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U.S. APPROACHES IN COLOMBIA **AND PROSPECTS FOR PEACE**

I want to thank Richard Solomon for those very kind words. The U.S. Institute of Peace is a valuable resource for the Washington community – for policymakers and scholars alike. Its staff, reports, briefings, forums and programs help so many of us create valuable professional connections and networks, hear fresh voices and insights on often seemingly intractable problems, and think creatively when faced with important policy decisions. In no small measure, this is due to Richard Solomon's leadership as president of USIP – and on behalf of so many of my colleagues in the House and Senate, I sincerely thank you.

I had the pleasure of traveling to Colombia with Ginnie Bouvier in February 2003 as part of a fact-finding delegation organized by the Washington Office on Latin America. In April of that same year, Ginnie invited me to speak at the USIP about that trip, the situation in Colombia, and U.S. policy initiatives. I made such a lasting impression that USIP never invited me back until today – a little over six years. So, if I do as good a job speaking today as I did then, my next visit to USIP should be sometime in 2015.

I was asked to talk today about some of my thoughts about the approach the United States should take towards Colombia – and especially what I thought might be the prospects for peace in Colombia, and how the U.S. might help bring that about.

Those are big topics, and we could probably spend hours on them – especially if USIP would be nice enough to break out some Johnny Walker Black to help things along. Members of the House rarely get to speak for more than five minutes on any topic, so to be invited to speak for 25 or 30 minutes, just like a Senator, is too good an opportunity to pass up.

In November, just five days after the U.S. elections, I traveled to the northeastern border region of Ecuador and spent some time learning about the greatest refugee crisis in the hemisphere, the Colombian refugee crisis, and how it's affecting Ecuador. The UNHCR estimates there are at least 130,000 refugees in Colombia in need of protection, the majority of them located all along the northern border area.

I visited a couple of communities hosting refugees that sit right on the border – meaning right on the San Miguel River or just a couple of kilometers away. Many of the people at our meetings – Ecuadorians and Colombians alike – walked for hours to get there from nearby communities.

When I mentioned that soon we were going to have a new president in the United States, the crowd went wild. These are poor, humble people – literally in the middle of nowhere – and there was such hope shining in their eyes and faces. They applauded; they cheered; they smiled. The emotion was tangible in the room, hitting my group in waves. These people have so much hope that President Obama will help end the violence and the war; that he will help them accomplish the one thing in the world they want more than anything else, to go home to Colombia and raise their families in peace. They believe that he will “see” them; and that they won't be invisible or meaningless anymore.

Most of the refugees I met with in Ecuador come from the department of Putumayo, in southern Colombia. A few days after I

returned to Washington, I chaired a Human Rights Commission hearing with human rights representatives from Putumayo – who described in detail the hell of daily life and survival in Putumayo. So, in the space of a week, I felt like I was straddling the San Miguel River, hearing about life on both sides of the border and about such similar dreams for peace and the right to simply live a life free from violence and the constant threat of violence.

And the question I can't seem to get out of my mind – these people from Putumayo, these refugees struggling to survive along the Ecuadorian border – do they have any reason to hope at all?

Colombia isn't the only place in Latin America where this year is viewed as a moment of great hope and opportunity. If we – in the new Obama Administration, the 111th Congress and the NGO community – are going to seize upon this opportunity, it will require us to take fresh approaches, reject ideologies and old terminologies, and demonstrate a genuine desire to listen not just to the leaders of Latin America, but to the people of these nations.

I think President Obama and Secretary of State Clinton have started out in the right direction. President Obama has officially rejected torture as a tool of foreign policy and announced he is going to close Guantanamo – although that's proving harder, of course, than he first thought. These are actions that resonate throughout the world, including Latin America.

President Obama and Secretary Clinton have announced a new emphasis on promoting education, health care, rural and agricultural development, and food security – priorities that are desperately needed globally. We will need to watch and see whether such aid and investments will include Latin America, where too often trade has been seen as the instrument to deliver these basic human needs.

The President and Secretary of State also courageously accepted that the U.S. bears a great deal of responsibility for the violence wracking Mexico, Central America and the Andes – that it's our guns, our laundered money, and our insatiable demand for illegal drugs that bolster many of the violent, criminal networks that plague so much of the hemisphere. Now we need to put our money where our mouth is and put policies and programs in place to address these maladies.

At the Summit of the Americas in April, the President and Secretary Clinton also did something unusual for the highest officials of the United States: they listened. And now, faced with this latest crisis in Honduras, they are working carefully and multilaterally with our hemispheric partners.

So, perhaps there is reason to hope for change for the better in our dealings with Latin America.

But what about Colombia?

Over the past nine years, I have come to be known as one of the principal critics of U.S policy towards Colombia. My intent, however, has never been to walk away from Colombia, but to achieve a better balance, a better purpose to policies and strategies that I have found failing in Colombia.

Colombia is not just the source of 90 percent of the cocaine on U.S. streets. It's a place where people – almost two-thirds of them – live on less than three dollars a day. It's a place where they suffer from nearly a half-century of unrelenting war and violence. Vast stretches of the national territory are totally ungoverned, left to the whim of cruel, drug-money-fueled guerrillas, paramilitaries, and other armed criminal groups.

It's a place with nearly four million people displaced internally, and almost another million violently displaced into neighboring countries – creating the greatest humanitarian crisis in our hemisphere and among the greatest in the world. Colombia is second only to Sudan in the number of internally displaced – greater than Iraq; greater than Afghanistan; greater than Pakistan. Its refugee crisis is among the top five of the world – yet so invisible in Washington and Bogotá, so rarely talked or written about.

Until recently, over 80 percent of our money went to Colombia's military and police. For every four dollars spent on helicopters, guns and military trainers, only one went to feed millions of displaced families, or make a broken judicial system function, or help people in neglected rural areas make a decent, legal living.

The results of that policy were not just depressing, they were predictable. Cocaine is just as plentiful and cheap here as it was in 2000. While there are minor fluctuations one way or the other from year to year, overall there has been no real change in the amount of coca being grown in Colombia. And while President Uribe deserves congratulations on reducing several measures of violence, especially in the area of kidnapping, forced displacement from violence is increasing, abuses and human rights violations by the uniformed military continue to rise, and recent months have seen a spike in guerrilla attacks. Every week I still receive notices about communities under threat – and community leaders under threat, or disappeared, or murdered.

In the past couple of years, Congress has attempted to provide greater balance between economic and development aid for Colombia and continuing military and security-related aid. I think we have seen positive signs that U.S. aid and support are now getting to more of those who are in greatest need, and that the judicial system is trying to be more responsive than in the past to investigating crimes involving military and government officials. And on the military side, we have seen the FARC

greatly weakened over the past two years, although most objective analysts emphasize that the guerrillas are not broken.

Part of my job is to try and measure what is and is not working – but I don't want to just emphasize the negative. Over the past decade, I have seen changes in Colombia. I can attest that the cities are safer than when I first started traveling to Colombia. There is a diversity of political views and emerging political parties, even though opposition politicians live under constant threat for their physical safety and security. And there are vibrant and courageous NGO and civil society voices, with work going on everywhere, from the local to the national level.

The Supreme Court and the Constitutional Court have played invaluable roles in fighting corruption, exposing the links between elected officials, wealthy elites and the paramilitaries, uncovering abuses by the country's military, security and intelligence agencies, and protecting the basic human rights of the displaced, indigenous peoples, and Afro-Colombians. It is essential that these institutions remain independent and for Colombia's system of checks and balances not to be compromised.

I must admit that I was disappointed when the President Obama's budget cut assistance for Latin American refugee response, failed to alter past military and economic aid formulas for Colombia, and invested very little new money in reducing the demand for drugs here at home through treatment on demand and strengthening local law enforcement. Congress is working to rectify some of those errors, but money is tight and competition for funds intense. Maybe the Administration will do better the next time around, but I don't believe we should just sit around and wait for it to happen. I think we need to make it happen.

I have visited some of the most troubled corners of Colombia. Unlike some of my congressional colleagues, I'm not satisfied with a

brief visit to the capital, a military fly-over of an area that has been recently fumigated, a meeting with the President and U.S. Ambassador, and then time for shopping, dinner and a show.

I've been privileged to travel to Putumayo and meet with several hundred people who actually try to live and work there. I've gone to San José de Apartadó, Barrancabermeja and Sincelejo. I've traveled to the mountains of Popayán and the oilfields of Arauca. And when I am in Bogotá, I make it a point to visit communities like Barrio Kennedy, Ciudad Bolívar and Soacha. I've met with high government and military officials in Bogotá and around the country, and I've also met with Colombian families of the disappeared and of the hostages. Bit by bit, visit by visit, I'm learning how large, diverse and complex Colombia and its problems are.

I've been asked by mothers, fathers, grandmothers, teachers, priests, mayors, governors and community leaders – please help us with projects that will generate income, get our children into school, put food on the table, and keep our children out of the hands of the guerrillas or the paramilitaries.

I've been shocked by the poverty and isolation in which so many people live, but I have also been inspired by the many brave Colombians who are trying to forge peace and create opportunity in their communities, often with little or no support from their own government. And I've spent a great deal of time talking to the people who live in the rural countryside –

- Where the war is fought –
- Where communities are caught in the crossfire or live under threat from the guerrillas, the paramilitaries, armed criminal groups and even the Colombian Army –
- Where the violence is greatest and takes place on a daily basis –
- Where poverty is endemic –

- Where every crop is fumigated –
- And where development and investment are scarce.

So I strongly believe that U.S. funding must be directed more towards meeting the basic needs and the development goals that communities themselves have identified. Anyone who has ever traveled to Colombia knows that you can't go to a community without the people presenting their outline of what they would like to do to improve their community and their daily lives. The funny thing is, if you actually sit down and read their plans, they are very thoughtful, sound and thorough – and far less expensive than the elaborate imaginings of people in Washington, SOUTHCOM, and Bogotá. I wish we would give more of these proposals a chance.

Let me now move to the other key topic, which is peace in Colombia.

Here's my feeling about peace: You can't make peace if no one is interested. Colombia has a long history of individuals and organizations dedicated to peace-building and attempts to de-escalate the violence and end the conflict. I believe USIP is hosting a forum later this week on Ginnie's excellent new book, which takes an in-depth look at this rich history. I've also been privileged to see first-hand what some of the peace and development networks in places like Barrancabermeja and Sincelejo are trying to accomplish; how peace communities like San José de Apartadó are trying to survive; and the paths towards peace the Catholic and Protestant churches are trying to forge. Their efforts deserve our support – moral, political and financial.

But when I take a hard look at Colombia's leadership – with the exception of these human rights and humanitarian NGOS – and the people who are the victims of the violence, which is nearly everyone who lives in rural Colombia, the displaced and the urban underclass – hardly anyone seems to be talking about peace. People in power talk

about power. They talk about unconditional surrender and they talk about victory. They talk about political advantage – or whether someone else is trying to take political advantage of them. And they talk and talk and talk about their own political projects. But they don't talk about peace. They don't talk about ending the violence. And the killing and constant state of threat goes on and on.

Remarkably, over the past year, and certainly throughout the first half of this year, there appears to be a growing initiative among the Colombian people themselves for peace. Too fragile and threatened yet to call it a “movement,” but certainly a presence, a voice, a coalition for peace. Just talking about peace, let alone putting forward concrete proposals to the government and armed actors, is an incredible act of courage in Colombia. Like anything and anyone in Colombia that challenges the status quo, these individuals and organizations are denigrated, threatened, and harassed, including by President Uribe and other government high officials. But they have hung in there, and some of their efforts have resulted in the freeing of more hostages and getting the press and the public at large to think, write, and even talk about how Colombia might move towards ending the conflict in a *foreseeable* future, not years or decades in the future.

Because the bottom line is: Only Colombians can make peace for Colombia.

The question for us here is what might the Obama Administration, the 111th Congress and the NGO community do to help open up space for Colombians to pursue and create the ground for peace in Colombia?

I think there are a number of things we can do, have begun to do, or need to do more of and better.

- **We can focus more resources on addressing the humanitarian crisis inside Colombia and along its borders in neighboring countries.** We need to invest more resources not only in *addressing* the basic human needs of the internally displaced, but in *ending* and *preventing* the constant displacement inside Colombia. We need to be thinking about how to create permanent livelihoods for the displaced and their host communities, about how they might safely return to their original homes if possible, and ensuring they do not become a permanent underclass inside Colombia.

Just last Friday, I hosted a briefing on the Colombian refugee crisis in Ecuador and Venezuela. In 2008, the number of refugees entering Ecuador from Colombia doubled from 2007. So far, in the first six months of 2009, the number of Colombian refugees entering Ecuador already equals the total for 2008. What does this say about the level of violence in southern Colombia?

- **We must provide more help and support to Colombia's neighbors** – this is key not only to addressing the humanitarian crisis, but in helping ease the tensions between Colombia and every single one of its neighbors, which is essential for peace-building. The patterns of violence in Colombia are replicating themselves in neighboring border regions. Working with Latin Americans on these issues is critical – and it might just be the kind of question President Obama and Secretary Clinton can bring to other hemispheric nations: How can the United States work *with* you to help ease the tensions and address the humanitarian crises in the Andean region? What would you, Chile, Costa Rica, Brazil and Argentina recommend we do? What would you, Ecuador, Bolivia, Peru, Panama and Venezuela recommend that we do? What might we all do together in partnership in this hemisphere to address this humanitarian and security crisis? What responsibility

does Colombia have for the people and violence it is exporting to its neighbors?

- **We need to put “Plan Colombia” behind us and move beyond it** – In November, the GAO reported that the drug war in Colombia has failed. We should pay attention. We need new initiatives that focus on the ‘demand side’ of the drug war, and that promote community –based rural development rather than the more narrowly-defined so-called alternative development. The U.S. must also stop using tactics that encourage and exacerbate displacement. We need to help Colombia bring health care, education, food security and state presence to Colombia’s people, especially the rural poor and especially those in conflicted areas where help is most needed. Some say that the Integrated Action strategy and programs are exactly this approach. But even its strongest supporters agree that this project, conceived by SOUTHCOM and the Colombian Armed Forces, remains overly-militarized in its approach and lacks the coordinated funding and resources from those non-military agencies most necessary to delivering basic services and establishing *civilian* state presence. And let me be clear, I believe we do indeed need to support those strategies and tactics in security, interdiction and intelligence that have been most successful in disrupting narco-trafficking and the narco-economy – and leave the rest behind.
- **We need to be both more pro-active and more open to taking advantage of possible peace initiatives – For example:**
 - **We need to support humanitarian initiatives that deescalate the conflict and help “humanize” the war.** I still believe that a humanitarian exchange or humanitarian agreement on the remaining hostages – at a minimum, the remaining 24-or-so exchangeable hostages – is something the U.S. can now be more engaged in supporting. And I believe that our engagement

would send a powerful signal about the importance of humanitarian initiatives. Now that the three Americans are free – and I’d like to note that July 2nd was their first anniversary of a year in freedom – I believe we actually have *greater* flexibility and leeway to be engaged and helpful on the hostage crisis.

- This is really an Administration matter, not one for Congress to meddle with legislatively. The U.S. could, possibly, lend its support to a Latin American initiative, if one arises, but we should also support efforts to move Colombian-initiated humanitarian solutions forward. I welcome President Uribe authorizing Senator Piedad Córdoba to work with the International Committee of the Red Cross, the Catholic Church and Peace Commissioner Frank Pearl in helping secure the release of the remaining hostages.
- *At a minimum, U.S. officials could meet regularly with the Colombian families whose relatives are still held hostage and openly demonstrate our sympathy and solidarity with them.*
- Clearly, we need to be careful and sensitive – but the ability of Colombia to negotiate freedom for the hostages could be a powerful move towards confidence-building inside Colombia that other measures to reduce the violence can indeed be taken on. Possibly, it could open up negotiations on rejecting hostage-taking as a tactic by the FARC; it could possibly open up a dialogue and negotiations on “humanizing” the war, for example on ending the use of landmines and child soldiers; it could possibly open the door to finding out the fate of the some 700-hundred-plus kidnap-for-ransom hostages attributed to FARC-kidnapping and the release of those still alive; it could possibly revitalize negotiations with the ELN on similar topics; and it could open up dialogue and potential negotiations on a ceasefire or some type of cessation of hostilities, even on a

limited basis, that could create confidence that it is possible to end to the conflict.

- These aren't rose-colored ideas. Dialogue and negotiations with brutal antagonists are hard. But it all has to begin somewhere – and I believe that starting point is with the hostages, where there is so much public sentiment and engagement on the part of Colombian society.
- **Another necessity for peace and an end to the violence is to seriously go after the paramilitaries.** Seriously address and go after the source or sources of the death threats that national and community-based NGO leaders receive every single day on their phones, over their faxes, in their email, and under their doors. As far as I can tell, hardly a penny of U.S. funding focuses on going after the paramilitaries –the old, the new, the reconstituted, the newly-emerging illegal actors. With all the electronic surveillance and human intelligence that have worked so well against the guerrillas, I find it unbelievable that it's simply impossible to find out who are the sources of these death threats. A serious campaign on this would restore a great deal of confidence that Colombia actually is willing to root out all the sources of violence in the country in order to build peace.
- And if a **serious initiative actually arises to negotiate peace** between the Government, the FARC and/or the ELN – I would hope the U.S. would actually encourage it, even embrace it, for a change.

Next on an agenda that promotes laying the groundwork for peace --

- **Emphasize the importance of human rights, the work of human rights defenders, and the needs and aspirations of the victims of violence** – including victims of the FARC, the

paramilitaries, state actors like the military, security and intelligence forces, and narco-criminal networks. This is the constituency that most hungers for peace – the least we can do is support their efforts and stand by them while they are most in peril. I would extend this approach, again, to working with Colombia's neighbors who are attempting to provide a safe haven for the victims of Colombia's violent reality – but who are also suffering from the presence of all the illegal armed actors and sources of violence crossing into their territory.

One of my greatest frustrations – and an obstacle to peace or creating any confidence in peace-building – is the inability of the Colombian government and military to distinguish between people who dissent and those who are armed actors. Human rights lawyers, trade unionists, academics, community leaders, journalists, religious leaders and others who disagree publicly with government policies or who pursue peace at the local or national level are not terrorists or guerrillas. It's been discouraging to hear President Uribe himself lash out against his critics as terrorists. It was shocking to hear him characterize those working for peace and for the release of the hostages as the intellectual arm of terrorists and guerrillas. It's very troubling to hear General Freddy Padilla, the chief of Colombia's Armed Forces and now the acting defense minister, characterize Colombian NGO leaders who travel abroad to talk about the challenges facing Colombia as FARC ambassadors. It puts these individuals' lives – and sometimes whole communities – in danger. Such comments are themselves an obstacle to dialogue and negotiation and directly contribute to acts of violence. They demonstrate, in no uncertain terms, why civilians continue to be threatened, murdered and disappeared at the hands of the State or with the State's collaboration. And they are a key contributor to the continuing culture of impunity that has tainted Colombia for decades.

- **We need to be clear that peace without justice is no peace at all**
 - We need to do much more than we currently are to meet the needs of those constituencies that hunger for justice and rule of law
 - to fully implement the Justice and Peace Law; to support the Supreme Court, the Constitutional Court, the Inspector General, the Ombudsman and the Attorney General’s office. To make sure that the extradition of paramilitary leaders to the U.S. doesn’t cut short the search for truth and justice in Colombia for the victims of violence there. To help the Colombian military put an end to extrajudicial killings and ensure that those who carried out such murders are prosecuted and imprisoned to the full extent of the law. Above all, we must deal more forcefully with the issue of impunity. Ending impunity for government and military officials, and their close allies and colleagues, is essential to establishing the rule of law and creating some sense of confidence in the judicial system and the hope that serious crimes, human rights crimes, will be punished. Over the past two years, Congress has increased funding for these purposes. And Attorney General Mario Iguarán has moved the ball forward in these areas, but his tenure as Attorney General is now over – and it remains to be seen whether judicial reform and the prosecution of serious crimes will continue to advance or once again retreat.

The bottom line: Protecting human rights – making it a priority – is absolutely essential to building confidence in the State. The continuing abuses by the armed forces, the denigration of human rights and human rights defenders by the highest officials in the land, the continuing impunity, the continuing threats against and disappearances and murders of community and national civilian leaders, and the continuing tolerance of and collaboration with paramilitaries all undermine the legitimacy of the State. And there will never be peace if the State itself is not viewed as a trustworthy partner in peace.

Some might argue that we're already doing all of this. Unfortunately, the little that does support these types of programs has happened only because it's been forced upon the last Administration by Act of Congress. It is not policy; it has never been policy; it's been imposed on official policy by a concerned and disgruntled Congress. I'd like to see an *Administration-driven* policy, articulated and supported at the very highest levels, centered on these priorities, rather than relegating them to the periphery; one that is more pro-active, more genuine, more results-oriented. I'm really tired of fighting over the crumbs when it comes to human rights, democracy, development and rule of law.

Let me just say, it's not easy being in Congress right now, especially when I serve on the House Rules Committee, which is a lot like working in the theater of the absurd at two in the morning. The U.S. economy, the U.S. budget are in a mess – and aid to Colombia, just like funding for other programs, many of them very worthy programs, will face greater scrutiny and likely cutbacks over the next couple of years.

But it's easy being in Washington compared to life in Colombia.

It's much harder being a *campesino* farmer in rural Colombia, far from markets or any basic social services.

It's much harder to be an indigenous community, caught in the cross-fire between the paramilitaries, guerrillas and the Army.

It's much harder to be an Afro-Colombian displaced, living in squalid conditions, constantly under threat in Tumaco or Buenaventura.

It's much harder being a religious or community leader, trying to encourage local development, while at the same time having to personally broker agreements with the paramilitary, guerrilla or criminal

groups that have effective control over who lives and who dies in the area.

And it's much harder for any local, regional or national government or elected official to genuinely represent the Colombian people and their best interests – and come out of office still alive.

I know there are no easy answers for Colombian leaders.

Drug trafficking and pursuing power through violence is a way of life for many on the right and the left. But I do believe – at the end – Colombia's troubles will not be solved on the battlefield – but through a policy that truly recognizes the importance of strengthening civilian institutions, combating head-on the scourge of poverty and displacement, and protecting human rights.

And finally – and I say this to all the actors in Colombia – start talking and negotiating and dealing with one another in good faith. Try talking face-to-face rather than issuing pronouncements and ultimatums through the press.

The challenge for the U.S., I believe, is to help create the incentives and climate for this to happen.

Once again, I thank USIP for inviting me here this afternoon, and I look forward to exchanging ideas with all of you about possible alternatives for U.S. policy in Colombia and the pursuit of peace and an end to the conflict.