

What Freedom Means

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“Freedom is indivisible, and when one man is enslaved, all are not free.” This important and enduring quote of President John F. Kennedy represents the will and commitment to individual freedom by the Government of Colombia.

Just a few months ago, 15 hostages held captive by the terrorist group known as the FARC¹ were rescued in the jungles of Colombia. While this news was greeted with worldwide jubilation, we know our job is not completed, as we remain devoted to achieving the freedom of those who remain in the FARC’s unjust and inhumane captivity.

For many in other nations, the dramatic rescue was seen as a single, isolated action. For Colombians, however, it is a remarkable milestone and the symbol of a sustainable transformation the country has eagerly embraced. The rescue, engineered and executed flawlessly by the Colombian Army, with the leadership and commitment of the President and the Minister of Defense, was largely made possible through a process that began in 2002.

Since President Uribe came to office, Colombia has experienced unprecedented progress through the President’s Democratic Security Policy (DSP), which is based upon a consolidation of State control throughout Colombia. The goal of the DSP is to deny sanctuary to terrorists and perpetrators of violence, while protecting the general population through an increase in State presence in all corners of the nation. This includes not only a reduction in violence, but the destruction of the illegal drug trade and the elimination of the illicit revenues which finance terrorism and have supported the spread of corruption and crime for far too long.

The results speak for themselves. Colombian citizens are more engaged and invested in our country’s progress and there is a renewed sense of optimism and pride. Our army is more professional and prepared, illustrated by a large and successful demobilization process over the past few years which has led over 30,000 former combatants to lay down their arms. During this time, our nation has made significant strides in improving the efficient and transparent management of resources as a means to reform and improve the performance of government—and these institutions are now widely recognized in a positive way by the people.

President Uribe and the Government of Colombia remain fully committed to continuing on the path towards long-term stability and unity—and statistics point to great

¹ FARC is an acronym which stands for Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia. The English translation is Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia.

progress: homicides dropped 40 percent since 2002; kidnappings fell over 80 percent during the same period; and terrorist attacks declined by about 80 percent.

These achievements in the area of security have allowed for broader social investment and renewed growth in our economy. For instance, the overall basic education coverage has increased from 81.4 percent in 2002, to 94 percent in 2007. The rate for higher education rose from 21.2 percent in 2002, to 31.8 percent in 2007. Added to that, the Colombian economy has been growing steadily over the past six years, reaching rates above 7.4 percent during 2007, which has led to the creation of new businesses and many new jobs.

Despite all of these remarkable success stories, Colombia is at an important crossroad. The support given by the United States has been central to our achievements and our country's ongoing transformation. Through a longstanding bipartisan relationship, we have achieved great success working with the US Congress and the administrations of both Presidents Bill Clinton and George W. Bush to initiate Plan Colombia.

Plan Colombia is an ambitious cooperative program aimed at supporting progress in five vital areas: fighting narco-terrorism; attending to urgent humanitarian and social needs; achieving economic stability; protecting human rights; and extending government protection throughout civil society.

An important aspect is the transformation of our judicial system—enhancements in law enforcement and the capacity for criminal investigation. Importantly, during this period Colombia's judicial system has been transformed from an inquisitorial closed-door one to an open accusatorial system with oral procedures and open trials. It will be fully operational in 2008, and has already shown significant results in terms of speed, efficiency and transparency.

As indicators of the success of Plan Colombia, it is worth noting that since 2000, 996.2 tons of cocaine with an estimated value of US\$ 32.8 billion have been seized; manually eradicated cocaine crops increased from 2,977 hectares in 2002 to 66,396 hectares in 2007; and over 700 extraditions have taken place, including 14 former leaders of the illegal drug-trafficking groups.

As we look back at the dramatic hostage rescue this past July, it is clear that it is one more success story in the ongoing evolution of Colombia. The rescue constitutes the strongest evidence of the professionalization of the Colombian military, the strides toward recovery of territory and the rule of law, and the strengthening of Colombia's democratic institutions.

President Uribe and the Government of Colombia remain committed to continuing our partnership with the United States—as together we can secure the freedom of all those who remain hostages, and continue working toward the ultimate goal of achieving a long-lasting peace.

Colombia is more secure, peaceful and prosperous than ever before, which only strengthens our resolve to keep working to reinforce democracy and boost prosperity for all of our people.

The rescue embraces the effort of a deep transformation, of a success story that we are glad to share with the world.