the State's legitimate forces.
- There is none because the State cannot waive its duty to protect its people from the illegal groups' attacks because only well-trained and legitimate Military Forces can deter insurgents from their intention to take control of the State through armed force and intimidation.
- The message we are conveying to the guerrilla is that we are willing to talk and discuss matters of national interest, but the means for imposing ideas can never be the extermination of those who think differently from us.

IV. Conclusion:

- The journey to peace implies traveling a difficult road, and there is no road map to peace, it is mostly trial and error, and the road is paved as we journey on. But what is most important is to have the political willingness to make peace, and you can rest assured that willingness is what we do have.
- Last year's good economic performance, overcoming the 1999 recession, was achieved in the midst of a conflict that terrorizes the population. Just imagine what we could achieve if we were a country in peace!
- Therefore as we work our way to peace, business and investment opportunities are still very much alive, as is

recognized by the visionary entrepreneurs who have invested in our country or who continue doing business with us.

- Life continues amidst all the difficulties, and behind the violent news we find good news.
- The Government of Colombia and Colombian society are intent on achieving the peace we deserve and we will not rest until we achieve peace.
- We ask the international community to join us in this legitimate effort, that you pressure illegal armed groups to come to humanitarian agreements, to denounce all forms of human rights violations – not just those involving some state agency – and that you, the international community, continue believing in Colombia.

- As you can see my dear friends peace is not around the corner, but we have planted the seed of peace and I invite you all to join us and watch it flourish.

Thank you very much.