



Colombia and the United States at a Crossroads

A Conversation with President Alvaro Uribe

An Event Report from The Americas Project at the Center for American Progress

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A series of recent allegations linking Colombian paramilitaries to government officials there, the pending decision by the U.S. Congress on the U.S.-Colombia Trade Promotion Agreement, and continued U.S. foreign assistance for Colombia have drawn significant attention to the South American country and its ties to the United States. These were the predominant themes discussed by Colombian President Alvaro Uribe in an event organized by *The Americas Project* at the Center for American Progress entitled *Colombia and the United States at a Crossroads: A Conversation with President Alvaro Uribe*.

The event was held during President Uribe's early May trip to Washington, DC to promote the pending free trade agreement before the U.S. Congress and allay concerns regarding the para-politics scandal. Uribe's visit marked the first visit by a head of state to the Center and drew a wide range of diplomats, scholars, journalists, and human rights activists, among others.

During the dialogue with Uribe, the president focused on the positive effects of *Plan Colombia* (the six-year-old U.S. foreign assistance program for Colombia), the demobilization of the paramilitaries, and the changes in the Law of Justice and Peace that governs the demobilization process. Uribe also highlighted the remaining challenges facing Colombia and vehemently rejected having ties with the paramilitaries or being soft on them. Among the issues highlighted by President Uribe during the event were:

- The achievements of *Plan Colombia*
- The improvements in security brought about by his "Democratic Security Strategy"
- The Colombian government's commitment to justice and changes made to the Law of Justice and Peace; and
- The importance of the U.S.-Colombia Trade Promotion Act.

A Conversation with President Alvaro Uribe

Prior to the event, a large crowd gathered outside the Center to protest the human rights situation in Colombia and the trade agreement pending before the U.S. Congress. Upon Uribe's arrival, the president rushed out to meet the protesters and engaged them in a tense but lively debate. Uribe then invited a group of three protesters upstairs to allow them the opportunity to ask him questions in a more formal setting.

John Podesta, President and CEO of the Center for American Progress, gave President Uribe a formal introduction in which he stressed the strategic significance of U.S. relations with Colombia. “As a longstanding ally of the United States in the Andean region, it is in our best interest to see Colombia succeed and thrive as a stable, democratic nation.” Podesta acknowledged that significant progress had been made in Colombia but maintained that “serious work remains, however, to bring about the lasting stability which we all hope to see in Colombia.”

In that vein, Podesta emphasized that the levels of politically motivated killings and particularly those aimed at labor leaders remain unacceptably high. “Much more work remains to examine the past, stabilize the present, and build a future of lasting peace, reconciliation, and justice.” Podesta argued.

After Podesta’s introductory statements, Dan Restrepo, Director of *The Americas Project*, began the dialogue with President Uribe. Restrepo’s first question addressed the president’s response that he had made mistakes but had not committed any crimes when faced with allegations of links to paramilitary groups. Uribe responded that given his long political career in a country plagued with complex problems it was very possible that he had made mistakes along the way. But he reaffirmed that he was not guilty of committing crimes.

Restrepo then asked the president about the one-sided nature of U.S. assistance under *Plan Colombia* and highlighted the Center’s support for the use of Integrated Power—the use of all aspects of U.S. power, not just military power, to advance U.S. interests in the global arena. “*Plan Colombia* as it was originally conceived was very much in keeping with the spirit of Integrated Power,” noted Restrepo. “As it has been implemented, at least from the perspective of the United States funding, it fails the test.”

The president responded, “We do not fail. We have not won yet, but we are winning.” Uribe then posed the question of what might have happened in the absence of *Plan Colombia* and recounted the improve-

ments that had occurred in unemployment, homicide, and kidnapping rates since its implementation. He also highlighted a recent report from the United Nations that claimed a 12 percent reduction in illicit plantations of coca and a 20 percent decrease in production in 2006.

President Uribe continued to remark on the many improvements under his administration, saying that poverty had decreased but that at 45 percent it was still far too high. He then set a goal to reduce poverty to 15 percent by 2019.

Uribe also enthusiastically discussed microlending and the 1.8 million Colombian families that had already received it, pledging to provide an additional 5 million poor Colombian families with this service. The president also mentioned the expansion of educational programs in the country. “My country has suffered a lot of problems, but we are working with all the optimism, all the patriotism, with all the love for our people and for our land to overcome these problems,” said Uribe.

Before turning it over to the audience, Restrepo commented on the lack of talk of reconciliation in Colombia’s political debate and asked about the tough rhetoric used by Uribe when discussing the civil conflicts that bedevil the country. Restrepo asked what message Uribe was sending to armed groups seeking peace when he referred to his political opponents who had formed part of a guerrilla group that had been demobilized and integrated into the political system more than 20 years ago as “terrorists in suits.” Uribe responded that he had not called all of them terrorists and that he believes such debates should stay within Colombia.

The head of state also reminded everyone that his government was the first in Colombia to fight and dismantle paramilitary organizations, and that more than 1,700 paramilitaries had been killed by the armed forces. Uribe also noted that for the first time, Colombia had a law of peace and that several changes had been made to the law in an effort to promote truth and minimize impunity. While the old

laws pardoned serious atrocities, the new ones, he argued, do not and require that restitution be paid to the victims. The president emphasized that the new laws were made to set a standard for future peace processes with guerrilla groups as well.

While acknowledging that he had called some of his political opponents “terrorists,” he asserted that no other government had offered them as effective protection as his administration. He also recalled the experience of the Patriotic Union—the political wing of the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia, or FARC, the nation’s oldest guerrilla group—whose members were assassinated and said that under his mandate as governor of Antioquia, two Patriotic Union deputies were protected.

Question & Answer Session

In the spirit of open debate, the audience was then given an opportunity to ask the president their questions directly. The first question came from Mark Schneider, Senior Vice President of the International Crisis Group. Schneider asked if it was not the Constitutional Court in Colombia that had changed the initial text of the Law of Justice and Peace in order to require full instead of partial confessions and the seizure of illegal assets prior to confessions. Schneider then asked the president if he planned to increase funding to expand the number of attorneys currently investigating paramilitary crimes and the assassinations of labor leaders. Finally, Schneider questioned the resurgence of paramilitaries known as *reparas*.

Uribe acknowledged that the Constitutional Court had in fact changed the initial draft of the Justice and Peace Law, but quickly remarked that his government had accepted the changes. He then added that the initial text did not want to hide crimes and promoted the seizure of assets to pay reparations to victims.

With regard to the increased funding of prosecutorial teams, the president accepted that the number of prosecutors should be increased but asserted that many efforts had already been made to expand their role. “First, we introduced the accusatory system,”

he explained. “Second, we approved the codes to implement the accusatory system. Third, we have enlarged the judiciary a lot in order to be capable to implement the accusatory system.”

Uribe also reminded the audience that his government had allotted an additional \$70 million to the budget for the implementation of the accusatory system. Furthermore, this year the Supreme Court of Justice formed its own body of investigation supported by the new budget. “We need to do much more of course, and we are ready,” he argued. “And don’t forget all the fiscal constraints Colombia has suffered.”

In reference to the reemergence of paramilitaries, Uribe responded that more than 30,000 paramilitaries and close to 10,000 guerrillas had been demobilized. Uribe lashed out at his critics who called into question the disarmament of guerrillas. “I would like them to go to Colombia and speak with the demobilized guerrillas and ask them about this supposed farce. We have demobilized near 10,000.”

Uribe did accept that a small number of *reparas* had emerged, but that they did not number more than 1,080 people. The police and armed forces have killed more than 400 and incarcerated more than 800 *reparas*, he added.

“The only way to avoid these people rearming, to avoid guerrilla groups enlarging, to avoid new groups appearing is by the continuation of our policy of democratic security,” said Uribe. He noted that the armed forces had recently seized two main paramilitary leaders that had not demobilized and assured the audience that they would be extradited to the United States.

The president then claimed that the Law of Justice and Peace had shed light on 106 cases of homicide. “It’s a very complex law,” he explained. “It isn’t easy to apply, but we are convinced and optimistic that with perseverance we will see the results.”

The second question was asked by a representative of the group of protesters Uribe had encountered

earlier and invited to the event. Heather Hanson from the U.S. Office on Colombia, commented on the United Nations High Commission on Human Rights and Inter-American Human Rights Commission's recent report that marked 756 cases of extrajudicial killings in Colombia and the Commission's findings that the pressure on the armed forces to produce a high body count had contributed to civilian deaths. Hanson then asked the president what steps his administration would be willing to take to put an end to the extrajudicial executions and to ensure that these cases do not remain in impunity.

Uribe was quick to respond that the United Nations had been critical of Colombia and that human rights violations were not measured only by cases of homicide but also by kidnappings and protection of labor leaders and journalists as well. The president noted that prior to his administration, Colombia had seen years where 15 journalists were assassinated, but that this year not a single journalist had been targeted and killed.

In reference to extrajudicial executions, Uribe claimed that whenever there was a need to remove an official from the Army, it would be done but that he could not allow the destruction of the armed forces.

Uribe also noted these two reports showed Colombia was open to international scrutiny and was ready to move forward on human rights, but not without first stating that he disagreed with the number Ms. Hanson had presented. "I believe that our policy on democratic security needs to be credible to become sustainable and to be credible needs effectiveness and transparency," he explained.

The next question was posed by an international reporter who asked if the Uribe administration had any plans of extraditing the heads of U.S. multinational companies based in Colombia that had been accused of paying paramilitary groups to assassinate trade unionists and leaders. In response, Uribe emphasized that the FARC was very much alive in Colombia and defended the government's right to continue fighting terrorism. He also said that such

Marxist groups were to blame for the emergence of paramilitaries and that these guerrillas sought to fight his security policy by discrediting institutions and employers. "We have to continue in the fight," emphasized Uribe.

The following question was raised by Adam Isacson, Director of the Colombia Program at the Center for International Policy. Isacson told the president that he'd like to present him with another chance to answer the question previously posed by Ms. Hanson regarding what action the Uribe administration planned to take to end extrajudicial executions. "And I thought I heard you respond that such allegations are the work of terrorists trying to weaken the Army, and I would like to hear you actually say that you are committed to actually investigating these cases and seeing them brought to justice," added Isacson.

Uribe quickly noted that such cases must be investigated but once again emphasized that the armed forces could not be weakened. "I cannot weaken our institutional forces," said Uribe. "The only way for Colombia to live in democracy under the constitution in permanent democratic debate is through the strengthening of our institutional forces."

The final question from the audience came from Gerardo Cajamarca, a Colombian who had been politically exiled three years ago and who has been living in the United States ever since. Mr. Cajamarca called attention to the numerous politicians accused of having ties to paramilitaries, some of whom were appointed to their posts by President Uribe, such as Jorge Noguera, the former head of Colombia's domestic intelligence agency, and noted that Uribe's administration had never referred to any of these individuals as terrorists. Cajamarca then asked how it was possible that such men had not been labeled as terrorists but that others had, such as Senator Gustavo Petro from the opposition party.

Uribe quickly affirmed that Colombia needed to be a country without paramilitary terrorists but then argued that the discourse by the last question was not the most significant aspect of the situation. Uribe

then challenged Mr. Cajamarca to name a government that could say it had imprisoned paramilitaries.

“You must notice the level of the political debate of some of my compatriots,” he admonished the gathered audience. “They have never complained about paramilitarism while it existed. They complain now about the government that has dismantled them.”

Uribe also denied having any prior knowledge of Jorge Noguera’s alleged links to the paramilitaries and added that he was confident that if given the chance, Noguera would be able to prove his innocence. The president further noted that even some his critics who lived abroad were back in Colombia now that they had been offered protection. “I was more preoccupied with protecting the opposition than myself,” claimed Uribe.

Before closing the event, Restrepo asked the final question in an effort to discuss the controversy surrounding the U.S.-Colombia Trade Promotion Agreement that had yet to be addressed. Restrepo asked, “What if anything is your government prepared to do to protect those who are either missed by or victimized by the opening up of trade with the United States if you actually are successful in getting the agreement approved by the United States Congress?”

Uribe emphasized that from a purely economic perspective, a free trade agreement with the United States would serve to balance the bilateral equation. He also observed that it was very important that Colombia did not follow the trend of statism that other Latin American countries followed. “Our country, an ally of the United States committed to freedoms, committed to social justice, committed to free, private initiative with social responsibility should not be excluded from this agreement,” remarked Uribe.

Uribe also asserted that Colombia had many possibilities when it came to long-term crops and that a free trade agreement would serve to enhance these possibilities for those in rural areas. The president

noted that a free trade agreement could prove conducive to the possibility of exporting biofuels to the United States and Europe. “My government has begun in Colombia the era of biofuels production.”

While stipulating the importance of a free trade agreement, Uribe noted that it was not all that Colombia needed. He then discussed the Andean Community’s agreement with Mercosur, Colombia’s potential agreements with Central American countries, and potential negotiations with Europe and Asia.

Finally, the president reminded the audience that Colombia produced many products in need of trade agreements in order to put them on the international market. “And let me finish with this,” he concluded. “The best jobs we can create are in the exporting sector. High quality jobs with affiliation to the social security system. The Free Trade Agreement is a very good step.”

Conclusion

The United States and Colombia certainly find themselves at a crossroads amid the widening politics scandal, continuing human rights violations, debate in the U.S. Congress regarding the U.S.-Colombia Trade Promotion Act, and questions about the largest U.S. foreign aid program outside of the Middle East. Given Colombia’s strategic importance and the complexity of its many problems, however, one thing remains clear. The United States must remain engaged with Colombia as it seeks to reduce poverty, improve security, establish justice, dismantle armed groups, and promote free and fair trade.

The Americas Project will continue to track and analyze developments in Colombia and in the U.S.-Colombia relationship, and will continue expanding its efforts to examine issues affecting the United States and the Americas and to propose practical, progressive policy recommendations to promote strong democracies and economies throughout the Americas.

About The Americas Project

The Americas Project at the Center for American Progress is focused on the United States' relationship with and place in the Americas. The United States is in the midst of dramatic changes that will profoundly affect its future, which are manifest both in the rapid growth of its Latino population and the ever-increasing interconnections with its neighbors throughout the Americas. Through rigorous research and open collaboration, *The Americas Project* seeks to more fully explore and understand those changes, the relationships among them, and their implications for progressive policy abroad and at home. *The Americas Project* endeavors to formulate innovative policy recommendations to address those changing realities and, through active engagement of all forms of media, effectively communicate its proposals to a wide range of audiences.

Center for American Progress



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The Center for American Progress is a nonpartisan research and educational institute dedicated to promoting a strong, just and free America that ensures opportunity for all. We believe that Americans are bound together by a common commitment to these values and we aspire to ensure that our national policies reflect these values. We work to find progressive and pragmatic solutions to significant domestic and international problems and develop policy proposals that foster a government that is “of the people, by the people, and for the people.”

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