

**Remarks as prepared to the House Foreign Affairs Committee, Subcommittee
on the Western Hemisphere**

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Chairman Duncan, Ranking Member Sires, Members of the Committee, thank you for the opportunity to discuss Colombia's peace process. Our distinguished Special Envoy Bernard Aronson will discuss the negotiations and his work in more detail. I will review some of the implications for our bilateral relationship, regional interests, and global concerns.

In naming Special Envoy Aronson to his position in February, Secretary Kerry noted, "today, Colombia is a critical ally for the United States. And we are working hard together to promote security and economic prosperity throughout the Western Hemisphere and the world. But despite Colombia's remarkable story and all that it has achieved as a nation, the country has continued to suffer the tragic effects of one of the longest running wars on the planet... For 20 years the United States has been Colombia's steadfast ally in this conflict... We know that if the parties were able to reach an agreement...this would unleash enormous potential for the Colombian people and it would have an impact throughout Latin America and perhaps even beyond."

I am not suggesting we get ahead of ourselves. Make no mistake, the talks are at a critical stage, perhaps the most difficult to date. We condemn the continuing terrorism by the FARC, including brutal killings and assaults on infrastructure. We agree with President Santos that these actions only bring destruction and suffering to the Colombian people and are wholly inconsistent with a commitment to peace. We support President Santos' call for the FARC to accelerate progress at the peace talks.

At the same time, we should bear in mind that progress in achieving peace is part of a virtuous circle, which benefits not just the families of victims but all of Colombia, Latin America, and indeed the wider community of nations. Building a durable peace deal can help Colombia invest more in education and promote economic development. With these investments and growing security and defense of human rights, more children succeed and vulnerable populations begin to

participate fully in economic and social life. Broad-based economic growth, together with a safe and secure population, boosts Colombia's ability to engage regionally and globally to support security, advance economic prosperity, and defend human rights.

This virtuous circle is not theoretical, it is real. In fact, it describes Colombia's history over the last decade. The future benefits of a Colombia at peace will also be very real, but even more dramatically positive. We did not get to this point by accident, but rather by ongoing investment by the international community, including strong bipartisan support in Washington. The support of the U.S. Congress has been instrumental to everything that the United States has achieved with Colombia, and your support will be needed now more than ever as Colombia attempts to find a real and lasting peace.

Together with Colombia, we have worked to promote reconciliation and prepare for the post-conflict period. The Colombian government has enacted ambitious social reforms supporting transitional justice, such as the 2011 Victims' and Land Restitution Law, which seeks to provide reparations and land restitution to seven million registered conflict victims. We have supported the government's work to restore more than 84,516 hectares of land to 11,401 displaced persons.

We are helping Colombia build safer communities, training police, judges and prosecutors. Since 2000, kidnappings in Colombia have plummeted 90 percent and homicides have dropped nearly 50 percent.

There has been significant media attention to the 2014 increase in coca production as well as Colombia's decision to halt aerial cocaine eradication in the coming months. We are working together with our Colombian partners to develop alternative plans to respond. We anticipate Colombia will support expanded manual eradication and interdiction to compensate for the loss of aerial eradication, and continued U.S. assistance will be important to this effort. We do not doubt Colombia's commitment to combat counternarcotics – their will and focus has been evident for more than a decade and led to a six year trend of declining coca cultivation.

A second area where we are advancing with our Colombian partners is expanding educational opportunities. The United States has trained more than 800 Colombian public school teachers in English language and teaching methodology. In a recognition of the need to invest in the Colombian people, President Santos

recently announced that, despite the conflict, his government will, for the first time, spend more on education than on defense.

We are investing in opportunities for vulnerable groups. Through the Women's Entrepreneurship in the Americas Initiative (WEAmericas), Embassy Bogota organized a TechCamp to help more than 80 women business owners to grow their businesses with technology solutions. Our \$1.8 million Beca Scholarship program facilitates entry of qualified Afro-Colombian and indigenous youth into Colombian National Police academies. The program has produced more than 1,800 active police officers.

We continue to support Colombia's increased energy opportunities, as well as Colombia's energy leadership in the region. Together, Colombia and the United States announced the "Connecting the Americas 2022 Initiative" at the 2012 Summit of the Americas, and Colombia joined us at the Caribbean Energy Security Summit. We are also coordinating on energy: we provide technical support to help Colombian businesses develop offshore oil and unconventional gas responsibly, defend biodiversity, promote conservation, and reduce illegal mining.

We are strengthening our already robust economic ties with a Colombia which has significantly reduced poverty and extreme poverty. The U.S.-Colombia Free Trade Agreement is fostering economic growth in both nations. Since the FTA took effect in 2012, U.S. exports to Colombia have grown 42 percent to \$20.3 billion in 2014. Colombian companies have capitalized on competitive advantages from the FTA. According to ProColombia, 1,908 Colombian companies exported to the United States for the first time in the first two and a half years of the CTPA, and consumers in the United States can now enjoy more than 430 new imported Colombian products.

We are also making progress in promoting human rights, though there are significant challenges. On labor, the government has reaffirmed its commitment to the Labor Action Plan, and we are encouraging them to do more. Impunity is a continuing concern, as are continuing threats and attacks against human rights defenders and labor unionists. The government provides protective measures for over 7,500 at-risk citizens, which is commendable, yet more must be done to prosecute those who kill, attack, and threaten human rights defenders and others.

Finally, we are strengthening security regionally and across the globe. Our bilateral law enforcement cooperation is second to none. Colombia has trained more than 22,000 security officials on its own, and this year our bilateral regional

security plan will implement more than 200 capacity-building programs in Central America and the Caribbean. We are delighted Colombia has agreed to contribute to UN peacekeeping, and we support its aspirations to become a NATO partner. In fact, this summer Colombia is deploying an ocean patrol vessel to support Operation OCEAN SHIELD, a NATO counterpiracy mission off the coast of Somalia.

I would caution that talk of a “peace dividend” and reduced need for support to Colombia may be an alluring proposition, but it is also an illusory one. The investments we have made in Colombia over close to two decades – whether through foreign assistance, continuing messages of bipartisan political support in Washington, or time invested building relations with the Colombian government and people – have benefited the United States in security, economic, and political gains. With a peace agreement, the results will be all the more impressive. But we should not spike the ball on the five yard line by cutting back on this investment.

Chairman Duncan, Ranking Member Sires, Members of the Committee, I have been privileged to work on Colombian issues since 1999, first as the Senior Colombia Desk Officer at the conception of Plan Colombia, then as the Political and Economic Counselor at our Embassy in Bogota, and for the past year and half in my current position. In 1999, many Colombians questioned the ability of their government to survive. Those of us who have followed Colombia closely since that difficult decade have been profoundly inspired by how Colombia has turned itself into a self-confident, increasingly prosperous, sought-after partner on the world stage. I know that, if we can help the Colombian people reach their enduring quest for peace, we will come to see how much more Colombia has to offer to its people and to the world.

Thank you for the opportunity to meet with you today and for your continuing commitment to Colombia.

I look forward to your questions.