

A Common Vision for the Future: US-Dominican Relations in the 21st Century

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The United States of America's relationship with the Dominican Republic is based on shared goals and aspirations for greater economic prosperity, security and democracy. With an estimated one million Dominican Americans living in the United States, there is a natural constituency for close and collaborative relations between our two countries on the full spectrum of bilateral economic and political issues, and there is a long-term recognition of the need to support our friendship in times of plenty and in times of need. This relationship extends to a common fight to control the illicit trade in narcotics, to strengthening democratic institutions and fighting corruption, building the educational foundation for the Dominican Republic's next generation, and many other vital areas. Yet the true building block of the strength of our relationship starts with the cultural and social ties we share and cultivate.

American tourists flock to the beaches and resorts in the Dominican Republic to enjoy the hospitality of its people and the world famous natural beauty of the island. Dominican Americans send roughly \$3 billion in remittances to their family members in the Dominican Republic each year, representing a little less than ten percent of the country's gross domestic product. Dominican baseball players, such as Robinson Cano, Manny Ramirez, Pedro Martinez and David Ortiz, are heroes of America's national pastime. Dominican government officials and private individuals regularly travel to the United States on State Department-sponsored international visitor programs to learn first-hand about the policymaking process in Washington, discover opportunities for commercial partnerships, or launch journalistic exchanges. Dominican merengue and bachata musicians play in the clubs of Miami and New York City, and American jazz musicians perform in the concert halls of Santo Domingo. These types of exchanges are just a sampling of the broad range of interactions between our two countries.

Our political and economic relationship grows closer, as highlighted by the March 2008 one year anniversary of the entry into force of our free trade agreement with the Dominican Republic and Central America, known as CAFTA-DR. The agreement is opening opportunities for US businesses, as evidenced by the nearly 15 percent growth in US exports to the Dominican Republic in 2007, and it is expanding economic freedom in the Dominican Republic. We have seen the benefits that free trade can bring to countries in Latin America, where countries like Chile and Mexico have dramatically reduced their poverty levels through open economic policies. Obviously, free trade is not a guarantee of social justice, but job creation and economic growth do benefit those most in need.

President Bush has said, "The working poor of Latin America need change, and the United States of America is committed to that change. It is in our national interest, it is in the interest of the United States of America, to help the people in democracies in our

neighborhood succeed...so we're helping to increase opportunity by...opening up trade, encouraging reform, and delivering aid that empowers the poor and the marginalized." However, to ensure that the benefits of CAFTA-DR and the opportunities it creates are enjoyed by the full range of producers and consumers alike, the agreement must be implemented transparently to foster the competition necessary to benefit all. We are working with the Dominican authorities to ensure that continued economic growth and expanded trade opportunities will lead to a reduction in poverty and broad-based economic empowerment.

The Dominican government has committed through this trade agreement to broaden the economic freedom of its citizens, which is an essential component of political development and leads to greater institutional transparency. To support this goal, the US government is providing millions of dollars in trade capacity building assistance aimed at strengthening the institutional development of the Dominican government. Strengthening democratic institutions is a shared goal and is reflected in all of our US assistance programs in the Dominican Republic, which cover areas such as education, trade capacity building, environmental protection, renewable energy development, health care, strengthening the military and police forces and many other areas. While the US government continues to support the development of the Dominican Republic through these much needed assistance programs, the emergence of broader political pluralism and sustained economic growth, averaging 9.5 percent over the past three years, point toward a bright future for the country.

Like partners in all good relationships, we face some challenges. These include tackling the growing problem of trafficking in narcotics, combating corruption and reducing human rights violations. These issues confront governments across the globe. The United States claims a proud history of striving in every generation since our nation's founding to bring our own democratic practices closer to our cherished principles, even as we seek to confront the injustices and difficulties of each new age. We take all of our human rights commitments seriously, and, in our good faith efforts to meet those commitments, we value the vital role played by civil society and independent media. We ask that our partners demonstrate this same commitment to human rights and the importance of civil society. It is important to highlight that despite continuing trouble spots, the Dominican Republic has made progress over the past few years in protecting human rights, and this fact has been reflected in our annual report. Ultimately, the Dominican Republic's democratic evolution will be the best guarantor of human rights in that country, as democracy is the form of government best suited to ensuring that fundamental freedoms are protected.

The US government is helping the Dominican Republic address the scourge of corruption that persists despite so many good faith efforts. The passage of a Dominican Freedom of Information Act in 2006 was an important step forward to achieving greater openness in the government. We also have witnessed a renewed commitment by successive Dominican administrations to ensure greater fiscal transparency through the strengthening of the Ministry of the Treasury, which will hold government agencies accountable for how public funds are spent. Nonetheless, there is considerable work still to

be done as evidenced by the Dominican Republic's lagging rating in Transparency International's Corruption Perceptions Index.

The United States is a consistent and dedicated supporter of the Dominican Republic in its struggle against the transshipment of narcotics through its territory. Our efforts include training programs, the provision of equipment, and joint operations with not only the Dominican government, but also with other interested parties in and outside of the region. Recognizing that an increasing amount of narcotics are remaining in the Dominican Republic and fueling both local demand and delinquency, the US government also has committed to working with the Dominican government to help craft and implement demand reduction programs, with a particular focus on Dominican youth.

During a recent visit, John Walters, Director of the White House's Office of National Drug Control Policy, accompanied by Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) Acting Administrator Michele Leonhart, hailed the Dominican Republic's efforts, and in particular those of the DEA-equivalent National Directorate for Drug Control, in combating narcotics trafficking; all parties agreed, however, that given the progress of the Mexican, Jamaican and Colombian governments in combating their local traffickers, that increased drug flow through Hispaniola is all but a certainty. As the flow of illegal narcotics shifts further toward the Caribbean, additional assistance and renewed political commitment from the Dominican Republic and donor countries will prove necessary.

Our bilateral relationship, however, is not merely about economics, politics or even social and cultural ties. There is a more elemental component to our relationship forged by our shared ideals and goals that leads us to stand by each other through good times and bad. For example, despite its limited financial resources, the Dominican Republic offered to provide rescue workers, doctors and nurses to help deal with the humanitarian disaster wrought by Hurricane Katrina on the people of New Orleans in the summer of 2006. This gesture is emblematic of our partnership.

Similarly, when I arrived in the Dominican Republic in December 2007, the country was still reeling from the devastating impact of Tropical Storm Noel. Noel's massive flooding left over 130 people dead, close to 80,000 individuals displaced from their homes, destroyed over 19,000 houses and 95,000 hectares of crops. It is important to note that Tropical Storm Noel was a completely unexpected phenomenon as the storm formed practically over the island with little or no warning, inhibiting preventive measures. Noel also was followed shortly afterward by another tropical storm, Olga, whose rains added to the devastation and hardships faced by communities.

In response to the Dominican Republic's urgent need for assistance in the immediate aftermath, the US government provided over \$3.3 million in emergency humanitarian assistance. The US Agency for International Development's (USAID) mission in the Dominican Republic has reprogrammed \$2.5 million of existing funding to assist small agricultural communities impacted by the storms' destructive force.

Almost immediately after Tropical Storm Noel hit the Dominican Republic, US Coast Guard rescue helicopters could be seen plucking stranded families from rooftops and bringing them to safety. The US Embassy's Coast Guard Liaison and Defense Attaché Offices were honored by the US Southern Command and US Coast Guard District Seven for their outstanding work in coordinating such a rapid and successful deployment. Our support for the rescue and recovery efforts was coordinated with multiple agencies of the US government, including USAID, the US military, the US Coast Guard, Peace Corps, and the Department of State, as well as with nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) and local Dominican government officials. For example, in early November, the US Chargé d'Affaires, Roland W. Bullen, led a team from the USAID Office of Foreign Disaster Assistance and the US Department of Defense to the southern province of Barahona to deliver relief supplies, including hygiene kits, food and medicine, in coordination with local NGOs and Peace Corps volunteers.

Beyond our cultural ties, economic partnerships and mutual commitment to aiding each other in times of need, our countries share a common vision for a more prosperous and democratic future. As both countries ride the wave of presidential election cycles in 2008, we bear witness to the dual commitment to peaceful and transparent political decision making and transfer of power. The Dominican Republic's political evolution is emblematic of the progress of political reform across Latin America in the past 20 years. The forces of freedom and democracy have clearly triumphed over the oppression of tyranny and oligarchy, and while these gains must not be taken for granted and must be cultivated constantly, we should step back to recognize the great progress that has occurred. I am convinced our bilateral relationship will continue to grow stronger as the bonds of friendship and our mutual political evolution take us in the same direction.