Colombia: An Opportunity for Lasting Success

"With courage and sacrifice, Colombians have taken their nation from the verge of failure to the brink of peace and prosperity in little more than a decade. The U.S. has been with them every step of the way." — Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice

On July 2, 2008, the Colombian army rescued 15 hostages, including three American citizens, from FARC (Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia) guerrillas. Not a shot was fired. This rescue reflects what the government and people of Colombia have accomplished over the past decade in combating violence and restoring stability. Colombia's achievements are a foreign policy success, and the product of two U.S. Administrations with broad bipartisan support from the Congress.

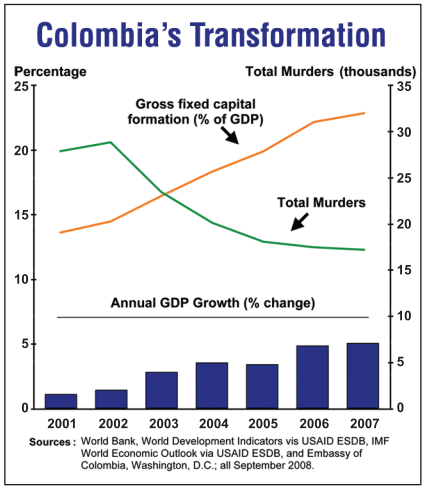
Rescued U.S. hostage Keith Stansell
Source: American Embassy Bogota

U.S. economic, counter-narcotics, and security assistance are key elements of our joint strategy to promote peace, justice, and prosperity in Colombia. Temporary trade preferences complement the assistance by creating jobs in the legitimate economy. The U.S.-Colombia Trade Agreement, pending before the Congress, makes those preferences permanent and will create jobs for U.S. workers and farmers by giving U.S. exports the same access to Colombia that Colombian exports have in the United States.

FROM NEAR FAILING STATE TO STRATEGIC PARTNER

In the late 1990s, Colombia was failing. Violence was rampant, citizens were fleeing the country, and the economy was plummeting. The United States and Colombia decided to work together to combat violence and instability. Since President Alvaro Uribe took office in 2002, security has improved dramatically. Homicides have dropped by 40%, kidnappings by 83%, and terrorist attacks by 76%. Over 31,000 paramilitary combatants and 10,000 guerrillas – mostly from the FARC and the National Liberation Army (ELN) – have demobilized. FARC guerrillas' top leadership has been disrupted, and the rank and file are deserting.

Drug cartels have been dismantled, and Colombia has extradited over 700 drug traffickers – including 15 paramilitary leaders – to the United States. Seizures of cocaine bound for the United States have more than doubled and, while estimates differ, coca cultivation has declined since 2002. Since 2001, cocaine production has fallen by a quarter. Interdiction and eradication have kept an average of 400 metric tons per year of cocaine from reaching the United States. Alternative development programs benefit over 135,000 families. Colombia's economy is growing rapidly (6.9% in 2007), and poverty continues to drop.



IMPROVING HUMAN RIGHTS

The United States is working closely with Colombia to promote human rights, ensure access to justice, and end impunity.

Anti-FARC demonstrators.
©AP Images

Working with the International Labor Organization, Colombia has strengthened its labor laws. The Ministry of Interior and Justice devotes over $13 million to protect more than 1,900 trade union members. The Prosecutor General's Office established a special unit with a $1.5 million budget to investigate cases of violence against trade union members. According to NGO figures, homicides of union members have dropped over 80% since 2002, and the murder rate of union members is lower than that of the general population. With the transition of the criminal justice system from an inquisitorial to a prosecutorial system, cases now move from arrest to verdict in months instead of years, and conviction rates have grown to over 60%.

COLOMBIA'S SUCCESS IS OUR SUCCESS

Colombia is one of our closest allies in South America and a democratic anchor in the region. Economists estimate that the U.S.-Colombia Trade Agreement will lead to the creation of 270,000 jobs in Colombia's formal economy while increasing U.S. exports to Colombia by an estimated $1.2 billion. The Agreement establishes a strategic economic partnership that is beneficial for both nations and creates a relationship of equal partners. Through this Agreement, the United States and Colombia look forward to completing the task we embarked on together in 2000. ■

For more information on the U.S.-Colombia Trade Agreement, please visit our website: www.state.gov/e/eeb/tpp/c22883.htm
11/06/08