

REINVIGORATING U.S.-COLOMBIA RELATIONS

HEARING

BEFORE THE

**COMMITTEE ON FOREIGN RELATIONS
UNITED STATES SENATE**

ONE HUNDRED SEVENTEENTH CONGRESS

SECOND SESSION

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FEBRUARY 16, 2022
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REINVIGORATING U.S.-COLOMBIA RELATIONS

WEDNESDAY, FEBRUARY 16, 2022

U.S. SENATE,
COMMITTEE ON FOREIGN RELATIONS,
Washington, DC.

The committee met, pursuant to notice, at 2:00 p.m., in room SD-G50, Dirksen Senate Office Building, and via Webex, Hon. Robert Menendez, chairman of the committee, presiding.

Present: Senators Menendez [presiding], Shaheen, Coons, Booker, Van Hollen, Risch, Rubio, Johnson, Young, Cruz, and Hagerty.

OPENING STATEMENT OF HON. ROBERT MENENDEZ, U.S. SENATOR FROM NEW JERSEY

The CHAIRMAN. This hearing of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee will come to order. Our hearing today is Reinvigorating the U.S.-Colombia Relations.

As the world braces for Russia's assault against the Ukrainian people in defiance of a peaceful world order and in rejection of democratic values, it is imperative that we renew efforts to strengthen our alliances and closest partnerships, particular those close to home. We have long championed the United States' relationship with Colombia as one of our most important in South America and one of the greatest foreign policy successes globally. Indeed, together we have disrupted massive criminal networks and built an economic relationship worth nearly \$50 billion.

Thanks to the countless sacrifices of the Colombian people and our decades-long partnership, Colombia was able to end the world's longest civil war. Today, Colombia exports its expertise to help other nations combat drug trafficking and terrorism. Massive security improvements opened Colombia's doors to the world while also enabling Colombians to discover their own homeland.

In a welcome first, we even have a Disney movie about Colombia, enabling a generational shift in global perceptions about the country. Personally, I am thrilled that Colombian-American children in New Jersey will be more likely to hear their peers singing about Bruno rather than recycling the tired tropes about Colombia drug wars of the eighties and nineties. It is transformational on many levels.

Of course, significant challenges still exist. The pandemic strained Colombia's national budgets and poverty increased, the government's presence in rural areas of the country diminished, illicit coca cultivation continued to proliferate, and armed criminal groups have returned to open conflict and are terrorizing local communities. Additionally, last year the world watched as an ill-fated

tax reform proposal sparked country-wide protests and brought violence to Colombia's cities, unseen in decades, and Colombia has also shouldered an already generous response to Venezuela's protracted refugee crisis, a crisis that rivals the tragedy in Syria in size and impact.

That said, I believe that the complexity of the world today demands that we embrace the opportunity to address different challenges, challenges like social and economic inequality, environmental deterioration, human rights and the creeping influences of extra-regional actors like Russia and China. These issues may not affect the lives of Americans as directly as drug trafficking, but they are critical to the strength of our democracy in our hemisphere and to the region's overall health and resilience. In today's world, they must be a priority.

It is long past time that we modernize our relationship with Colombia to focus on the realities of the present rather than the ghosts of the past, and to elevate our partnership to reflect Colombia's growing leadership on the world stage. We cannot afford to rest on our laurels.

As we saw, former President Trump was a wrecking ball to U.S.-Colombia relations, going so far as to say that Colombian President Duque had, "done nothing to work with the United States," an insult that is untethered from reality.

That is why, with our country celebrating 200 years of diplomatic relations this year, I am announcing the most expansive legislative initiative to date to reinvigorate U.S.-Colombia relations. The U.S.-Colombia Strategic Alliance Act will formally designate Colombia as a major non-NATO ally of the United States. It will strengthen our partnership on international security and defense issues, as well as human rights and labor rights. It will also create a new enterprise fund to catalyze investments in Colombian businesses as they recover from the pandemic, and promote efforts to diversify U.S. supply chains away from a reliance on China.

My bipartisan legislation will facilitate new opportunities for women entrepreneurs and members of Afro-Colombian and indigenous communities. Importantly, it will also propose actions to bolster Colombia's efforts to address the hemisphere's historic refugee and migration challenges and to support conservation of Colombia's truly privileged biodiversity. The bill reinforces the United States' support for the full implementation of the 2016 Peace Accord, which continues to be the best, albeit imperfect, tool to build peace and democratic governance in Colombia.

I will close by noting that bipartisan support for Colombia has directly contributed to the success of the U.S. approach. I look forward to working with my Senate colleagues on this new legislation. I welcome the views of our esteemed panelists on how we can modernize and strengthen our relationship in light of the new opportunities and challenges we face.

With that let me turn to the distinguished ranking member for his opening remarks.

**STATEMENT OF HON. JAMES E. RISCH,
U.S. SENATOR FROM IDAHO**

Senator RISCH. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. The United States has an enduring interest in a prosperous, democratic, and stable Western Hemisphere. Strong relations with Colombia are important to attain these goals. This year we proudly celebrate 200 years of diplomatic relations, the 20th anniversary of Plan Colombia, and the 10th anniversary of our bilateral trade promotion agreement. Our partnership has contributed to widespread economic growth and development as well as safer and more secure communities, both in Colombia and the hemisphere at large.

At the same time, Colombia's home-grown democratic institutions have demonstrated extraordinary resilience in the face of multiple and simultaneous crises. Colombia's internal security is under pressure due to flaws in the 2016 deal with the FARC and the ongoing security and humanitarian crisis created by the Maduro regime in Venezuela. Our Colombian allies need our support in confronting transnational criminal and terrorist organizations and maintaining a credible deterrence against the rising security threats in the region.

Equally concerning is the negative influence of malign state actors such as Russia and China. Russian disinformation campaigns and its export of sophisticated weapons and repressive practices to the Maduro regime are a growing threat to the security of Colombia and the stability of northern South America. China has shown growing interest in the region, and Colombia's neighbors have already suffered the consequences of China's predatory practices. The United States should work with credible regional institutions, such as the Inter-American Development Bank to unleash private sector solutions to fulfill the Colombian people's growing expectations.

Given its strategic location straddling the Pacific Ocean and the Caribbean Sea, Colombia can be a powerful ally in the race to secure critical supply chains. The Biden administration should get serious about our partnership with Colombia or risk squandering the strategic gains of the last few decades.

I welcome our witnesses today and look forward to hearing from you about these issues.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

The CHAIRMAN. Thank you, Senator Risch. We have a great panel of Administration witnesses to start off. It is my privilege to welcome back to the committee Assistant Secretary for the Western Hemisphere Brian Nichols. Assistant Secretary Nichols has been an outspoken advocate for peace and prosperity in Colombia and regional security in our hemisphere.

Prior to assuming his role as Assistant Secretary he served two ambassadorships in the Republic of Zimbabwe and in Peru. He served as the Deputy Chief of Mission at the U.S. Embassy in Colombia, where he managed U.S. diplomatic activities and oversaw over \$500 million in annual assistance. Welcome back, Mr. Secretary.

We also welcome Assistant Secretary for the Bureau of International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs Todd Robinson to the committee. He has played a critical role in strengthening the U.S.-Colombia bilateral relationship in the areas of governance,

anti-narcotics strategies and security. Ambassador Robinson has served as Special Advisor for Central America in the Bureau of Western Hemisphere Affairs. Ambassador Robinson was also previously chargé d'affaires in Caracas, Venezuela. He served as U.S. Ambassador to the Republic of Guatemala from 2014 to 2017. Welcome back to you as well.

Finally, it is a pleasure to have the Honorable Marcela Escobari, Assistant Administrator of USAID's Bureau for Latin America and the Caribbean as a witness for today's hearing. Her leadership within USAID Latin America and the Caribbean portfolio has been critical for supporting efforts that advance economic opportunity and peace in Colombia.

While serving in the Obama-Biden administration as Assistant Administrator of USAID's Bureau for Latin America and the Caribbean, she reinforced U.S. support for Peace Colombia and prepared a proactive strategy to confront the humanitarian crisis in Venezuela.

So with the thanks of the committee to all of you for attending, we will start off with you, Secretary Nichols. We ask that you keep your statements to about 5 minutes so the committee can have a conversation with you. Your full statements will be included in the record, without objection. Secretary Nichols, you are recognized.

STATEMENT OF THE HONORABLE BRIAN A. NICHOLS, ASSISTANT SECRETARY OF STATE FOR WESTERN HEMISPHERE, U.S. DEPARTMENT OF STATE, WASHINGTON, DC

Mr. NICHOLS. Chairman Menendez, Ranking Member Risch, distinguished members of the committee, I find it fitting that we take the opportunity to discuss Colombia now. As you noted, 2022 marks the bicentennial of bilateral relations between our two countries. The United States and Colombia stood shoulder to shoulder through some of the toughest tests of the 19th, 20th, and 21st centuries, and today we are closer partners than ever.

We share a deep commitment to democratic governance, prosperity, and opportunity, the rule of law, and respect for human rights. We share a determination to ensure Colombia has a lasting peace, counters terrorism and narcotics, expands state services and protection throughout its territory, and finds rich strength in its diversity. We join forces to uphold these values in our countries as well as others, and we do not refrain from calling out and holding accountable those who trespass upon the standards we hold dear. In the face of terrorist violence and a brutal dictatorship in neighboring Venezuela that provides shelter and encouragement to both terrorist and criminal groups and caused the exodus of millions, Colombia's resolve has not waned.

We continue to seek ways to improve security and prosperity for citizens in both our countries, and we continue to support comprehensive implementation of the historic 2016 Peace Accord with the former FARC, which will be critical to ensure Colombia's transition from 50 years of conflict to a just, inclusive, and durable peace.

Over the past year, the United States supported Colombia's impressive efforts to build back from the global pandemic. We donated more than \$117 million to response and recovery efforts—in-

cluding surge healthcare personnel, critical supplies, and equipment—to curb the COVID–19 pandemic. The United States also donated 6 million safe, effective COVID–19 vaccine doses and helped distribute them in hard-to-reach areas.

Last week in Colombia, I witnessed the commitment of the Colombian Government to further professionalize its security forces and increase state presence and resources in remote areas. During my visit, I underscored our shared commitment to human rights with civil society leaders and encouraged U.S. businesses in Colombia to create new economic opportunities.

For all that we have accomplished together, there remains more to do.

The COVID–19 pandemic has highlighted the precarious state of Colombia’s most vulnerable populations. Colombia cannot achieve lasting peace without addressing the systematic inequities that have contributed to persistent violence. Expanding efforts to improve respect for human rights and accountability for past offenses remains essential. I will strengthen our work with Colombia to ensure historically disadvantaged communities of Afro-descendant and indigenous peoples benefit from the same opportunities as the broader population. I will continue prioritizing policies and programs that provide opportunities for women, minority ethnic communities, victims of violence, and other groups that remain disenfranchised in society today.

The vulnerable populations in Colombia include almost 2 million Venezuelans displaced by the poverty, kleptocracy, and brutality of the Maduro regime next door. With its historic offer of 10-year temporary protection, Colombia generously welcomed Venezuelan refugees within its borders and provides short-term access to food, services, and medical attention to nearly 6 million Venezuelans living in border communities, all at a time when resources have been stretched even thinner due to the pandemic.

Colombia has also assumed an outsized leadership position in the hemisphere in addressing irregular migration, including by co-hosting a hemisphere-wide ministerial on migration with Secretary Blinken last October.

An acute priority is collaborating with Colombia to fend off the malign activities of state and non-state actors, who increasingly seek opportunities to erode the hemispheric consensus on the importance of the rule of law and democratic governance. Those actors helped Nicaragua, Venezuela, and Cuba turn away from this consensus, and enable the autocratic leaders of those countries to hold onto power by suppressing their own people.

Colombia’s leaders recognize that protecting democracy from external threats is essential. With elections on the horizon, the United States provides funding and technical support to help Colombia counter malign actors seeking to sow confusion and mistrust in the institutions Colombia and the United States worked so tirelessly to strengthen. We also continue to support Colombia’s security efforts to ensure every citizen can exercise their right to vote safely.

We will seek progress on our bilateral and regional goals throughout the end of the Duque administration, and we will engage with Colombia’s next administration with the shared goal that

governments must not only be elected democratically, but also govern democratically to improve the lives of all citizens. I am confident that this productive, democratic partnership will continue to deliver for Colombians and Americans for years to come.

Thank you for this opportunity and I look forward to your questions.

[The prepared statement of Mr. Nichols follows:]

Prepared Statement of Mr. Brian A. Nichols

Chairman Menendez, Ranking Member Risch, distinguished members of the Committee, I find it fitting that we take the opportunity to discuss Colombia now, as 2022 marks the bicentennial of bilateral relations between our two countries. The United States and Colombia stood shoulder-to-shoulder through some of the toughest tests of the 19th, 20th and 21st centuries, and today, we are closer partners than ever.

We share a deep commitment to democratic governance, prosperity and opportunity, the rule of law, and respect for human rights. We share a determination to ensure Colombia has a lasting peace, counters terrorism and narcotics, expands state services and protection throughout its territory, protects the environment, and finds strength in its rich diversity. We join forces to uphold these values in our countries as well as others, and we do not refrain from calling out and holding accountable those who trespass upon the standards we hold dear. In the face of terrorist violence and a brutal dictatorship in neighboring Venezuela that provides shelter and encouragement to both terrorist and criminal groups and caused the exodus of millions, Colombia's resolve has not waned.

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For all that we have accomplished together, there remains more to do.

The COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted the precarious state of Colombia's most vulnerable populations. Colombia cannot achieve lasting peace without addressing the systematic inequities that have contributed to persistent violence. Expanding efforts to improve respect for human rights and accountability for past offenses remains essential. I will strengthen our work with Colombia to ensure historically disadvantaged communities of Afro-descendant and Indigenous peoples benefit from the same opportunities as the broader population. I will continue prioritizing policies and programs that provide opportunities for women, minority ethnic communities, victims of violence, and other groups that remain disenfranchised in society today.

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sensus—and enable the autocratic leaders of those countries to hold on to power by suppressing their own people.

Colombia's leaders recognize that protecting democracy from external threats is essential. With elections on the horizon, the United States provides funding and technical support to help Colombia counter malign actors seeking to sow confusion and mistrust in the institutions Colombia and the United States worked so tirelessly to strengthen. We also continue to support Colombia's security efforts to ensure every citizen can exercise their right to vote safely.

We will seek progress on our bilateral and regional goals throughout the end of the Duque administration, and we will engage with Colombia's next administration with the shared goal that governments must not only be elected democratically, but also govern democratically to improve the lives of all citizens. I am confident that this productive, democratic partnership will continue to deliver for Colombians and Americans for years to come.

Thank you for this opportunity and I look forward to your questions.

The CHAIRMAN. Thank you. Secretary Robinson.

STATEMENT OF THE HONORABLE TODD D. ROBINSON, ASSISTANT SECRETARY OF STATE FOR INTERNATIONAL NARCOTICS AND LAW ENFORCEMENT AFFAIRS, U.S. DEPARTMENT OF STATE, WASHINGTON, DC

Mr. ROBINSON. Chairman Menendez, Ranking Member Risch, distinguished members of the committee, thank you for the opportunity to testify today regarding INL's efforts in Colombia. If I may, thank you for passage of State's authorization bill and your leadership in that which will help strengthen the Department and reaffirms this body's commitment to the role of the Bureau of INL and other bureaus in the Department.

Together, with longstanding support for Congress, we have built one of the deepest bilateral partnerships in the Americas. Colombia's security affects the security and welfare of all of our citizens. A stronger, more stable Colombia is not just a better partner, but provides regional leadership on our shared priorities, including countering transnational crime, enhancing regional security, and training security forces throughout the region.

Colombia has made significant progress over the last 20 years, transforming into a stable democracy and economy. To sustain Colombia's progress we must continue to support Colombia's institutions and their capacity to expand state presence in rural areas, invest in counternarcotics efforts, protect human rights, and combat environmental crime.

The Duque administration has dedicated significant resources and personnel to meet ambitious counternarcotics targets despite enormous challenges. While our combined efforts have helped slow years of explosive coca growth, the now historic levels of coca cultivation show more work is needed, which is why the U.S. and Colombian governments developed a new counternarcotics strategy.

Last October, we committed to a comprehensive, holistic strategy to link state presence, development, rule of law, and environmental protection with reducing cocaine production. Our approach focuses on three pillars: integrated supply reduction, comprehensive rural development and security, and environmental protection. The strategy will define broader measures of success. Eradication will remain crucial, but we broadened our work to also focus on environmental crimes as narcotics traffickers also destroy the environment.

Under the integrated supply reduction pillar, INL is addressing cocaine production and related illicit finances. INL will continue to help Colombia eradicate coca, interdict cocaine and precursors, and improve the government's ability to disrupt criminal financial networks. We also support police effectiveness by improving training, deployment cycles, and human rights practices.

Under the rural development and security pillar we hope to extend state presence to expand economic opportunity, advance the accords, and improve security, justice, and social services critical to people's needs. Our efforts with USAID protect community leaders, make licit crops more competitive, formalize land ownership, and pursue environmental crimes. Our programs help reverse environmental degradation by enhancing detection, assisting Colombian efforts to pursue environmental criminals, and reforestation.

Our new strategy brings together U.S. and Colombian public stakeholders in an integrated, sequenced fashion with broader metrics to produce sustainable results in three targeted areas to gauge their efficacy. For example, in Cáceres, Antioquia, we sequenced programs to increase police presence, strengthen community police relations, remove land mines, formalize land ownership, improve infrastructure, provide agricultural training, train prosecutors, enforce environmental crimes, and improve local government services.

To achieve this strategy, we recognize that Colombian people's confidence in their police and institutions must improve. We are therefore supporting the Colombian-led plan to increase police accountability, transparency, and protection of human rights. We support the Colombian Government's focus on transparency and accountability, its intent to fully investigate allegations of police misconduct, and its statement of zero tolerance for officials acting outside the law.

Mr. Chairman and Ranking Member, we have worked closely with the Duque administration to implement vital police reforms, achieve impressive counternarcotics results, strengthen rural security, and disrupt criminal networks. We cannot and should not underestimate the challenges we face in Colombia. Armed groups are resilient, adaptive, and well resourced. Improving rural security in Colombia, an urbanized country almost twice the size of Texas, is a significant challenge. We look forward to working with the next Colombian presidential administration and believe our new whole-of-government strategy can accommodate whoever wins the next Colombian elections.

Our work and success in Colombia are made possible by strong bipartisan congressional support. Thank you, and I look forward to your questions.

[The prepared statement of Mr. Robinson follows:]

Prepared Statement of Mr. Todd Robinson

Chairman Menendez, Ranking Member Risch, distinguished Members of the Committee, thank you for the opportunity to testify before you today regarding INL's efforts to advance the United States' priorities in Colombia. Together, with long-standing support from Congress, we have built one of the deepest bilateral partnerships in the Americas.

Colombia's security directly affects the security and welfare of our citizens. A stronger, more stable Colombia is not just a better partner but also provides re-

gional leadership on our shared priorities, including countering transnational crime, enhancing regional security, and training security forces throughout the region.

Colombia has made significant progress over the last 20 years, transforming into a stable democracy and economy. It has become more secure and prosperous, with a dramatic drop in violent crime statistics and a more than tripling of Gross Domestic Product (GDP) and Gross National Income (GNI) per capita.

To sustain Colombia's progress, we must continue to support Colombia's institutions and their capacity to expand state presence into rural areas, invest in counter-narcotics efforts, protect human rights, combat environmental crime, mitigate climate change, and manage the Venezuelan migrant crisis.

Despite COVID-19-related challenges, the Duque administration has dedicated significant resources and personnel to meeting ambitious counternarcotics targets. In 2021, the Colombian Government captured alias Otoniel, the most significant blow to Clan del Golfo in many years; interdicted or assisted in the interdiction of 758 tons of cocaine and cocaine base, the most in Colombia's history; and manually eradicated 103,000 hectares of coca, the second most manual eradication in Colombia's history. While our combined efforts have helped slow years of explosive coca growth, the now historic levels of coca cultivation show a new approach was needed to reduce overall drug production in Colombia, particularly as transnational criminal organizations find new drug markets and improve production techniques. With the historic cultivation numbers in mind, the U.S. and Colombian governments developed a new strategy to redesign our counternarcotics efforts.

Last October, we committed to a comprehensive, holistic, whole-of-government strategy to link state presence, security, development, rule of law, and environmental protection to reduce coca and cocaine production in Colombia significantly and sustainably. The new approach focuses on three pillars: integrated supply reduction; comprehensive rural development and security; and environmental protection.

The strategy will enable us to define broader measures of success for counternarcotics in rural communities. Eradication will remain crucial and is essential to create the space for long-term solutions, but we have also broadened our interventions to include a focus on environmental crimes as criminal organizations responsible for narco-trafficking are often responsible for environmental destruction such as deforestation, soil and water pollution, and illegal mining. By aggressively pursuing environmental crimes, we will both protect the environment and apply pressure on these criminal organizations.

Under the integrated supply reduction pillar, INL seeks to address the nature of the cocaine supply and counter the growing trend in coca cultivation and related illicit financial flows. INL will continue to help Colombia eradicate coca, interdict cocaine and precursor materials, and improve police and prosecutor's ability to disrupt the financial networks that sustain and support these groups. We are also supporting the police to improve their long-term training, deployment, and human rights practices to make them more effective.

Under the rural security, development, and justice pillar, the United States works with our Colombian partners to extend state presence to rural communities to provide greater security, expand economic opportunity, and improve justice and other social services, which are critical to people's needs and to advance the accords. Together with USAID, our efforts include protecting community leaders; making licit crops more profitable and competitive; and amplifying land formalization.

We have launched programming to reverse the negative impact of the narcotics trade on the environment by enhancing detection, supporting reforestation, and assisting Colombian military and police efforts to pursue the perpetrators of environmental crimes.

Our new strategy brings together U.S. and Colombian public stakeholders in an integrated, sequenced fashion to produce optimal, sustainable results in three targeted geographic areas to gauge their efficacy. INL, in particular, is collaborating closely with USAID. For example, in Cáceres, Antioquia, we sequenced programming to increase police presence, strengthen community-police relations, remove landmines, formalize land ownership, improve infrastructure, provide agriculture training, train prosecutors, enforce environmental crimes, and improve local government services.

To achieve this strategy, we recognize the Colombian people's confidence in their police and institutions must improve. We are, therefore, also supporting the Colombian-led plan to increase police accountability, transparency, and protection of human rights. We support the Colombian Government's focus on transparency, accountability, its intent to fully investigate allegations of police misconduct, and its statements of zero tolerance for officials acting outside the law.

Mr. Chairman and Ranking Member, we have worked closely with the Duque administration to implement vital police reforms, achieve impressive counternarcotics results, strengthen rural security, and disrupt criminal networks. We cannot and should not underestimate the challenges we face in Colombia—armed groups are resilient, adaptive, and incredibly well-resourced—and improving rural security in Colombia, a highly urbanized country that is almost twice the size of Texas, is a significant challenge. We look forward to continuing to work with the Duque administration in these next few months, and to working with the next Colombian presidential administration. We believe our new whole-of-government strategy is sufficiently flexible that it can accommodate whoever is the eventual winner of Colombia's presidency. Strong and sustained bipartisan support from Congress is an integral component of our shared success with Colombia. Thank you, and I look forward to your questions.

The CHAIRMAN. Thank you, Mr. Secretary, and thank you for recognizing the State authorization that Senator Risch and I, along with other members of the committee, were able to achieve, something that has not been achieved in a couple decades, and we hope to build upon that in the future.

Administrator Escobari.

STATEMENT OF THE HONORABLE MARCELA ESCOBARI, ASSISTANT ADMINISTRATOR FOR LATIN AMERICA AND THE CARIBBEAN, U.S. AGENCY FOR INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT, WASHINGTON, DC

Ms. ESCOBARI. Chairman Menendez, Ranking Member Risch, and distinguished members of this committee, thank you for the opportunity to testify today.

Colombia remains one of the United States' closest and most steadfast partners in the hemisphere. Despite daunting challenges, the country's people and successive governments have demonstrated the will and the capacity to end decades of civil conflict and build a more peaceful, prosperous, and just society.

Today Colombia is facing severe shocks: COVID-19, the Venezuelan migration crisis, and a rise in coca cultivation. These shocks threaten progress made toward peace and inclusive development, and USAID is helping Colombia address these issues head on. USAID adjusted fast to support Colombia's COVID response. Aside from emergency assistance, we made adjustments throughout our programs to mitigate the impacts of the virus. Our support has helped get shots in arms, helped schools shift to virtual learning, protected women from gender-based violence, and provided food to those that lost their livelihoods. We are now focused on the future, getting Colombia's youth back to school and supporting a robust economic recovery.

We remain committed to supporting Colombia in protecting human rights. As the FARC demobilized and stepped away from the battlefield, criminal gangs have entered into violent competition to control territory and the illegal narcotics trade. Social and environmental leaders who are fighting back have become even more vulnerable to violent attacks, and USAID has deepened its efforts to support them. We helped the National Protection Unit to make more effective use of collective protection for ethnic groups. We helped the Attorney General secure 88 sentences in human rights defender homicide cases to date. There is a lot more work to do, but these are positive steps toward greater accountability.

Coca's rapid expansion also greatly complicates rural development. Last October, the White House announced the implementation of a more integrated and holistic approach to counter narcotics in Colombia. USAID supports this strategy to integrate and sequence assets in each municipality, in tight coordination with the Colombian Government and our interagency partners. Together we bring expanded access to state services, land reform, rule of law to guarantee basic rights, and income for licit producers. Together, this brings an expanded state presence that gives alternative sources of income over coca a real chance.

One promising strategy has been providing land titles. USAID piloted the first municipal-wide titling sweep in a municipality, emblematic of the armed conflict, Colombia's Montes de Maria area. These efforts are showing positive results, and USAID hopes to scale this pilot program in other coca-growing municipalities.

In addition, we recently launched the agency's largest award dedicated to ethnic inclusion, and we are advancing localization efforts through direct grants to four local Afro-Colombian and indigenous organizations.

Another massive challenge is the Venezuelan migration crisis. In an act of remarkable generosity, Colombia welcomed nearly 2 million Venezuelan migrants and refugees with open arms, and USAID quickly adjusted its programs to provide assistance. In addition to immediate relief, including food, medicine, and shelter, U.S. investments have helped Colombia ramp up registration of Venezuelans under their TPS programs, helping Venezuelans access basic services and employment opportunities. Colombia's response is a promising model for the region, and USAID will continue to support Colombia's integration efforts.

Lastly, and similarly to migration, Colombia has responded to its environmental challenges with innovation and leadership. USAID's mission in Colombia oversees the agency's largest natural environment investment in the hemisphere, focused on tropical forests and biodiversity conservation, as well as addressing environmental crimes.

The challenges I have outlined may seem daunting, but it is our task to make peace irreversible. It will be a long-term endeavor, but the trust and progress we have forged with the Colombian people will continue to provide a strong foundation for the future.

Allow me to close with the words of Luis Fernando Arias, a leading voice of Colombia's indigenous movement and a close USAID partner, who a year ago this week died from COVID. He reminded us, "We have to continue working for a country that is more humane, peaceful, equitable, and inclusive. We are here because Colombia cannot have one more victim." May his words be our call to action today?

Thank you, and I look forward to your questions.
[The prepared statement of Ms. Escobari follows:]

Prepared Statement of Ms. Marcela Escobari

Chairman Menendez, Ranking Member Risch, and distinguished members of the committee, thank you for the opportunity to testify on USAID's work in Colombia and discuss our vision for the future.

Colombia remains one of the United States' closest and most steadfast partners in the hemisphere. Despite daunting challenges, the country's people and successive

governments have demonstrated the will and the capacity to end a 52 year civil conflict and build a more peaceful, prosperous, and just society.

The achievement of the 2016 Peace Accord between the state and the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) rests squarely with Colombia. The United States is proud to have been the country's closest partner in advancing the transition from five decades of conflict to greater peace and security.

There are few parallels to what Colombia has achieved in the relatively short time span of about two decades. Once a nearly failed state, the country has come back from the brink to establish itself as a stable democracy, Latin America's fourth largest economy and a close U.S. partner and ally. From 2000 to 2019, the gross domestic product more than doubled; the percent of Colombians living in poverty was nearly cut in half (from 54 percent to 29 percent); and violence fell dramatically.

The historic 2016 Peace Accord brought important progress. It disarmed and demobilized 13,000 FARC combatants, with 11,000 still committed to the peace process; advanced justice and reparations for around 9 million victims; and spurred unprecedented levels of public investment in the country's far-flung and historically neglected rural areas. USAID has been Colombia's most valued partner in advancing implementation of the Accord.

The Accord is not perfect, and implementation is uneven. Overall, it has helped the country transition to a new, more hopeful chapter while creating new opportunities for development investment. Its survival itself is notable, given that 50 percent of similar peace accords across the globe collapse during the first 5 years. We note the important progress that Colombia has won through its choice to negotiate an exit from conflict, even if implementation remains a formidable challenge.

USAID'S SUPPORT OF THE PEACE PROCESS

USAID's support to peace implementation has been vital. Our assistance is closely aligned with the Accord's Rural Development, Transitional Justice, and Ethnic Inclusion chapters. With regard to the Rural Development Chapter, USAID has made implementation of Colombia's own Territorially-Focused Development Programs the centerpiece of our support under the firm belief that addressing the rural-urban divide is the best path for Colombia out of violent conflict.

USAID assistance for land titling, financial inclusion, expansion of the Colombian State, and rapid response community development projects directly supports the Rural Development Chapter and is bringing tangible benefits to conflict-affected communities throughout rural Colombia. USAID's more nimble and flexible programs help pave the way for, and mobilize, much larger Colombian Government investments in the municipalities selected for peace resources.

Notably, we have increased our assistance to the transitional justice system agreed to in the accords. A truth and justice response seen as successful and legitimate will help Colombia move decisively forward to reconcile and come to terms with the violent past. USAID's assistance seeks to help Colombia reconcile and move beyond past atrocities and establish consequences for transgressions committed on all sides during the state's conflict with the FARC. Last year, the Special Jurisdiction for Peace (or JEP) issued 34 indictments for war crimes and crimes against humanity in two major cases. USAID assistance has helped accelerate JEP cases and better protect witnesses. USAID also has helped the Unit for the Search of Disappeared Persons and the Truth Commission reach victims all over the country.

With regard to the Ethnic Inclusion Chapter, the Accord recognizes that the full economic, political, and social participation of Afro-Colombians and Indigenous peoples is key to a lasting peace. USAID is profoundly committed to this goal. USAID recently launched the Agency's largest award wholly dedicated to ethnic inclusion. Moreover, and to advance Administrator Power's focus on aid localization, USAID is proud to have direct grants with four local Afro-Colombian and Indigenous organizations that advance self-determined development, COVID-19 recovery, peacebuilding, and environmental conservation. Hand-in-hand with those organizations, representing some of the country's most prominent ethnic leaders, we are advancing implementation of the Ethnic Inclusion Chapter, building the leadership skills of young people, and protecting five new indigenous community conservation areas—totaling 772 square miles of protected territories.

USAID's comprehensive support is a recognition of the strategic possibilities the Accord offers to address the root causes of violence while expanding equity, economic opportunities, and justice throughout Colombia's historically neglected rural areas.

While significant progress has been made, Colombia today faces severe and unanticipated shocks, including the COVID-19 pandemic, the migration crisis from Venezuela, and the continued rise in coca cultivation—which has fueled violence against

human rights defenders, social leaders and environmental defenders. These shocks have widened the gap between Colombia's fortunate and struggling classes and exacerbated long-standing grievances, resulting in widespread national protests. These shocks threaten progress made in Colombia's transition from conflict to an inclusive peace and USAID is working to help Colombia address these issues head on.

COVID-19 PANDEMIC RESPONSE

The COVID-19 pandemic has made peace implementation and integrated rural development more difficult. Colombia implemented one of the longest, and most strict quarantines in the world. The effects were similarly devastating across Latin America—loss of livelihoods from a paralyzed economy, learning losses among the youth and a marked increase in gender-based violence as victims were trapped with their aggressors. The COVID-19 pandemic also enabled illegal groups in Colombia's rural areas to assert territorial control and terrorize communities.

USAID adjusted fast to support Colombia's COVID-19 response across our health, humanitarian, livelihoods, peacebuilding, and governance programming. We've provided food assistance and bolstered health capacities in rural and underserved urban areas. As the pandemic hit ethnic communities particularly hard, we provided over 70,000 Afro-Colombian and Indigenous peoples from La Guajira, Chocó, Amazonas and elsewhere with life-saving food, water, and non-medical supplies. We helped schools shift to virtual learning, engaging thousands of children at risk of falling behind or being recruited by illegal armed groups. The United States is also helping Colombia with COVID vaccinations. To date, the United States has donated 6 million vaccines, with USAID providing complementary technical assistance in support of Colombia's efforts to turn the vaccines into vaccinations. We're now focused on the future, getting Colombia's youth back to school and supporting inclusive, and sustainable economic recovery, including income generation and job opportunities for vulnerable populations.

ADDRESSING COCA CULTIVATION

Coca's rapid expansion across the peace geography also greatly complicates rural development. As the demobilized FARC stepped away from the battlefield, this created a void in the control of the lucrative narcotics trade. In vying for control of the enterprise, armed groups have increased violence and innocent civilians, particularly social leaders, are caught in the crossfire. While this was predicted when the Accord was being negotiated, the situation only underscores the need to continue efforts to bring democratic governance, institutional presence, security, and licit development to coca growing regions.

Last October, the White House announced the Biden-Harris Administration's implementation of a more integrated and holistic approach to counter-narcotics in Colombia. This bilateral strategy—which USAID works closely to implement with our State Department colleagues—aims to make eradication gains more sustainable by better integrating expanded state presence, licit economic opportunities, and strengthening the social fabric of communities weakened by decades of conflict. The strategy links counter-narcotics progress to peace, as there is close geographic overlap between drug crops and Peace Accord implementation. USAID works closely with Bureau of International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs (INL) and others across the interagency to assist Colombia in the pursuit of the goals of this strategy that better balances a range of complementary interventions including access to state services, institutional presence, rule of law to guarantee basic constitutional rights, income for licit producers, eradication of coca, and permanent territorial control.

An example of this integrated approach is our amplified focus on land formalization, including titling, as an important precondition to licit development. USAID is betting heavily on the power of land ownership as the best determinant of how that land is used into the future. Formal title to land opens access to credit and allows the titleholder the security to make long-term investments in their plot. It also creates iron-clad incentives to stay legal by giving the government the power to sanction the owner with confiscation. Land titling promises important coca reduction benefits, given estimates that recidivism rates for coca cultivation without a land title is 70 to 75 percent, whereas it is 20 percent with a land title. USAID has piloted municipal-wide titling sweeps in areas emblematic of armed conflict, like Colombia's Montes de Maria area, which was victimized by successive waves of FARC and paramilitary abuses.

Having partnered with the Colombian Government to deliver over 2,500 rural titles in just one municipality in this area—the first massive land titling initiative in Colombia's history—USAID's approach takes these processes to areas where our

conflict, coca, and peace goals coincide. The Agency is intensively mapping and collecting household data to process land titles in the first of three priority municipalities that were agreed to during last October's High Level Dialogue with Colombia. USAID anticipates using this as a test case for success in other coca growing municipalities. We know that land is at the heart of Colombia's conflict and are convinced that it must be central to the solution.

PROTECTING HUMAN RIGHTS

Coca cultivation is closely linked to violence and human rights violations. As the FARC laid down its arms under the Peace Accord, criminal gangs have entered into violent competition to control territory and illegal economies. Social and environmental leaders—the voice of peaceful advocacy for the democratic rights of rural communities—have become even more vulnerable to violent attack.

What is clear is that if you are a Colombian environmental defender, your life may be directly at risk. If you organize to promote victims' rights or repossession of stolen land, you can expect to be a target. If you promote a vision of your territory that is less dependent on coca or illegal mining, you expose yourself to real danger. And if you are a child, vulnerable while out of school and with your family facing increased socio-economic hardship, you are at increased risk of forceful recruitment by illegal armed groups. In line with historic trends, violence disproportionately affects diverse ethnic communities.

In the face of the chilling rise in threats and murders of social leaders, USAID has deepened efforts to support human rights defenders and environmental leaders. We helped the National Protection Unit—a government entity USAID was instrumental in establishing—to tailor life-saving protection plans for women, Afro-Colombian, and indigenous leaders, resulting in more effective use of collective protection.

Increasing accountability for crimes committed against human rights defenders is a top priority and one that is shared across the United States Government. Through USAID's partnership with the U.N. Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, we helped the Attorney General secure 88 sentences in human rights defender homicide cases to date. We know there is more work to do, but are encouraged by these positive steps toward greater accountability. It is more important than ever that the United States stand beside these courageous partners.

VENEZUELAN MIGRANT CRISIS

The crisis in Venezuela—the greatest migratory crisis in this hemisphere's history—has diverted focus and resources away from peace implementation. Colombia now hosts nearly 2 million Venezuelan migrants and refugees, all seeking a better life. Colombia welcomed them with open arms, and USAID quickly adjusted to help Colombia meet this unforeseen challenge.

The United States helped provide a humanitarian lifeline through food, medicine, and shelter.

Colombia has launched Temporary Protected Status (TPS) programs for Venezuelans and is just one example of Colombian generosity to the Venezuelan people. TPS is Colombian-led, but assistance from the United States has catalyzed its launch and implementation. Modest U.S. investments, in the form of additional staff and equipment, enabled Colombia to move decisively to register Venezuelans, thus allowing them to access basic services and seek employment.

Colombia's response to the crisis has contributed to hemispheric stability; positively improves the lives of millions of vulnerable migrants; and helps migrants contribute productively to Colombia. Colombia's example offers a promising migration management model for the region. USAID is maximizing limited resources by working with the Colombian Government and the private sector to help with the socio and economic integration of migrants.

MITIGATING CLIMATE CHANGE

Colombia's peace and climate change agendas are closely linked. Similarly to migration, Colombia has responded to its environmental challenges with innovation and leadership. The country's Paris Agreement commitments set an example through their ambitious targets of a 51 percent reduction over baseline by 2030, net zero deforestation by 2030, and carbon neutrality by 2050.

Moreover, President Duque has identified the natural environment as one of Colombia's most strategic assets. Protecting environmental assets, particularly tropical forests, carbon sinks, and the country's rich biodiversity in order to achieve climate change goals will require innovative development investments in many of the same municipalities where the Peace Accord is being implemented.

USAID's Mission in Colombia oversees the Agency's largest natural environment investment in the hemisphere—fitting for the second most biodiverse country in the world. Much of our environmental work, particularly that related to tropical forests and biodiversity conservation, as well as addressing illegal gold mining, is centered in conflict-affected areas. We undertake this work in close collaboration with Afro-Colombian and Indigenous communities, empowering them to balance development with conservation. For example, our work assisting Afro Colombian and Indigenous communities to conserve tropical forests and then sell carbon credits from the standing forests to firms seeking to offset their carbon footprints is generating an important income stream for badly needed social and economic investment in these communities.

Our investments in the environment reinforce our peace and security goals. The same organized criminal elements who profit from coca also seek to capitalize on illegal logging, deforestation, illegal mining, and other environmental crimes, all which have increased in recent years. USAID's environmental protection activities work in concert with INL's efforts to assist Colombian law enforcement to prosecute these crimes and place added pressure on these organizations, while denying them safe havens in protected areas such as national parks and forest reserves.

CONCLUSION

USAID is proud to be a partner with Colombia on the path away from decades of conflict towards peace and prosperity. Our task now is to make that peace irreversible in the face of continuing challenges.

The Accord's implementation, while on pace with international norms, has been slower than many would like. Yet it remains a long-term, Colombian-led framework for stability, security, counternarcotics, and economic development.

The Colombian track record of self-improvement is undeniable. Much has been accomplished in a short amount of time. USAID has used our resources to support innovative government programs, mobilize Colombia's own human and financial capital, and support the resilience and bravery of Colombian civil society. The trust and progress built in this relationship will continue to provide a strong foundation for our future investments.

In closing, in the words of USAID partner Luis Fernando Arias, a leading voice of Colombia's indigenous movement and a champion of the Accord's Ethnic Inclusion Chapter: "We have to continue working for a country that is more humane, peaceful, equitable, and inclusive . . . We are here because Colombia cannot have one more victim." Luis Fernando tragically died as a result of COVID-19 last year. We honor his memory and may his words be our call to action today.

The CHAIRMAN. Thank you. Thank you all for your testimony. We will start our round of 5 minutes.

Secretary Nichols, the United States has designated 15 countries as major non-NATO allies, including two in the Western Hemisphere: Argentina and Brazil. This special status elevates our closest partners and provides special benefits and security cooperation. Given the expansive security partnership between our countries, my new legislation would formally designate Colombia as a major non-NATO ally.

It is also important to note that the ties between NATO and Colombia have grown over the last decade. In 2017, Colombia became the first country in Latin America to achieve the status of NATO global partner, underscoring the nation's leadership on security matters, not just in the Western Hemisphere but globally. President Biden has said that Colombia is, "the keystone of U.S. policy towards Latin America." I fully agree and believe it is time we formalize Colombia's role.

So Secretary Nichols, given the United States' close bilateral and multilateral security partnership with Colombia, what is your assessment of formally designating Colombia as a major non-NATO ally?

Mr. NICHOLS. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I would certainly welcome the initiative and the framework that your bill brings to bear,

and major non-NATO ally status is something that I believe sends a positive signal, given the tremendous progress in the relationship that we have with Colombia. Typically, the process for designating a country has been with the recommendation of the Secretary of State and the Secretary of Defense to the President. I do not want to jump over that process, but I know I cannot think of any country that better fits that role.

The CHAIRMAN. Well, I appreciate that. I think it is long overdue, personally, and I hope that this jump-starts a conversation within the Administration to come to that conclusion.

Let me ask you one other question. In recent weeks Putin, as part of a desperate effort to distract from the imminent assault of the Ukrainian people, has sought to expand support for this hemisphere's dictators. In an apparent attempt to intimidate our closest partner, Russia's military advisors are accompanying Venezuelan military personnel near the Colombia border.

Frankly, Russia's support for the region's dictators have already destabilized Latin America. Upwards of 6 million Venezuelans have fled their homeland as a result of Russia coaching the Maduro regime. The instrumentalization of vulnerable refugees is part of the Russian playbook to provide crises, overwhelm governments, deepen divisions.

As has been testified here, nearly 2 million Venezuelans have sought refuge in Colombia, challenging the government's efforts to respond to long-term issues related to social and economic inequality, internal displacement, the pandemic.

When Russia is not launching all-out attacks against countries it is intimidating, extorting, and sowing mis- and disinformation, all of which aim to shake the foundations of democracy around the world.

How should we interpret Russia's presence in the region? What are the security implications for Colombia?

Mr. NICHOLS. Russia seeks to destabilize our region, to inject conflict intention from other parts of the world to the Western Hemisphere. I had the opportunity to discuss these issues with our Colombian counterparts last week in a delegation led by Under Secretary for Political Affairs Nuland. We remain vigilant about the Russian activities, both along the border with Colombia, but more broadly in our region. We also seek to prop up the tinpot dictators that they support in our hemisphere.

The CHAIRMAN. Well, and that to me is another reason why this deepening of relationship with Colombia is important within the hemisphere as a whole.

Administrator Escobari, Colombia's longstanding challenges with social and economic inequality reached an apex last year when the combined effects of the pandemic and the tax reform proposal—which, by the way, I called ill-fated, but in large part in response to the IMF and the IMF pressures on countries like Colombia. It is a broader question for another time, but it seems to me the IMF needs to have a smoothing period for these countries, not to walk away from their responsibilities.

If you are going to require some rather dramatic financial challenges in the midst of a pandemic—and we have seen what we have had to do as a nation to try to meet that challenge, not every

country has the wherewithal to do that—it needs to have a smoothing period, but that tax reform proposal led to mass protests, blockades, deeply concerning images of police violence.

It was clear to me then and now that we have not done enough to work with our Colombian partners to facilitate the conditions for inclusive economic growth. The pandemic actually plunged three million Colombians into poverty. It is critically important that we engage, both politically and programmatically, to minimize these gaps and help level the playing field for all Colombians, including underrepresented communities such as Afro-Colombian and indigenous people.

So I heard what you said that we are doing, but I want to challenge you and say, how do we best use our programming to promote and support an inclusive economic growth in Colombia, and how are we engaging on the issue of trying to foster greater engagement by the private sector as part of our solution to meet that economic need?

Ms. ESCOBARI. Thank you, Senator. There is no doubt that Colombia has made tremendous progress and has huge growth potential, right, but this growth potential needs to—we need to make sure that it is inclusive and that it reaches these neglected rural areas, and more so as Colombia tries to recover from COVID-19 and tries to integrate the Venezuelan migrants.

I think there are huge opportunities for the diversification of the economy. It has huge opportunities in the agricultural sector and to modernize an entrepreneurial class, but what we need to do, and what we have done as USAID is make sure that that modern, robust, 21st century Colombia reaches the rural areas. We did it with financial inclusion where we helped mobilize over \$1 billion through Colombian banks, to SMEs and micro-entrepreneurs in rural areas, and I think a lot more can be done to help these farmers link to supply chains, elicit development, and export their products abroad.

The CHAIRMAN. All right. Thank you. Senator Risch.

Senator RISCH. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. Secretary Nichols, in March of 2020, almost 2 years ago now, the U.S. and Colombia announced a joint plan to reduce coca cultivation and cocaine production by 50 percent by the end of 2023. We know it is going in the wrong direction and does not seem to be turning around. Do you believe that Colombia can meet these goals without conducting aerial eradication?

Mr. NICHOLS. I believe that manual eradication, comprehensive alternative development programming, efforts to improve rural livelihoods can significantly improve Colombia's ability to address illicit coca cultivation. Bringing better rural governance to the country, fully implementing the chapters of the Peace Accord that deal with improving rural livelihood will all help achieve that goal.

I served in both Colombia and Peru. Peru has never had aerial eradication programming, and made substantial gains in addressing illicit coca cultivation.

Senator RISCH. Well, you would agree with me, though, that aerial eradication is significantly more robust than the other methods, hand removal and those kinds of things. Do you agree with that?

Mr. NICHOLS. I think it is a choice for each country. Colombia is a sovereign country and should they choose to pursue aerial eradication, that will be their decision, but whatever they determine we seek to work with them to address the threat of coca cultivation and trafficking.

Senator RISCH. Well, that was not really the question. The question was do you not agree that aerial eradication is the, by far, most robust and the most efficient way to do eradication?

Mr. NICHOLS. I feel like I am taking away from my distinguished colleague from INL. However, I note that there can be ancillary effects from aerial eradication that diminish rural livelihoods and raise concerns. So I do not think you can just look at the amount of hectares that have been eradicated without looking at the full impact of the policy.

I think it can be very effective, but it requires a thorough analysis, and it is a sovereign decision for the Columbians.

Senator RISCH. What is the U.S. policy in regard to that? Do we not have one?

Mr. NICHOLS. Our policy is that it is a decision for Colombia to make, and if Colombia decides to pursue aerial eradication we will support that.

Senator RISCH. We do not encourage them either way. Is that what you are saying?

Mr. NICHOLS. We encourage them to decide what is best for them.

Senator RISCH. We do not encourage them, as far as which of these methods of eradication to choose, they should choose.

Mr. NICHOLS. We are not pushing them one way or the other.

Senator RISCH. Thank you. Secretary Robinson, it is estimated that the FARC has only delivered about \$12.9 million of the \$291 million it pledged to surrender by the end of 2020, for reparations to their victims. What is FARC doing—well, first of all, why has FARC not surrendered those funds?

Mr. ROBINSON. I think that is probably a question for my distinguished colleague from the Western Hemisphere. I am not familiar with the FARC having to deliver this money, but I can get an answer and find out for you.

Senator RISCH. Well, thank you very much.

Secretary Nichols, I guess he threw you under the bus. Can you answer the question?

Mr. NICHOLS. I am happy to be under the bus.

Senator RISCH. It is not a good place to be.

Mr. NICHOLS. The FARC has many steps that it needs to undertake to comply with the Peace Accord. Among that is reparations and implementing decisions from the Justice and Peace Courts. They have cited a lack of resources as part of their inability to provide reparations to victims, but it is an ongoing process.

Senator RISCH. Do you believe that to be true, that they lack resources?

Mr. NICHOLS. I find that difficult to believe, given the experience that I had with the peace process in El Salvador when I served there.

Senator RISCH. Do you know what they are doing with those funds instead of surrendering them?

Mr. NICHOLS. Well, I do not know what they would be doing with those funds, but I imagine that some funds are buried underground, some funds are in foreign bank accounts, some funds are with the individual FARC members who decided not to demobilize, would be my guess, but I cannot say for certain.

Senator RISCH. Thank you. My time is up. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

The CHAIRMAN. Senator Shaheen.

Senator SHAHEEN. Thank you, Mr. Chairman, and thank you to each of our witnesses for being here today.

Assistant Secretary Robinson, I want to begin with you and pick up a little bit on the questioning that Senator Risch had with respect to our policies working with the Colombian Government to address domestic cultivation and production of opioids, or opiates, because coming from a state that has had a real challenge with opioids, we would like to see fewer drugs getting across the border from South America and into the United States.

So recognizing that we do not tell the Colombian Government that they should do aerial eradication, what are we doing to try and address the illicit production of drugs in the country?

Mr. ROBINSON. Thank you very much for that question. We have a very robust relationship with the Colombian Government, and my bureau in particular, with the Colombian National Police. For a number of years we have worked very closely training and equipping the National Police and making sure that they have the tools necessary to go after these networks. As I mentioned in my statement, in October we agreed on a new strategy which will broaden that effort, helping them to reduce the supply side by continuing with eradication, investigations, and targeting networks, by extending the state out to rural areas, both on the security side, but also on the development side, and by adding a new twist, helping them investigate environmental crimes.

We know that what these criminals are doing is negatively affecting the environment, and this is another way that we think we can be successful in going after these networks.

Senator SHAHEEN. Do we have data that shows that we are succeeding in those efforts? The last time—and it has been several years ago now, but the last time I saw a report on the drugs that were being produced in Colombia, the production had actually gone up, because of the decline in aerial eradication. Not gone down. So do you have any data to support the effectiveness of the policies?

Mr. ROBINSON. Well I think, frankly, the data is mixed. We know that production is going down, but the cultivation is increasing. That is why we are working as closely as we can with the Colombian National Police to go to those areas. We continue to do eradication. We continue to do manual eradication, but frankly what we need to do is a better job—what the Colombians need to do, with our help, is a better job of going after their finances. We are working with them on that. My colleagues at DHS are also working with them on that.

Senator SHAHEEN. Good. I look forward to hearing what more we can do to address that.

Assistant Secretary Nichols, the 2016 Peace Accords provided for groundbreaking and comprehensive gender priorities, and yet the

Kroc Institute for International Peace Studies, which is monitoring the implementation of the Peace Accord has reported that implementation of the gender commitments of that accord is not advancing as rapidly as the general accord implementation. In fact, according to their latest report released in November, the gender commitments have only reached 12 percent implementation while the general accord implementation is considered to be 30 percent complete.

So it has been over 5 years now. What is the State Department and USAID doing to ensure that the gender-related commitments are implemented?

Mr. NICHOLS. Thank you very much. I wholeheartedly agree with your question and concern. Women and girls disproportionately suffered under the conflict and continue to be disadvantaged as Colombia seeks to emerge from the COVID-19 pandemic and economic dislocation.

We are working comprehensively to provide support to women and girls through things like entrepreneurship program, small and micro finance programming, training, providing support to Colombian institutions to implement the 2016 Peace Accord. I can go deeper if you would like, but I want to make sure my colleague also has a chance.

Ms. ESCOBARI. Sure, no, thank you, Senator, for your focus on this issue. In responding to this reality, Colombia has one of USAID's largest standalone gender programs anywhere in the world, and dedicated staff in the field mission to focus on this problem. It actually launched this last October, a \$35 million program dealing with issues of gender equity, changing societal attitudes, gender-related policies, and protecting human rights of women and girls. We are linking with the Colombian Vice President, who is also very committed to these issues, and make sure that gender cuts through all of our programming. So when we are working with land titles, 50 percent of those land titles went to women. So we want to make sure that gender cuts through everything that we do.

Senator SHAHEEN. Good. Thank you. I am pleased to hear that and look forward to seeing the ongoing studies that show how the implementation is working

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

The CHAIRMAN. Thank you. Senator Van Hollen.

Senator VAN HOLLEN. Thank you, Mr. Chairman, and I thank all of you for your testimony today. I have been concerned by reports of increasing violence in Colombia's rural regions, especially near the Venezuelan border. I understand that these attacks are being perpetrated primarily by FARC dissidents as well as the ELN, the National Liberation Army, an even more violent group. I especially concerned of the toll this is taking on civilian populations, on indigenous groups, and on human rights defenders, all of whom have been targeted.

Assistant Secretary Nichols, what is the Colombian Government plan to address these issues, and how can we help them?

Mr. NICHOLS. Thank you, Senator. The Segunda Marquetalia, a FARC dissident group, and the ELN have launched attacks against Colombian Government installations, against airports, against military facilities, using safe haven from Venezuela to help them

achieve those attacks. Last week we met with a variety of senior Colombian officials to talk about a comprehensive approach under the high-level strategic security dialogue to our cooperation.

Among the things that we are looking at are strengthening our cooperation in intelligence sharing, training, mobility, cybersecurity, all those areas, police and law enforcement strengthening, to help them deal with the threats posed by the FARC dissident groups and ELN.

Senator VAN HOLLEN. Thank you. Do you have any concerns at this point that that violence could lead to any unraveling of the Peace Accord, or are you confident that it can be addressed?

Mr. NICHOLS. I believe it can be addressed. I believe that the Colombian military, and security forces broadly and broader government, have the capacity and training to deal with those threats, and I believe that those FARC members who have the original FARC that demobilized as part of the 2016 agreement remain committed to that agreement.

Senator VAN HOLLEN. Let me turn to some of the issues regarding human rights abuses among the Colombian police. As you know, Plan Colombia and other U.S. assistance has been very successful at helping Colombia consolidate its democracy, to improve the economic situation, but despite billions of dollars that we have provided, the Colombia security forces continue to be involved in serious human rights violations, including the killings of dozens of civilians during mass protests in 2021. As you know, Under Secretary Nuland just announced last week another \$8 million in assistance.

What mechanisms do we have in place to prevent our funds, our help, from being implicated in any way in these kinds of human rights abuses?

Mr. NICHOLS. Well, the \$8 million that was announced last week is precisely to support the Colombian National Police's human rights respect and response. It goes to vetting police officers, providing training for officers, providing greater investigatory capability when there is an accusation of human rights violations, and I think those are all very important steps. I will note that President Duque himself has repeatedly said that he has a zero-tolerance policy for human rights violations.

The protests that took place, there have been investigations into police actions, both internally within the police as well as the Colombian attorney general, and there has been some accountability, but more remains to be done.

Senator VAN HOLLEN. Well, in keeping with the stated zero-tolerance policy, what actions have we done to cut off any assistance that may have gone to units who committed the abuses, like the anti-riot police who killed protesters in 2021? Have we made clear that none of our funds should go to that unit?

Mr. NICHOLS. So we cannot provide funds to any unit that violates human rights, under the Leahy amendment. That is part of our legal commitment.

Senator VAN HOLLEN. So, Mr. Secretary, I see my time is running out, so is your answer that none of our funds are going to that unit?

Mr. NICHOLS. I will defer to my colleague from INL.

Mr. ROBINSON. Yes, no. We have not funded and we are not funding any of the units that were involved in the human rights abuses.

Senator VAN HOLLEN. Thank you. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

The CHAIRMAN. Thank you. I do not have any other members presently.

Senator RISCH. Mr. Chairman, Senator Cruz has indicated that he is on the way.

The CHAIRMAN. Oh, I will want to wait forever for Senator Cruz. I should wait. I will ask another question.

I am sure our panel would be thrilled to wait for that question. Let me ask you this. I heard you, Senator Robinson, say, you touched upon combating financial crimes. There are two elements as we deal with the drug trafficking—well, three elements. One, we have to reduce our demand in the United States. That is something that we need to work on. Two, is that we have to hit them where it hurts, and that is on the financial side, and three, if you have a poor Colombian farmer and you do not give them an alternative to a sustainable development opportunity they are going to grow coca, or cultivate it, as you noted that the cultivation is growing higher than production.

So with reference to the first part, hitting them hard where it hurts, you touched upon it. How are we focusing our attention with the Colombians in terms of combatting financial crimes associated with the drug trade? What additional steps are we taking to strengthen anti-money laundering initiatives? Then, finally, for Administrator Escobari, how are we specifically targeting some of our programs to deal with those poor farmers who we need to give an alternative with one that actually helps them sustain their families instead of cultivating or actively engaging in the drug trade?

So let us start off with you, Mr. Secretary.

Mr. ROBINSON. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. We have, for a number of years now, been working very closely with Colombia's—I always forget the name of this—the financial investigative unit, and we have experts working with them to target the financial networks of these criminals. We have been doing that. We expect to enhance that relationship with our new strategy. That is number one.

As I mentioned earlier, we are working closely with the Department of Homeland Security HSI to go after illegal activity at the ports. We have experts on the ground at the ports, working on security, investigations, and also tracking illicit finance.

So those are two ways, two things that we are going to do to enhance going after the money laundering aspect of this side of the criminal activity.

The CHAIRMAN. Administrator.

Ms. ESCOBARI. To answer your question on alternative licit livelihoods, you know, we are very optimistic with this new holistic and sequencing approach, where USAID complements eradication and interdiction, where we provide licit crops, land titling, local government strengthening, access to rule of law, and options for youth empowerment. This really dramatically increases the chances of success, because when you take this holistic approach, and this very place-based approach, it really gives people an option out of coca.

Senator Shaheen had asked for data, and in one of these experiments or pilots that we are running on land titling, we have seen that without a land title about three-quarters of coca growers replant after eradication, but with a title, replanting drops to 20 percent.

So I think this holistic approach would really make a difference. I have seen it. I traveled to Cáceres. I thought that it was naive to believe that people would give up this profitable trade, but really, people hate living under the thumb of these thugs and being subject to violence. So I think if we create the opportunities, people will take it.

The CHAIRMAN. All right. Senator Cruz.

Senator CRUZ. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. Mr. Nichols, welcome back.

As we discussed the last time you appeared before this committee, I am deeply concerned about the Biden administration's decision in November to dismantle terrorism sanctions against the FARC and against FARC members. The FARC is an organization of Marxist, Leninist, and narco-terrorists. For decades, they have killed and kidnapped and extorted Colombians. They have murdered and seized American citizens. They continue to pose an acute threat to Colombian security and to American interests across the region.

The last time we spoke the decision to dismantle terrorism sanctions had just been announced. Since then, presumably, you have had some time to evaluate the effects. I want to ask you some questions about that.

One of the reasons publicly cited for the removal of the FTL listing was to provide certain types of U.S. assistance to FARC for reintegration into Colombian society. I believe that justification is deeply flawed, but it was at least a reason that the Administration cited for dismantling the sanctions.

So have you distributed any such aid, and if so, what checks were in place to ensure funding was not used for terrorists?

Mr. NICHOLS. Thank you, Senator. It is a pleasure to see you again. The decision to designate the FARC EP and the Segunda Marquetalia as the current groups engaged in terror activity in Colombia was one fully concordant with the process of implementing the Peace Accords. We have continued our efforts to provide broad assistance to rural areas in Colombia—

Senator CRUZ. Mr. Nichols, if I could ask you to answer the specific question I asked, which is have you distributed any such aid to the FARC or members of the FARC?

Mr. NICHOLS. I would have to defer to my colleague from USAID on the specifics of their program.

Ms. ESCOBARI. We do not work or support terrorists. We do not give any funds. They are not eligible to receive funds from USAID, and we actually have—

Senator CRUZ. So your testimony is that the Biden administration has not given any funds to FARC or members of the FARC.

Ms. ESCOBARI. Right. They have not.

Senator CRUZ. Okay. Good.

Ms. ESCOBARI. —deserters and people who have laid down their arms.

Senator CRUZ. So alongside removing terrorism sanctions on FARC, you also removed terrorist sanctions on individual FARC members. The press release that the Biden administration published listed literally hundreds of entities. A few weeks later, on December 11, Colombia's Special Jurisdiction for Peace, an independent entity tasked with implementing the Peace Accords, issued summons for 47 FARC members because they had been involved in the forced recruitment of children for the conflict and for child trafficking. Five of these individuals had been sanctioned by the United States for their roles until you removed them a few weeks earlier.

Did the State Department consult with the Colombians about these individuals before lifting sanctions, and did you reimpose sanctions after the announcement of their involvement with child traffickers?

Mr. NICHOLS. So the process of delisting the FARC and listing FARC EP and Segunda Marquetalia was done in consultation with the government of Colombia. The FARC, as the organization that signed the 2016 peace agreement, is not listed as a terror organization in Colombia. U.S. immigration law prevent the entry of any of the members of the FARC who took up arms.

Senator CRUZ. So was the Biden State Department aware of the work and impending decision of Colombia's Special Jurisdiction for Peace at the time you lifted the sanctions on these individuals?

Mr. NICHOLS. They do not consult their decisions with the United States Government before—

Senator CRUZ. So you were not aware of it?

Mr. NICHOLS. Not to my knowledge.

Senator CRUZ. Okay. I want to shift, in my remaining time, to Mexico. Mr. Nichols, as you know and we have discussed, I am deeply concerned about deepening civil unrest in Mexico and the breakdown there of civil society. The breakdown of the rule of law across our southern border poses acute national security challenges and dangers to the United States, on issues ranging from counter-narcotics to illegal immigration.

The current climate faced by politicians and journalists in Mexico is the deadliest ever. In 2020, more journalists were killed in Mexico than in any other country in the world. It alone accounted for almost a third of the journalists killed. Since the start of the electoral process in September 2020, over 80 politicians were assassinated by criminal organizations, and more than 60 candidates suspended their campaigns under duress.

President Lopez Obrador seems intent on making all of these trends worse. On Friday, he used his morning press conference to intimidate one of Mexico's highest profile journalists, Carlos Loret de Mola. He waved around private financial information and asked authorities to investigate it. He seems to be indulging in abusing power, no matter the effect on Mexico or the U.S.-Mexico relations.

What steps is the Biden administration taking to convey to the Mexican Government that their behavior is undermining the rule of law and that is, in turn, endangering American security and the U.S.-Mexico relationship?

Mr. NICHOLS. We have a deep and comprehensive relationship with Mexico on security issues. My colleague from INL and I were

in Mexico last year to discuss these issues, and our embassy continues to be engaged on the full range of security questions.

Senator CRUZ. What have you expressed about the murder of journalists, politicians, and the intimidation of journalists?

Mr. NICHOLS. We have said that we believe that the murder of journalists and the murder of civil society members is a tremendous problem and a stain for all of us. We need to take actions to protect those important members of Mexican society. It is crucial for us to redouble our efforts to protect politicians, journalists, civil society members. It is vital, and we talk about that with our Mexican colleagues all the time.

Senator CRUZ. Thank you.

The CHAIRMAN. Senator Hagerty.

Senator HAGERTY. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I want to follow up on Senator Cruz's questioning regarding Mexico. I, too, am very concerned about the situation there. I was also in Mexico last year. I met with government officials, but also members of the private sector there in Mexico and with American interests that are present in Mexico, where we have significant investments.

We have trade agreements with Mexico that are not being honored properly. I am very concerned about the lack of the rule of law that Senator Cruz mentioned, and I would like to get your assessment of where we are today versus where we were, say, a year and a half ago.

Mr. NICHOLS. I think we have a very positive, constructive, frank relationship with the Mexican Government. I think we agree on a great many things, and there are a great many issues that we need to work with them to move forward on.

You talk about issues that are of great import to us. Working to forge a cohesive North American energy policy that is green, that is respectful of the rights of the private sector—

Senator HAGERTY. Does that include confiscation of American investments in Mexico? Are you for that?

Mr. NICHOLS. I am against that.

Senator HAGERTY. I think you should be. This would take a lot more time than we have.

I would like to turn our conversation now, though, to Colombia. If you think about the activity of the Chinese Communist Party, around the world Colombia is one of the areas that I am most concerned about. Back in 2019, Xi Jinping hosted President Duque from Colombia and they agreed on a number of bilateral projects. They are now developing—the Chinese are now developing the Bogota Metro, the Bogota Regional Railway. They are doing the 4G and 5G systems around many parts of Colombia and infrastructure projects.

I want to talk now and turn our attention to the U.S.-Colombia Growth Initiative. That was a significant investment to try to help strengthen Colombia's economic and rural development. The DFC committed some \$1 billion to 30 projects there in sectors ranging from critical infrastructure to financial services.

Could you give me an update of where we are on that commitment, where those projects stand today?

Mr. NICHOLS. So DFC continues to work to develop projects in Colombia. I met with Pro Columbia, their government investment

arm last week to discuss the projects. There are six projects that were in various stages when I met. One of our priorities is through DFC and other mechanisms to increase investment through Build Back Better World in Colombia. That is something that we believe can be transformative. Colombia and the United States have a \$30 billion trade relationship, and we would like to see even greater investment there.

I met with the American Chamber of Commerce to talk about the obstacles that American companies face when investing in Colombia, and we agreed to continue our efforts to support the U.S. investment.

Senator HAGERTY. Can I come back to what you just said? You said that there are six projects underway. Does that mean that 24 of the 30 that were agreed to have not yet commenced?

Mr. NICHOLS. So I am not aware of those projects that occurred during the prior Administration so I do not know specifically—

Senator HAGERTY. This is a significant investment, and our economic security and our ties there are going to be critical to our national security. So I would like to ask you if you could get back to me and to this committee with an update on where we stand with respect to those 30 projects that were committed by the DFC under the previous Administration, and what the plan is to see those executed. Again, I think those are going to be critical to our prosperity.

[EDITOR'S NOTE.—The requested information referred to above follows:]

The U.S. relationship with Colombia remains strong, and the United States continues to support a wide array of initiatives to boost economic growth in the country. DFC supports highly developmental projects in Colombia and constantly considers new private sector proposals. I referenced six new projects in my previous testimony that were approved in 2021. More broadly, DFC has 34 portfolio projects in Colombia that amount to more than \$1.2 billion in exposure. DFC has supported investments that promote rural financial inclusion, affordable housing, infrastructure, and forestry. DFC has about \$55 million in exposure through regional funds that cover Colombia, including \$3.4 million in small, high-impact funds. Approximately 88 percent of this exposure focuses on housing and commercial buildings, and the remaining 12 percent focuses on industrial and financial technologies. For quick reference, all of DFC's active projects are available on DFC's website, which can be filtered by region, financing type, commitment level, and year: <https://www.dfc.gov/our-impact/all-active-projects>.

DFC's current portfolio prioritizes promotion of affordable housing and increasing lending to vulnerable populations, such as Venezuela migrant receptor communities, rural areas, and those worst-affected by COVID-19. Financial inclusion in rural and conflict-affected Colombia aims to promote a legal economy as alternative to illicit activities (coca, illegal mining, armed groups). DFC supports inclusive rural economic growth by attracting private investment into areas which have been affected by conflict and where investors have been reluctant to make financial commitments. DFC enhances economic opportunity by increasing access to affordable housing in conflict-affected communities and helping small farmers and landowners improve food security by strengthening producer associations, cooperatives, microcredit organizations, and agricultural value chains and business opportunities. By supporting bankable projects in Venezuela migrant receptor communities, DFC increases inclusion, strengthens resilience, and addresses the root causes of further migration.

Senator HAGERTY. I would like to come now to the digital economy and the infrastructure that is being built there in Colombia. Are we doing anything to make certain that the infrastructure that is being built out for the next generation of Colombia telecommunications, 4G, 5G, is protected from the Chinese Communist Party or malign actors like Huawei?

Mr. NICHOLS. We have had multiple discussions with the Colombian Government about that. We are in conversations about alternative technologies and opportunities that do not use Chinese technology. Telecommunications companies in Colombia are private companies so this will also involve working with them, but there is a key regulatory component, and we believe that we can structure this in a way that is good for Colombian consumers and avoids Chinese technology.

Senator HAGERTY. I think there is certainly a way. I would encourage you to look at what I did with the government of Japan when I served as ambassador there, because there are four private infrastructure telecommunications companies there, but I worked with the government of Japan to make sure that those remained clean. That is possible, and I encourage you to work on a way to do that as well in Colombia. I think that is important for our national security and theirs.

Mr. NICHOLS. I agree.

Senator HAGERTY. Thank you. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

The CHAIRMAN. Thank you. All right. I hope that this discussion has stimulated the State Department and the Administration to think about how we reinvigorate our relationship with Colombia, how we deepen it on this 200th anniversary. We welcome the Department's remarks to the legislation we will be introducing and any insights. We would appreciate it, and with the thanks of the committee this panel is excused.

As we have our first panel depart let me begin to introduce our second panel. We are joined by Mr. Dan Restrepo, a senior fellow at the Center for American Progress, with expansive expertise on Colombia. Mr. Restrepo served as the principal advisor to President Obama on issues related to Latin America, the Caribbean, and Canada as Special Assistant to the President and Senior Director for Western Hemisphere Affairs at the National Security Council. Previously he served on the professional staff of the House of Representatives' Committee on Foreign Affairs as well as a law clerk on the U.S. Court of Appeals for the Third Circuit.

The committee will also hear from Celina Realuyo, an adjunct professor at The George Washington University Elliott School of International Affairs. Professor Realuyo's work focuses on U.S. national security, illicit networks, transnational organized crime, counterterrorism, and economic sanctions issues. She has previously served as a U.S. diplomat, international banker with Goldman Sachs, and State Department Director of Counterterrorism Finance Programs. She has spoken and written regularly in English and Spanish about transnational crime, drug trafficking, and corruption in the Americas.

So our thanks to both of you. We invite you to make your statements, around 5 minutes or so. Your full statements will be included in the record, and we will start with you, Mr. Restrepo.

**STATEMENT OF DAN RESTREPO, SENIOR FELLOW, CENTER
FOR AMERICAN PROGRESS, WASHINGTON, DC**

Mr. RESTREPO. Thank you, Mr. Chairman, Ranking Member Risch. Thank you for this opportunity to discuss the U.S.-Colombia relationship.

Chairman Menendez, allow me to take this moment to commend you for holding this hearing and for authoring the U.S.-Colombia Strategic Alliance Act, both important signals of the abiding U.S. commitment to the people of Colombia at a critical juncture.

Colombia is today a like-minded democracy in the heart of Latin America, through the sacrifice of generations of Colombians with steadfast U.S. support. Advancing core U.S. national interests demands continued and reinforced commitment. Even aside from the pandemic and its fallout, Colombia faces notable challenges. Implementation of the 2016 Peace Accords lags, illicit economies are flourishing, and insecurity is on the rise. Venezuela's descent into kleptocracy, criminality, and chaos continues to put pressure on Colombia. Much-needed fiscal, labor, and pension reforms and expanded investment in human capital have proven elusive.

Colombia's political class continues to struggle to define a post-Peace Accord north star, and not coincidentally, in light of all of the above, Colombia has experienced one of the region's most pronounced declines of faith in democracy in recent years.

At the same time, Colombia is a critical leader on some of the central issues facing the Americas and the world, including migration, climate, citizen security, and fostering innovation. Understanding that successful migration management must extend far beyond border measures, the Colombian Government, across two administrations, and the Colombian people have stepped up to help their neighbors in need.

President Ivan Duque's decision to grant Venezuelans legal status for 10 years was one of the most commendable acts of leadership in the Americas in recent memory. It is an example to be followed as President Biden did when he granted TPS to Venezuelans.

Colombia's unparalleled biodiversity makes it a wellspring of hope for our planet and a critical player in responding to the climate crisis and leading the energy transition in the Americas, especially at a time when countries like Brazil imperil our planet through anti-science denialism.

Colombia is also home to modern entrepreneurs like Rappi, among Latin America's burgeoning tech unicorns, and others hot on its heels as well as cities like Medellin that strive to embrace the power of technology to better connect Colombians to 21st century global value chains.

The country is also, despite and in some cases paradoxically because of the challenges it faces, a vital security and citizen security partner. A new strategic alliance between the United States and Colombia can help address Colombia's challenges, consolidate its leadership, and as it has done repeatedly throughout history, advance key U.S. national interests across the hemisphere, as it did during the era of the Good Neighbor Policy, World War II, the birth of the Inter-American System, and the Alliance for Progress, to cite but a few examples. It is no accident that every U.S. President

since Ronald Reagan, except President Trump, visited Colombia while in office.

Against this backdrop, as you look to the next chapter in this storied relationship, I urge you to advance U.S. interests by continuing to support implementation of the Peace Accords; investing in a region-wide approach to mitigate, manage, and order irregular migration; finding ways U.S. development assistance financing can be catalytic in the transformation of the Colombian economy; leveraging Colombian climate leadership, supporting comprehensive efforts to roll back illicit economies; and respecting Colombian democracy.

In closing, allow me to elaborate on this final point. With Colombians headed to the polls, everything possible must be done to safeguard these critical elections so they accurately reflect the will of the Colombian people, free from outside interference and mis- and disinformation. It is imperative that the U.S. Government and other U.S. political actors defer to Colombian voters, as we rightly expect Colombians and others to defer to U.S. voters, free from influence. We should stand in unyielding support for Colombia's democratic process and institutions, not for or against particular candidates.

Going forward, U.S. interests will best be served by a Colombia that vigilantly respects democracy and builds a more inclusive capitalism. We should trust our friends and allies in Colombia to choose leaders across their democratic institutions who will lead along such a path. We should stand ready to work with those leaders as we have done across the past two centuries to advance shared values and interests.

Thank you very much.

[The prepared statement of Mr. Restrepo follows:]

Prepared Statement of Mr. Daniel Restrepo¹

It has become almost cliché to laude the strength and depth of the relationship between the United States and Colombia. As that relationship nears its 200th anniversary, it is important to move beyond the trite and take a step back to examine its history, its status today, and its promise into the future. In that spirit, I commend Chairman Menendez for holding this hearing and for authoring the U.S.-Colombia Strategic Alliance Act. The legislation is an important signal of the abiding U.S. commitment to the people of Colombia and comes at a critical juncture for Colombia and for U.S. relationships throughout the Americas. The broad range of topics I understand is encompassed within the legislation is also a testament to the complexity of the U.S.-Colombia relationship which profoundly impacts a series of U.S. strategic interests in the Americas and well beyond—as it has throughout the past 200 years.

As one examines the U.S.-Colombia relationship it is vital to appreciate that it long predates what many consider its high-water mark and which still others treat as its de facto starting point—Plan Colombia. The recency bias of a Plan Colombia-centric way of understanding the U.S.-Colombia relationship is understandable even if unhelpful. One is hard pressed to find a more successful recent investment of U.S. time, energy, and resources abroad than the role the United States played in Colombia during the past two decades. Colombian democracy thrives today because of the sacrifice of countless Colombians and the unwavering support of the United States. First, as Colombia sought to project the power of the state to the entirety of the Colombian territory for the first time in the country's history and then as it executed a textbook application of counterinsurgency doctrine to bring an end to the hemisphere's longest-running internal armed conflict through political means.

As Colombia moves forward, the Strategic Alliance Act gets it exactly right that we must shore up those investments and consolidate a cycle of success. The pursuit of core U.S. national interests does not afford us the luxury of walking away from

Colombia thinking our work is done. Now is the time to deepen the relationship, not turn our backs on it.

This is in part true because Colombia continues to face notable challenges. Recognizing the Colombian state has never managed to be fully present across the entirety of Colombia, implementation of the 2016 peace accords, which at its core seeks that elusive goal, lags the pace we would all like to see.² The need for continued support for the constitutionally required implementation of Colombia's peace agreement is one of the reasons the U.S. commitment must not waiver.

Colombia also continues to be plagued by flourishing illicit economies. Coca cultivation and cocaine production are at or above historic highs.³ According to ONDCP's latest report, coca cultivation reached 245,000 hectares in 2020 and potential cocaine production 1,010 metric tons.⁴ Illegal mining devastates Colombia's environment and fuels illegal armed groups in Colombia—and in Venezuela—putting further pressure on communities living in Colombia's long-neglected periphery. Today, revenue from illegal gold mining is said to outpace income from cocaine production in Colombia.⁵ As concluded by the bipartisan, congressionally mandated Western Hemisphere Drug Policy Commission, on which I had the privilege of serving, the United States must partner with Colombia to take an integrated approach to creating the conditions needed to reduce the size and negative impact of these illicit activities.⁶

The country continues to labor under the negative effects of the implosion of its closest neighbor and historical partner—Venezuela. Since 2015, more than 6 million Venezuelans have been forced to flee the chaos of their country's descent into kleptocracy and criminality, with approximately 2 million putting down roots in Colombia. Even before this exodus placed enormous strain on Colombia, the economic trainwreck imposed by failed chavista policies eliminated one of Colombia's historically most important and most reliable economic partners.

Colombia's economy has also regularly failed to deliver sufficiently for broad swaths of the Colombian people. Inequality remains a structural reality of Colombian society.⁷ A pre-existing condition only made worse by the pandemic despite a significant fiscal commitment—5 percent of GDP—by the Colombian Government in an attempt to protect Colombia's most vulnerable. Intervention that has been credited with softening COVID's impact on Colombia's economy and opening way to a stronger than expected 2021 recovery.⁸

Colombia, like too many of our neighbors throughout the Americas, is burdened by stiflingly high levels of informality and the economic distortions that flow from it. Throughout the decade leading into the pandemic, for example, informality stayed stubbornly above 60 percent.⁹ It is a country in need of fiscal, labor, and pension reforms and expanded investment in human capital to position its economy for success into the 21st Century. Reforms needed to fully maximize the talent and transformative capacity of Colombia's modern entrepreneurs embodied in success stories like Rappi—among Latin America's burgeoning tech unicorns—as well as in the embrace of the Fourth Industrial Revolution by cities like Medellín, in a way that addresses ongoing concerns with the gig economy and lifts the labor force. Sadly, such reforms have proven politically elusive in recent years.

Colombia also finds itself at a crossroads in the wake of its peace agreement with the FARC. The past years have seen a country—and particularly its political class—struggling to find a path forward, to define a new north star and avoid lapsing into traditional divisions, albeit with new labels, that throughout its history have dragged Colombia from one internal conflict to the next.

Although the hard work of defining and pursuing that new north star rests with the Colombian people and their leaders, a new strategic alliance between the United States and Colombia can help break that cycle. It can both serve as a catalyst for a more just Colombia and advance key U.S. national interests by anchoring U.S. policy in the Americas writ large.

It would not be the first time the U.S.-Colombia relationship played an outsized role in advancing U.S. interests and shaping U.S. policy in the Americas. Shortly after laying out his "Good Neighbor" policy, President Franklin Roosevelt became the first sitting U.S. President to visit South America when he toured Cartagena in the company of Colombian President Enrique Olaya Herrera.¹⁰ During World War II, Colombia joined the United States in declaring war against the Axis Powers; Colombian naval assets helped hunt German U-boats in the Caribbean; and the U.S. Navy prepared for its Pacific Campaign off Colombia's west coast.¹¹

After World War II, Colombia was instrumental in establishing the world's oldest regional international system—the Inter-American System. The Organization of American States was born from the Pacto de Bogota, negotiated and signed in Colombia's capital city in 1948.¹² The Organization's first Secretary General would be Colombia's once- and future-president Alberto Lleras Camargo. It was no accident

that when President Kennedy visited Latin America to see the first programs launched under the Alliance for Progress, he visited then-President Lleras Camargo in Bogota in 1961.¹³ Every U.S. President since Ronald Reagan, with the exception of the last occupant of the Oval Office, has visited Colombia.¹⁴ And have done so in effective pursuit of U.S. national interests and in bolstering a like-minded liberal democracy in the heart of Latin America. In short, the U.S.-Colombia relationship has long, vibrant, and consequential roots, and has benefited both countries.

A robust partnership with Colombia is essential for the United States moving forward given the central challenges facing the Americas today, including migration, the climate crisis, citizen insecurity, and democratic backsliding.

As members of the Committee know, the Americas are experiencing unprecedented levels of migration. In the past 7 years, irregular migration has accelerated as millions have been dislocated throughout the region. Understanding that successful migration management must extend far beyond border measures, the Colombian Government—and, as importantly, the Colombian people—have stepped up to help their neighbors in need. President Ivan Duque’s decision to grant Venezuelans in Colombia legal status for 10 years was one of the most commendable acts of leadership by any leader in the Western hemisphere in recent memory. Through its policies, Colombia has encouraged rootedness of otherwise irregular migrants, contributing to stability amid multiple regional crises. It has also set an example to be followed as President Biden did when he granted TPS to Venezuelans who have sought shelter in the United States in recent years.

Colombia—together with Panama, Costa Rica, Mexico, the United States, and Canada—is critical to shaping and implementing much-needed hemisphere-wide efforts to mitigate, manage, and order migration with a focus on supporting migrant-receiving communities throughout the region. To that end, Colombia’s regularization efforts together with international backing like the November 2021 \$800 million loan from the World Bank and the Inter-American Development Bank to Colombia conditioned on integration efforts need to be replicated and refined to local circumstances throughout the hemisphere.

Colombia is also a critical player in responding to the climate crisis and leading the energy transformation in the Americas. Colombia’s unparalleled biodiversity is a wellspring of hope and opportunity for our planet. One the United States should work to protect and preserve. As an Amazonian country, Colombia is an important partner in climate diplomacy at a time when countries like Brazil imperil our planet through anti-science denialism. Despite an unsustainable-over-time reliance on hydrocarbon exports, Colombia’s domestic energy matrix is one of the hemisphere’s cleanest with more than 70 percent of the country’s electricity coming from hydro. And thanks to a rapid acceleration of installed renewable capacity—it is in the midst of an expansion from 50 MW in installed capacity in 2018 to 2,500 MW by the end of this year—it is growing more sustainable by the day.¹⁵

Citizen insecurity remains a profound challenge in Colombia, although the nature of the security threat has changed in recent decades. As a result of enormous sacrifice by Colombians—and yes, the catalytic support of the United States, in the form of Plan Colombia—Colombia no longer faces an existential threat to the state from illegal armed groups. It does however continue to face a significant challenge. Homicide rates in 2021 were at a 7-year high and far too many community leaders are falling victim to the power vacuums created in the wake of the peace agreement in a tragic replay of some of the darkest periods in Colombia’s modern history.¹⁶ The country’s security structures have been slow to adapt to Colombia’s new reality and struggle to maintain the ability to project state authority throughout Colombia’s territory and safeguard citizen security on a day-to-day basis. Other critical rule of law institutions have not yet achieved the operational capacity needed to ensure access to effective justice at all levels of Colombian society. Despite these challenges—and in some cases paradoxically because of them—Colombia has been and should remain an important U.S. security and citizen security partner.

Democracy is under enormous pressure throughout the Americas. In fact, in its 2021 report, The Economist’s Intelligence Unit found that Latin America’s democracy index score not only dropped for the sixth consecutive year but also experienced the most dramatic decline of any region in any year since the Democracy Index debuted in 2006.¹⁷ As governments, even before the pandemic, struggled to meet the needs and expectations of their populations and public policy struggled to rise to the challenges posed by the accelerating effects of technology on traditional work, space has opened across the Americas for corrosive populism of every ideology.

Colombia has not been immune to these dynamics as disaffection with democracy is on the rise and popular unrest has manifest in sustained protests—both before and during the pandemic. According to the benchmark *Latinobarometro* public opinion survey, for example, Colombia experienced one of the region’s most pronounced

declines in faith in democracy—11 points between 2018 and 2020.¹⁸ With only a brief lapse in the mid-20th Century, Colombia has been a steadfast defender of democracy throughout the hemisphere. Continued U.S. support for Colombia and the Colombian people is an important bulwark against potential democratic backsliding. It is why the Biden administration’s provision of 6 million vaccine doses to Colombia should be understood for what it was—important support for the vibrancy of Colombia’s democracy. Fueled in part by those donations, Colombia’s vaccine program was more successful than anticipated and helped make possible a surprisingly robust economic recovery in 2021. In short, it helped Colombian democracy deliver.

It did so at a critical juncture because as we all know, Colombians will soon go to the polls. First on March 13 to elect a new Congress and select candidates from several coalitions to face off in Colombia’s presidential election at the end of May. A first round likely to lead to a runoff between the top two vote getters in June. It is of critical importance that everything possible be done by Colombian authorities, candidates, and their supporters, in cooperation with the international community, including the United States, to safeguard these critical elections so they accurately and transparently reflect the will of the Colombian people free from outside interference and mis- and disinformation-driven distortions that have affected so many electoral processes across the hemisphere in recent years.

Against this backdrop and as this Committee and this Congress look toward the next chapter in the storied U.S.-Colombia relationship, I urge you to seek to advance U.S. interests by:

- Continuing to support implementation of the peace accords through expanding the effective presence of the Colombia state throughout the country’s territory;
- Investing in a region-wide approach to mitigating, managing, and ordering irregular migration by supporting Colombia’s efforts at regularization and integration of Venezuelan migrants—and efforts like it throughout the hemisphere;
- Finding those ways that U.S. development financing can be catalytic in the transformation of the Colombian economy to best prepare it to deliver for the Colombian people into the 21st Century;
- Leveraging Colombian climate leadership in deepening hemispheric and global cooperation, including driving modernization in green financing across all of the hemisphere’s multilateral development banks, for confronting the climate crisis;
- Supporting comprehensive efforts to rollback illicit economies understanding that even as the negative effects of illicit drugs in the U.S. are less tied to Colombia given the intensifying opioid crisis in the United States, the threat posed to Colombian democracy is real and consequential for the United States; and
- Respecting Colombia’s democratic processes and institutions.

On this final point, while it is unquestionably true that U.S. interests have been well served by a succession of leaders in Colombia with an abiding commitment to democracy as well as market-driven economics, the most important thing the United States can do to continue shoring up democracy in Colombia in the coming months is place its trust in the people of Colombia. It is imperative that the United States and political actors in the United States respect the sovereign will of the Colombian people as we rightly expect Colombians and other members of the international community to respect the sovereign will of U.S. voters in our own elections.

We should stand in unyielding support for Colombia’s democratic process and institutions, not for or against particular candidates in the upcoming elections. Going forward, U.S. interests will be best served by a Colombia that vigilantly respects democracy and builds a more inclusive capitalism that meets the basic needs and expectations of the Colombian people and fosters the conditions for innovation and competition needed for Colombia and the U.S.-Colombia relationship to thrive into its third century. We should trust our friends and allies in Colombia to choose leaders across their democratic institutions who will lead along such a path. And we should stand ready to work with those leaders as we have done across the past two centuries to advance shared values and interests.

Notes

¹The views reflected in this testimony are my personal views and do not represent the views of any institution with which I am or have been affiliated.

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The CHAIRMAN. Thank you. Ms. Realuyo.

**STATEMENT OF CELINA B. REALUYO, ADJUNCT PROFESSOR,
THE GEORGE WASHINGTON UNIVERSITY SCHOOL OF INTER-
NATIONAL AFFAIRS, WASHINGTON, DC**

Ms. REALUYO. Thank you, Chairman Menendez, Ranking Member Risch, and members of the committee for the opportunity to testify before you on the challenges facing Colombia and the need for a deeper U.S. engagement.

I have had the privilege of covering Colombia and counter-narcotics issues since I was a junior officer at U.S. Embassy Panama in the 1990’s, and then implementing Plan Colombia at the State Department Counterterrorism Office, and more recently specializing on illicit networks in the Americas as an academic. In fact, in 10 days I will head to Bogota to conduct a national threats and emerging threats seminar with the Colombian National War College.

This year, as you know, Colombia and the United States celebrate 200 years of bilateral relations and enjoy a strong partnership promoting security and prosperity in Latin America. Colombia has transformed itself from a nearly failed state, threatened by counter-insurgency, into a sound democracy, with the support from Plan Colombia combatting cocaine trade and arms groups like the FARC and ELN over the past 20 years.

Currently, Colombia is experiencing multiple crises that threaten stability ahead of its presidential elections. Massive anti-government protests, rising violence, human rights abuses, increased cocaine trade, frustrations with the pandemic, and instability spilling over from Venezuela have made President Duque's government very unpopular. The COVID-19 pandemic has become a force multiplier for pre-existing socioeconomic grievances and have emboldened President Duque's opponents.

External actors like Venezuela, China, and Russia have increased their activities in Colombia, compounding these domestic crises. The Maduro regime has exported instability to Colombia by supporting the FARC rebels and the ELN who are engaged in an illicit economy that is ever expanding, and spurred the mass migration of some 6 million Venezuelans, of which 2 million are in Colombia.

As Colombia's second-largest trading partner after the United States, China is aggressively and strategically investing in major infrastructure and technology projects. It is also engaged in vaccine diplomacy to pressure the Duque government to allow China's telecom company, Huawei, to participate in the upcoming 5G spectrum auction.

Meanwhile, Russian intelligence services have been active in Colombia in recent years, and Russia has close ties to Venezuela, selling some \$11 billion in arms to Colombia's neighbor since 2005. This month, Colombian Defense Minister Molano reported that Venezuela was moving troops to the border region with the assistance from Russia and Iran, where there is fierce fighting currently between the ELN and former FARC rebels, who tried to control the drug trade. Russia has also capitalized on Latin American distrust of traditional media and official messaging to impact and shape public opinion and perceptions against incumbent governments and democratic institutions.

With all these crises there are fears that new violent protests, disinformation campaigns, and election meddling might destabilize Colombia. Therefore, the U.S. must redouble its efforts to support Colombia to defend its democracy and market economy and sovereignty and to ensure free, fair, and transparent elections this year.

To deepen our partnership with Colombia at this challenging time, I advise the Biden administration and Congress to increase security assistance to Colombia in support of their security services to counter armed groups and the lucrative drug trade and expand and reinforce state presence in areas vulnerable to transnational organized crime. Also it should expand the use of financial intelligence to combat, prosecute, dismantle, and defund these illicit networks.

We should also be assisting with the professionalization of Colombia's military and police, to include more human rights and rule-of-law training. We should also help Colombia in its efforts to ensure cybersecurity of its critical infrastructure, including sensitive data and communications.

With regard to external actors, the U.S. should boost counterintelligence capabilities to monitor what these external actors are doing to try to destabilize Colombia and the rest of Latin America.

We should continue our collaborative efforts with the aspiration of bringing security, stability, and democracy back to Venezuela.

We should also try to help civil society groups in Colombia address issues of misinformation and fake news, and more importantly, counter those efforts by hostile internal and foreign actors.

On the economic side, we should promote U.S. investment in Colombian infrastructure projects in order to counter China's Belt and Road Initiative and 5G technological aspirations. Finally, as we look from the lessons of the pandemic, we need to think about increasing bilateral trade in a part of our attempt to near-source and provide more resilience for our supply chains within the Western Hemisphere.

Thank you so much for your attention. I look forward to your questions.

[The prepared statement of Ms. Realuyo follows:]

Prepared Statement of Ms. Celina B. Realuyo¹

INTRODUCTION

Thank you Chairman Menendez, Ranking Member Risch, and members of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee for the opportunity to appear before you today to testify on the current security and economic challenges facing Colombia and the need to deepen U.S. engagement. Colombia is one of the closest partners of the U.S. in Latin America, sharing democratic values, free-market capitalism, and mutual security interests. Colombia is facing a triple crisis of mass social protests, increased insecurity and serious fiscal and economic challenges from the pandemic. These internal crises along with external actors like Venezuela, China and Russia and an expanding illicit economy are destabilizing the political, economic, social, and security aspects of Colombia ahead of their presidential elections. The U.S. must redouble its efforts to strengthen its partnership with Colombia to assist the country confront the formidable challenges to security, democracy and post-pandemic economic fallout and realize free and fair elections this year.

THE U.S.-COLOMBIA STRATEGIC PARTNERSHIP

This year, Colombia and the United States commemorate 200 years of bilateral relations between two of the oldest democracies in the Western Hemisphere. Colombia is one of the U.S.'s closest partners in Latin America with a strong record of promoting democracy, capitalism, and security in the region. With the support of the United States, Colombia has transformed itself over the past 20 years from a nearly failed state threatened by a narco-insurgency into a sound democracy with a thriving market economy. The two countries have been instrumental in promoting prosperity and security in Latin America.

The U.S. is Colombia's largest trade and investment partner, due in part to the U.S.-Colombia Trade Promotion Agreement (TPA) that was implemented in 2012, with a two-way goods trade of \$29 billion and a services trade of \$11.7 billion in 2019 alone. Meanwhile, Colombia is the U.S.' third-largest trade partner in Latin America, with two-way trade in goods and services totaling \$29.9 billion in 2020. U.S.-owned affiliates account for more than 90,000 jobs in Colombia.² As the U.S. looks for near-sourcing opportunities to decrease supply chain dependency on Asia that made it so vulnerable during the pandemic, Colombia is a logical counterpart to expand bilateral trade in Latin America.

For the past 20 years, Colombia has been a steadfast U.S. ally in the "war on drugs" and security cooperation. For over five decades, the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia-People's Army (FARC-EP) threatened to overthrow the established order in Colombia and replace it with a socialist dictatorship. The FARC sustained itself through the cocaine trade for years. In its attempts to destabilize the government, the FARC carried out bombings, extortions, selective assassinations, kidnappings and armed confrontations with Colombian police and military forces. In 2000, the U.S. launched a partnership called "Plan Colombia" to provide security and economic development assistance to help combat the spread of narcotics, train military and law enforcement, and promote economic growth. Through "Plan Colombia," the U.S. and Colombia have built a strong counterterrorism and counter-narcotics partnership to combat the cocaine trade and armed groups like the FARC and

ELN. Since 2000, the U.S. Government has provided about \$12 billion in bilateral aid to help implement “Plan Colombia” and its successor strategies.³ Further afield, Colombia has also provided security expertise across Latin America, training thousands of military and police personnel in Central and South America. This included Colombia’s participation in the “Merida Initiative” in Mexico, “Plan Colombia’s” Mexican cousin, which became critical to security and counternarcotics operations within Mexico and at the U.S. southern border.⁴

COLOMBIA’S HISTORY OF ARMED GROUPS AND THE FARC PEACE ACCORD

With a population of approximately 50 million, Colombia has experienced high levels of violence and citizen insecurity due to internal armed conflict and narco-insurgency. Fifty years of violence with guerilla groups like the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) and the National Liberation Army (ELN) have resulted in over 220,000 deaths, 81 percent of them civilians and almost made Colombia a failed state.⁵ More than 9 million Colombians, or roughly 17 percent of the population, have registered as conflict victims.⁶ Colombia’s insurgent and other armed groups have been sustained by the shadow, illicit economy through the lucrative cocaine trade, as well as illegal gold-mining and oil-smuggling operations. Colombian organized criminal groups, such as drug trafficking mafias and paramilitary groups, are well armed and dangerous. The economic impact of conflict, terrorism, homicides and sexual assaults in Colombia was over \$275 billion, 34 percent of the country’s GDP, in 2017. This figure also includes the costs of containing violence as well as the consequences of violence on the economy. Colombia was ranked 10th (out of 11 countries) in South America and 144th overall on the 2021 Global Peace Index. The country recorded a deterioration in its overall score as a result of increases in violence violent demonstrations and political terror.⁷

In 2016, President Juan Manuel Santos (2010–2018) brokered a historic peace accord with the FARC, the country’s largest leftist guerrilla organization at the time. That peace agreement, ratified by Colombia’s Congress, included an immediate cease-fire, disarmament and demobilization process, the creation of a transitional justice system and the recognition of the FARC as a legitimate political party with 10 guaranteed seats in Congress until 2026.⁸ During a U.N.-monitored demobilization in 2017, some 13,300 FARC members disarmed. The FARC later transformed from a leftist guerrilla army into a political party known as Comunes. Neither the government nor the FARC have upheld all their commitments under the agreement. Although the FARC has formally demobilized, its leadership has not yet been subject to the Colombian justice system, and FARC dissident groups continue to engage in violence and illicit activities in Colombia and Venezuela. In early December 2021, on the fifth anniversary of the signing of the peace accord, the U.S. Government removed the FARC from its list of foreign terrorist organizations (FTOs) and designated two FARC dissident groups, Segundo Marquetalia and FARC-EP, as FTOs.⁹ According to one estimate, some 90 armed groups remain active in Colombia—including some former FARC and rightwing paramilitaries that continued criminal activities after their respective disarmaments.¹⁰

The National Liberation Army (Ejército de Liberación Nacional—ELN) is another violent guerrilla group with left-wing political ideologies operating in Colombia. Initially a Marxist-Leninist nationalist movement, it is more focused on kidnapping, extortion and attacks on economic infrastructure and increasingly linked to the narcotics trade. The group has prospered since the demobilization of the FARC. In 2016, when the FARC was abandoning much of its territory, the ELN moved in to take over drug trafficking and contraband activities, especially in Catatumbo, Norte de Santander and in the northwestern department of Chocó. This greatly increased the ELN’s criminal profits and expanded its manpower and territorial control.¹¹

President Juan Manuel Santos tried to reach a peace deal similar to one with the FARC in 2016. In September 2017, the two sides signed a ceasefire which ran from October 1 to January 9, 2018, but no similar ceasefire has been signed since. President Ivan Duque (2018–Present) campaigned as a critic of the FARC peace accords and suspended existing talks with the ELN upon assuming office. He cited the ELN’s continued violence and failure to comply with agreements made during the Santos administration. The ELN is currently considered the most powerful criminal group in Colombia and Venezuela, dominating much of the criminal economies along the border. It controls vast areas of coca crops, cocaine production and distribution routes and is actively involved in illegal gold mining. Well supported by the Maduro regime in Venezuela in exchange for a cut of criminal profits, the ELN has become a truly transnational criminal organization.¹²

Recent clashes between the FARC dissidents and ELN has resulted increased violence along the Colombian-Venezuelan border as the groups battle over control of

the lucrative narcotics and illegal gold trade. On January 7, 2022, Colombia's Attorney General warned that the fight between the FARC dissidents and ELN was expanding in three border areas, Norte de Santander, Arauca and Casanare. He also noted that ex-FARC forces after taking on multiple enemies on Venezuelan soil were moving from their stronghold in Norte de Santander to attack the ELN in Arauca, a Colombian department on the border with Venezuela.¹³

THE ROLE OF EXTERNAL ACTORS IN COLOMBIA

External state actors are becoming increasingly active in Colombia. Colombia and greater Latin America serve as an expanded theater for great power competition. The growing influence of China, Russia and Venezuela in Colombia is a direct challenge to the U.S.-Colombian partnership and has profound implications for regional security.

Venezuela: The criminalized state in Venezuela under the Maduro regime is threatening Colombia's security and sovereignty and has created the largest humanitarian crisis in Latin America with some 6 million migrants fleeing Venezuela. Colombia is a key U.S. partner in ongoing efforts to help Venezuela return to democracy and economic prosperity. Colombia has been essential in coordinating regional support for Interim President Juan Guaidó, as well as condemning Maduro's authoritarian regime. Colombia has welcomed over 1.8 million Venezuelans fleeing the Maduro regime and providing assistance to its Latin American neighbors. In early 2021, President Ivan Duque reported that Venezuelans residing in Colombia comprised nearly 40 percent of the Venezuelan exodus. The U.S. Government has committed more than \$700 million to help Colombia address the Venezuelan crisis and support the Venezuelan refugees that Colombia hosts.¹⁴

Since it assumed power in August 2018, the Duque government has been dealing with increased provocation by the Maduro regime. Colombia has been the primary target of Venezuela's national security strategy since the dawn of the Bolivarian revolution in 1999.¹⁵ Due to Colombia's geostrategic location and its close ties to the U.S., Venezuela's Chavista regime and other malign external actors have an asymmetric strategy to exploit illicit networks and illicit economies to destabilize Colombia.¹⁶

The Maduro regime relies on close ties with U.S. rivals like Cuba, China, Iran, Nicaragua and Russia to support their economy and circumvent harsh economic sanctions. It also has proven ties with Colombian illicit armed groups including the ELN and FARC-D. In Venezuela's collapse, the ELN has found safe haven and opportunities to set up bases throughout rural Venezuela. While there has certainly been some friction, and at least one deadly skirmish, between the ELN and the Venezuelan military, the two more often cooperate with one another than fight each other. The Colombian military believes the Venezuelan armed forces are now actively training the ELN to use sophisticated weaponry.¹⁷

China: China's diplomatic, commercial and technological interests in Colombia have grown in recent years. China is now Colombia's second most important trading partner after the U.S., with average annual exports between 2011 and 2020 of \$3.4 billion per year almost seven times as large as those in the prior decade. Imports of \$9.9 billion now represent almost a quarter of Colombia's total imports. Backed by Beijing with state financial support, Chinese companies have been winning major infrastructure projects, including the long-awaited Bogotá metro, the Bogotá regional railway, many Colombian 4G and 5G infrastructure projects and a major new gold mine in Antioquia. Many of these projects resulted after President Iván Duque's visit to Beijing in 2019, when he promoted Chinese investment in Colombia. Seeking closer ties, he has hinted that Colombia may formally join the Belt and Road Initiative before he leaves office in 2022.¹⁸

Another asymmetric weapon in Beijing's arsenal is vaccine diplomacy. China's woefully inadequate, but readily available, Sinovac coronavirus vaccine was used as leverage in Colombia to pressure the Duque government to allow China's telecommunications company (and direct conduit to Chinese military intelligence), Huawei, to participate in the 5G spectrum auction in Colombia sometime in 2022—a dual-track diplomatic effort that China also initiated in Brazil.¹⁹ Although Colombia has been the largest recipient of vaccine donations from the U.S., receiving 6 million doses out of the 38 million donated by the U.S. Government, the early arrival of Sinovac vaccines during February and March 2021 “saved the day” by preventing thousands of deaths among the elderly. Indeed, by the end of March 2021, Colombia had received 3.5 million doses, of which 2.5 million came from China. In this sense, U.S. vaccine diplomacy to Colombia was generous, but China came first when it most mattered.²⁰

Russia: According to Colombian security officials, the Russian military intelligence services have been active in Colombia in recent years. In December 2020, Colombia tracked unusual movements of diplomatic personnel from the Russian embassy in Bogotá, leading to the expulsion of at least two “diplomats” in December of last year—a first in Colombia-Russia relations.²¹ This was followed by a Russian military aircraft violating Colombian airspace just days before the uproar of social protests began in April 2021. While the Colombian Government protested the incident, repeated violations of Colombian airspace by Russian-manufactured Venezuelan military drones has added to the complexity of the conflict on the Colombia-Venezuela border. In May 2021, Colombian Defense Minister Diego Molano accused Russia of conducting cyberattacks against the Colombian Army and Senate infrastructure, that Russia denied.²²

Russia is a close partner of the Maduro regime and has sold more than \$11 billion worth of armament to Venezuela since 2005. The presence of Russian military advisers and contractors has become routine in Venezuela. In December 2021, Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Sergei Ryabkov said he would not rule out Moscow deploying forces to allies Venezuela or Cuba if diplomacy failed with the United States over Ukraine, where Moscow has massed tens of thousands of troops. In February 2022, Russia promised Colombia’s Foreign Minister and Vice President Marta Lucia Ramirez that military equipment given to Venezuela would not be used to attack Colombia, destabilize Latin America or end up in the hands of illegal armed groups. Colombia’s Defense Minister Molano reported that Venezuela was moving troops to the countries’ border with technical assistance from Russia and Iran and called the possible deployment “foreign interference.” Molano, citing intelligence sources, said there were troop movements opposite Colombia’s Arauca province, which has seen fierce fighting between National Liberation Army (ELN) guerrillas and former FARC rebels for control of the drugs trade.²³

In recent years, Russia has leveraged its sophisticated propaganda capability to impact public opinion and perceptions across Latin America. Such efforts include overt Russian media such as Sputnik and Russia Today, as well as social media efforts through platforms such as Twitter, Facebook, and WhatsApp. The high level of distrust in the region toward government discourse and traditional media has made Latin America and the Caribbean particularly vulnerable to such initiatives. Russia has used that capability not so much to create opinion favorable toward Russia, but rather, to foment instability and undermine regimes aligned with the West. Both the Colombian and Chilean governments have accused Russian social media agents of contributing to the radicalization of protests and destabilization in their countries.²⁴

Colombia has become the focal point for top U.S. adversaries in this era of great-power competition. Abandoning or reducing support to Colombia does not come without unintended consequences, of which the most detrimental to U.S. national security is the likely expansion of Russian and Chinese influence from Venezuela to Colombia.

CURRENT CHALLENGES FACING COLOMBIA

President Ivan Duque’s popularity has declined over the past year as his government has struggled to address serious political, economic and security challenges in Colombia. These include mass anti-government protests, spikes in coca cultivation and cocaine production, frustration with pandemic response, violence against human rights and other social activists and instability spilling over from Venezuela. Without a doubt, the COVID-19 pandemic has negatively impacted health, economic security, and democratic indicators in Colombia and countries around the world. Colombia has been particularly hard hit by the pandemic with one of the highest rates of COVID-19 infections and deaths in Latin America²⁵ and with a gross domestic product (GDP) contraction of -6.8 percent in 2020 due to strict national lockdown policies.²⁶ The pandemic became a catalyst and force-multiplier for the explosion of pre-existing socio-economic grievances and the emboldening of political opponents of both the Duque administration and democratic institutions, resulting in mass protests that paralyzed Colombian cities.

Nationwide protests broke out over an unpopular government-proposed tax increase in mid-2021. The national strike lasted for nearly 8 weeks as diverse sectors protested about a host of grievances, including economic inequality, crime, police brutality against demonstrators, and unaddressed corruption. Colombia’s large social protests, labor strikes, and violent clashes with police made international news in April 2021, but had already been underway in November 2019, well before the COVID-19 pandemic. These protests were similar to the social and political unrest witnessed in Bolivia, Chile, Ecuador and Peru since 2019. In Colombia, the protests

were fueled by social and economic grievances due to long-standing inequalities and high youth and female unemployment. Unfortunately, Colombia still faces high levels of poverty. According to the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC), 37.5 percent of Colombians lived below the poverty line at the end of 2020. More than two-thirds of Colombian households make less than \$600 USD in total monthly income.²⁷

There were allegations of agitators and fake news fueling the protests via social media and human rights abuses by Colombian security forces. Colombian Defense Minister Diego Molano reported on May 3, 2021 that at least six criminal groups, including FARC dissidents (FARC-D), the ELN, and the Blue and Black Shields of the M-19 youth movement were behind the acts of violence and vandalism during Colombia's protests in 2021.²⁸ The crippling blockades across Colombia and vandalism resulted in an estimated \$3 billion of damage.

From April 28 to July 31, 2021, the United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights in Colombia received more than 60 allegations of deaths in the context of the mass protests. So far, it has verified the deaths of 46 people: 44 civilians and two police officers; most of the documented deaths, 76 percent, were from gunshot wounds. The UN office in Colombia conducted more than 620 interviews with victims and witnesses, and examined 83 videos, including mobile phone footage of the protests and related incidents. Based on this analysis, there are reasonable grounds to believe police officers were responsible for at least 28 of the deaths with members of the National Police's Mobile Anti-Riot Squad (ESMAD) involved in at least 10 cases. Non-state actors are believed to have killed 10 people, while there is insufficient information to determine the likely perpetrators of eight other deaths. The Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights called on Colombia to urgently reform how it polices protests in the wake of demonstrations in 2021 in which several people were killed or injured.²⁹ In response, the Colombian Government has embarked on a broad reform of its police to include respect for human rights and just received \$8 million of U.S. assistance for human rights training for the police on February 8, 2022.³⁰

The security situation in Colombia has been deteriorating significantly and will be a key issue in the upcoming presidential and legislative elections. In September 2021, Colombia's Military Commander General Luis Navarro stated that about 1,900 fighters belonging to Colombian rebel and crime groups are operating from Venezuela, where they plan attacks and engage in drug trafficking. The Colombian Government has long said Venezuela's leadership grants safe harbor to Colombian armed groups, allowing trafficking of cocaine in exchange for a cut of the profits. One FARC dissident group has taken responsibility for a car bombing at a military base in the border city of Cucuta which injured 44 in June and the June 25, 2021 failed assassination attempt against President Ivan Duque, the shooting of a helicopter transporting him.³¹

According to InSight Crime, murders in Colombia rose to a level not seen in 7 years a turnaround for the Andean nation, which had made great strides in reducing killings. According to the National Police, the country tallied 13,709 homicides in 2021, pushing its homicide rate up from a low of 23.8 per 100,000 people in 2020, to 26.8 last year. Last year's total killings, however, rose eight percent when compared with 2019, and 2021 was the first year since 2013 that Colombia surpassed 13,000 murders. Violence, meanwhile, surged in the country's lawless Colombia-Venezuela border. The northeastern jungle region of Catatumbo, home to an abundance of coca crops, came under siege in a war between a dissident front of the demobilized FARC and the National Liberation Army (Ejército de Liberación Nacional—ELN), Colombia's largest guerrilla group. On the other side of the country, the southwestern departments of Cauca and Valle de Cauca recorded nearly 100 people killed in 26 massacres. Both departments are critical for moving drugs out of the Pacific or to Ecuador and are a hot spot for criminal actors, including three dissident FARC fronts, the ELN and the Urabeños drug gang, also known as the Gulf Clan (Clan del Golfo). In the central Antioquia department, 52 people were murdered in 14 massacres.³² This increase in violence is linked to the lucrative illicit economy and is destabilizing parts of Colombia.

Anti-government protests, frustrations over the pandemic response, increasing insecurity, economic concerns and instability in Venezuela will be on Colombians' minds at the March 13 parliamentary and May 29 presidential elections this year. Discontent with the current administration has President Duque at record low approval ratings. If the elections were conducted today, left-leaning candidate Gustavo Petro, former M19 guerrilla and mayor of Bogota would likely win the presidency. He was a presidential candidate in 2018 who finished second with over 8 million votes (43 percent) in the second round against Ivan Duque. There are fears that new

violent protests, disinformation campaigns and election meddling might occur and attempt to destabilize Colombia.

MEASURES TO DEEPEN U.S.-COLOMBIAN COOPERATION

The U.S. must redouble its efforts to support Colombia, its closest democratic partner in Latin America as it faces mass social protests, increasing insecurity, external actors and serious economic challenges from the pandemic. Colombia needs assistance to defend its democratic institutions, open economy and sovereignty and ensure free and fair elections in 2022. To deepen U.S. partnership with Colombia at this challenging time, the Biden Administration and Congress should:

1. Increase security assistance to Colombia to support the police and the military to counter armed groups and the lucrative drug trade. Security assistance should focus on the growing instability and illicit economy along the shared border with Venezuela and the Pacific Ocean ports.
2. Expand the use of financial intelligence by supporting the Center for Combating Illicit Finances (CFI) and the creation of an interagency group to counter money laundering led by Colombia's Attorney General to combat, prosecute and dismantle illicit networks.
3. Assist with the professionalization and reform of Colombia's military and police forces and include more human rights and rule of law training.
4. Continue collaborative efforts towards bringing security, stability and democracy back to Venezuela.
5. Support Colombia's broad cybersecurity efforts to safeguard its sensitive data and communications and other critical infrastructure.
6. Boost Colombia's counterintelligence capabilities to closely monitor the growing activities of external actors like China, Russia and Venezuela in Colombia.
7. Identify and assist legitimate civil society groups in Colombia to address disinformation and misinformation efforts by internal and hostile foreign actors.
8. Promote U.S. investment in Colombian infrastructure projects, especially in areas that are economically isolated and vulnerable to organized crime, to counter China's Belt and Road Initiative and 5G technology aspirations.
9. Facilitate more bilateral trade between the U.S. and Colombia as part of a U.S. near-sourcing and supply chain resilience strategy.
10. Continue to work closely with Colombians in their pandemic recovery efforts through both public and private sector coordination.

Notes

¹The views expressed in this testimony are that of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views of the William J. Perry Center for Hemispheric Defense Studies, National Defense University, or the Department of Defense. Testimony is drawn from the author's recent publication, "America's Longtime Friend, Colombia, Needs U.S. Help" with James M. Roberts, Mateo Haydar, and Joseph M. Humire found here: <https://www.heritage.org/americas/report/americas-longtime-friend-colombia-needs-us-help>

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The CHAIRMAN. Thank you both. We will start a series of 5-minute questions.

Listening to the previous panel and some of your insights, one of our challenges is that if we do not want countries to use Huawei, if we do not want China to be investing in their infrastructure and ports, not only do we want to make it clear to those countries that we do not want to see that, but we have to compete with China. We have to offer an alternative to Huawei. We have to offer an alternative in investments into a country. Otherwise, we just say no, do not do that, but then leave you with nothing.

So that is something that I think we have to focus on. That is why I think the IDB is a great opportunity, and I hope we can get a capital investment increase to be a leader in helping us to fashion responses to some of these economic and development questions where American businesses are actually engaged. The IDB was used previously by China. IDB was conducting trade shows for

China. I am glad that its new leadership ended that, and it is focused in a different direction.

It just comes to me, as I listen to various testimony, that this is a critical thing that we have to address. Yes, we do not Huawei. We do not want its security challenges to our telecommunications infrastructure, but we certainly have to have an alternative.

Mr. Restrepo, for years numerous American officials have repeatedly referred to Colombia as a U.S. ally, yet we have never taken the step of making that formal designation. Would you agree that we are long overdue in formalizing the United States strategic alliance with Colombia?

Mr. RESTREPO. Absolutely. They are a strategic partner and ally and have been not just since Plan Colombia. I think there is a recency bias in our analysis often. As I noted, in World War II Colombia played a critical role in hunting U-boats in the Caribbean and allowing the U.S. Navy to prepare for its Pacific campaign off Colombia's Pacific coast, deployed troops to Korea during the Korean conflict, was fundamental in establishing the Inter-American System, was a fundamental partner in the Alliance for Progress.

This is a longstanding relationship that deeply benefits and advances U.S. national interests and should be recognized formally as such.

The CHAIRMAN. Let me ask you, throughout Plan Colombia the United States continuously recalibrated our foreign assistance to advance our strategic objectives of helping Colombia and the world's longest-running internal conflict, combat narcotics trafficking, and strengthen peace, democratic governance, and human rights. As we look to reinvigorate the U.S.-Colombia relations how do we—and set our sights, I should say, on addressing the opportunities and challenges of the future, not just deal with the ghosts of the past—what lessons can we draw from Plan Colombia to inform the future of our cooperation with Colombia and ensure that we are maximizing the impact of engagement on economic, social, environmental, and security issues, as well as addressing the emerging threats and challenges?

Mr. RESTREPO. So I think the fundamental lesson from Plan Colombia, and there are many, is where can the United States be catalytic? Where does the United States have a comparative advantage where we can help Colombia in a way distinct from what is on offer within Colombia or otherwise in the international community?

At the onset of Plan Colombia that was air mobility and the ability to project the Colombian state and Colombian lethal reach to all of Colombia society, and at the same time human rights and the professionalization of its security forces.

Today, I think that goes to the need to help Colombia become a much more innovative economy and a much more technologically advanced economy. Through the IDB, as you mentioned, the United States should be present in IDB Invest, the private sector arm, in a way that it is not today. They should be part of any recapitalization of the IDB. The DFC should be looking to put risk capital at play, to burgeon the kind of technological advances that economies like Colombia's needs to be sustainable and equitable into the 21st century.

The CHAIRMAN. Thank you. Senator Risch.

Senator RISCH. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. Ms. Realuyo, what kind of security assistance should the U.S. be emphasizing to more effectively help Colombia address the security environment that they face today?

Ms. REALUYO. Well, as a result of the many years that we have invested in security assistance on all aspects, also it is important to understand it has not only been at the national level, but actually at the more local level, where we are seeing the heightened violence and the rate of homicides rising quite dramatically.

We have actually got a lot of what I call the building blocks in place. The question is how do you make them more sophisticated and more nimble, in terms of taking a look at this?

So as you know, I have been following the money trail of terrorist groups and criminal organizations for the past 20 years, and it is great sign that we are now really starting to invest in cultivating and harvesting what we call financial intelligence. These groups that have now abandoned their political aspirations, like the FARC dissidents and the ELN, of overthrowing the central government of Colombia, they are all in it for the money, because the cocaine trade is so lucrative and the illegal gold mining, which we did not really mention during the hearing today. They are all about securing the supply chain, and then more importantly, the transit routes in order to get these illicit products to market.

So one piece, with our military assistance, is how to help the Colombians reestablish control in what were ungoverned or vulnerable spaces, and that is primarily right now where you are seeing the violence, that border region between Colombia and Venezuela. Sadly too, the Venezuelans regime of Maduro has actually given safe haven, ample safe haven and direct assistance to groups like the ELN, the FARC to enrich themselves.

So that is an area where we are starting to now incorporate different types of intelligence at an operational level. So that is actually taking also signals intelligence, to actually listen to their communications, with who the money runners are. Then now it is quite interesting, in my research I am looking at what is called the digitalization of the illicit economy. How are they starting to use cyberspace to secure, for example, precursor chemicals, which we did not really talk about as well, that are needed in the labs to transform the coca into refined cocaine, which sadly is becoming even purer and more impactful, and it is starting to come back into the United States.

So this is an area where we have seen more comprehensive approach to security as opposed to these silos that existed in our government in the United States as well as others. So we are looking at what we call more that kind of inter-departmental or inter-agency, we would call it in the United States, this training of prosecutors and the financial intelligence units as well as the military and the police to actually execute a more comprehensive attack against these illicit armed groups.

Senator RISCH. Thanks for that. It is pretty common knowledge that Russia has got a growing military and intelligence activity in both Venezuela and Colombia. How can the U.S. help Colombia in

safeguarding sensitive communications and mitigate the risks that are presented by Russia?

Ms. REALUYO. In our bilateral academic meetings with our counterparts in Colombia there is tremendous demand for training and, more importantly, understanding what we call the cyber domain. So this is part of SCADA units and then, more importantly, the whole platform in taking a look at how to not just secure the installations that we have now in both countries—and we share a lot of lessons learned—but more importantly looking at how you train the next generation to be able to anticipate. This is where we are using concepts such as strategic foresight to kind of game out how there might be vulnerabilities in existing systems.

Then the bigger challenge that we have seen throughout Latin America, and in Colombia, is that interoperability. So, for example, police units and military units still struggle in sharing real-time what we call actionable intelligence, and then, more importantly, how to protect. Also, we raise awareness about, sadly, the infiltration of corrupt actors inside the security services, which is a challenge in many countries around the world.

Senator RISCH. Thank you very much. I appreciate that. My time is up, almost, anyway, Mr. Chairman. Thank you.

The CHAIRMAN. Thank you. I have one last question for both of you. I mentioned Colombia's tax decision which created a revolt as a result of it, but that tax decision was spurred by requirements of the IMF to meet certain fiscal obligations, in the midst of a pandemic. This is not unique to Colombia. There are several countries in the hemisphere and beyond where these requirements, stringent requirements of the IMF, without the flexibility for what I call a smoothing period, but call it whatever you want.

Not to move away from the obligation but ultimately to have the time to meet the obligation in a responsible way that does not create societal disruption is something I would be interested in your thoughts on.

Mr. RESTREPO. Senator, you are entirely correct, and this is a problem throughout Latin America and actually throughout many emerging markets at the moment. Countries are frankly out of fiscal space as a result of attempts to protect the most vulnerable populations during the pandemic. That is true in Colombia, where a significant percentage of GDP was reallocated or directed towards the most vulnerable portions of the population. Effort was stood up to reach folks in an economy that is deeply informal. The Colombian economy informality ranges in the 60 to 65 percent, which is one of the challenges that the economy faces.

International financial institutions, starting with the IMF, right now should be providing more fiscal space for countries, rather than demanding quick corrections, if you will, as we emerge from the effects of the pandemic.

It is one of the reasons—and we have been a little remiss in not focusing, I think, the Colombian response on migration. One of the things that Colombia has done is launch an unprecedented regularization program. In November of last year, the World Bank and the IDB, with U.S. support, allocated \$800 million in financing to Colombia to support that integration and regularization program, in direct budget support conditioned on these programs. That is the

sort of thing that these institutions should be doing throughout the Americas today to help deal with a massive movement of people, and a historic movement of people that has been exacerbated by the pandemic itself.

So yes, the IMF should be engaging in these smoothing periods, as you named them, and the international financial institutions should be using their balance sheets to help countries both deal with the effects of the pandemic and communities of reception throughout the region for vulnerable populations that have been dislocated over the course of the last 7 years.

The CHAIRMAN. Ms. Realuyo, any observations?

Ms. REALUYO. If we take a look at the IFF's, they also have their own requirements and their own constituencies and stakeholders, and it is unfortunate that President Duque decided to raise, and more importantly proposed the tax that would hit the middle class, that actually served as a catalyst for these mass protests that had never been seen before in the streets of Colombia.

This also actually underscores the spirit of the hearing today about the importance of—reinvigorating, as you titled the hearing, the bilateral, economic, and trade ties with Colombia and the United States. Because all these countries that have suffered so much from the pandemic—and as you know, Colombia contracted its GDP by 6 percent in 2020, and was one of the hardest hit countries due to the COVID-19 pandemic—they have to grow their economy, and thankfully, Colombia has not just the natural resources, but the human and financial resources that position them very well for a quick recovery, and that recovery is directly linked to the U.S. economy.

That is where we see these concepts of the strategy of near-sourcing, realigning global supply chains, to rebuild, if not reinforce the U.S. ties with our Latin American partners, not just in Latin America, but the Caribbean, is a way out, and I think as we look at what is going to grow and then, more importantly, not just the goods, but the services industry, I see a very promising future in U.S.-Colombian bilateral economic relations.

We spoke a lot today about security. You cannot have prosperity without security, but you also cannot fund prosperity without actually having security to attract investments, and looking at alternatives.

You had asked and mentioned earlier at a point about trying to counter China's aggressive advances, and the real issue, as well, is to offer goods and services that meet the needs of the Colombian people and the economy. I think that the U.S. is very well positioned to do that, and I look forward to seeing the passage of your bill to really reinforce, and then, more importantly, codify the relationship between Colombia and United States.

The CHAIRMAN. Well, thank you. I think one of the challenges for countries like Colombia is when you have such a large informal economy, when you try to make it formal there is always a reluctance to have to pay your way to the state at the end of the day. So that will be challenging for whoever comes next, but I appreciate your insights.

With that, thank you both for helping us think about this more deeply. We appreciate your participation here today.

This hearing's record will remain open until the close of business tomorrow, and with the thanks of the committee this hearing is adjourned.

[Whereupon, at 11:22 a.m., the hearing was adjourned.]

ADDITIONAL MATERIAL SUBMITTED FOR THE RECORD

RESPONSES OF MR. BRIAN NICHOLS TO QUESTIONS SUBMITTED BY SENATOR JIM RISCH

Question. In August 2020, the U.S. International Development Finance Corporation (DFC) announced the launch of the U.S.-Colombia Growth Initiative with over \$1 billion invested in more than 30 projects across Colombia. However, during your testimony, you indicated only six projects were currently being implemented. Can you please provide a status updated on the 30 projects in question?

Answer. The U.S. relationship with Colombia remains strong, and the United States continues to support a wide array of initiatives to boost economic growth in the country. DFC supports highly developmental projects in Colombia and constantly considers new private sector proposals. I referenced six new projects in my previous testimony that were approved in 2021. More broadly, DFC has 34 portfolio projects in Colombia that amount to more than \$1.2 billion in exposure. DFC has supported investments that promote rural financial inclusion, affordable housing, infrastructure, and forestry. DFC has about \$55 million in exposure through regional funds that cover Colombia, including \$3.4 million in small, high-impact funds. Approximately 88 percent of this exposure focuses on housing and commercial buildings, and the remaining 12 percent focuses on industrial and financial technologies. For quick reference, all of DFC's active projects are available on DFC's website, which can be filtered by region, financing type, commitment level, and year: <https://www.dfc.gov/our-impact/all-active-projects>.

DFC's current portfolio prioritizes promotion of affordable housing and increasing lending to vulnerable populations, such as Venezuela migrant receptor communities, rural areas, and those worst-affected by COVID-19. Financial inclusion in rural and conflict-affected Colombia aims to promote a legal economy as an alternative to illicit activities (coca, illegal mining, armed groups). DFC supports inclusive rural economic growth by attracting private investment into areas which have been affected by conflict and where investors have been reluctant to make financial commitments. DFC enhances economic opportunity by increasing access to affordable housing in conflict-affected communities and helping small farmers and landowners improve food security by strengthening producer associations, cooperatives, microcredit organizations, and agricultural value chains and business opportunities. By supporting bankable projects in Venezuela migrant receptor communities, DFC increases inclusion, strengthens resilience, and addresses the root causes of further migration.

RESPONSES OF MR. TODD ROBINSON TO QUESTIONS SUBMITTED BY SENATOR JIM RISCH

Question. Your testimony seemed to have indicated that cocaine "production is going down but cultivation is increasing" in Colombia. As you may know, a July 2021 report by the White House's Office of National Drug Control Policy indicated a dramatic increase in both, coca cultivation and cocaine production in Colombia. Specifically, the ONDCP estimated that coca cultivation had reached a record 245,000 hectares and cocaine production stood at 1,010 metric tons—a roughly 30 percent increase from production levels at the time of the signing of the Peace Accords in 2016.

Can you clarify the record on your understanding of cocaine production levels in Colombia, and whether they represent a decrease or increase from previous years?

Answer. Both coca cultivation and cocaine production potential increased in 2020 compared to the year prior, according to U.S. Government estimates.

Question. How has the failure to conduct aerial spraying impacted this trend?

Answer. Several factors, including the limited number of hectares available for aerial eradication, suspension of aerial eradication itself, varying levels of manual eradication, perverse incentives in the national crop substitution program, and an expansion of the global cocaine market have all contributed to the growth in coca cultivation since 2012. The complex problems posed by narcotics trafficking require

a similarly broad set of interventions, and eradication in whatever legally available form is a core element of our strategy. The choice to resume aerial eradication remains for Colombia to decide. To date, various legal rulings in Colombia have prevented the program's launch.

RESPONSES OF MS. MARCELA ESCOBARI TO QUESTIONS
SUBMITTED BY SENATOR JIM RISCH

Question. What funds from the USAID Latin America bureau, the USAID mission in Colombia, or USAID's Center for Democracy, Human Rights, and Governance will be used to assist elections in Colombia in 2022?

Answer. USAID supports government and citizen efforts in Colombia to promote economic prosperity through the licit economy; improve the living conditions of victims of violence and vulnerable groups, including Afro-Colombians and indigenous peoples; promote respect for human rights and rule of law; and address climate change and environmental issues in one of the most ecologically diverse countries in the world. As part of furthering those priorities, USAID programming supports advancing Colombia's transition from violent conflict to an inclusive peace. USAID does not have direct programming related to election observation in Colombia. However, USAID's priority in the upcoming elections is to support victims of armed conflict to participate as candidates and voters in the upcoming Congressional elections, which include elections for 16 seats for victims of the armed conflict. USAID will use ESF and DA funding to provide support for those elections, focused on ensuring that victims' organizations have the knowledge and tools to actively participate in their democracy.

Question. Will USAID use the CEPPS mechanism and/or the Rapid Response Mechanism to support an electoral observation team during the upcoming legislative and presidential elections?

Answer. At this time, USAID does not intend to use CEPPS or related mechanisms to support an electoral observation team during the upcoming elections. USAID does not have direct programming related to election observation in Colombia. Such programming ended in 2019 as USAID shifted its focus to furthering the Peace Accord implementation under USAID's Country Development Cooperation Strategy (2020–2025). As we approach the elections, USAID will continue to be engaged in robust interagency discussions on the most appropriate support the USG can provide to Colombia.

RESPONSES OF MR. BRIAN NICHOLS TO QUESTIONS
SUBMITTED BY SENATOR MARCO RUBIO

Question. It's come to my attention that the Colombian-American community in Florida is very concerned with the constant delays experienced by Colombians applying for visas to visit the United States. In many cases, these are for family members trying to make it to a funeral, wedding or other family event. While this may not seem a big deal at first, furthering people-to-people ties are critical in supporting the bilateral relationship with Colombia.

Are you aware of the consular services backlog at the Embassy in Bogota?

Answer. Yes, I am aware there is a backlog of appointments for consular services at the U.S. Embassy in Bogota, as there is at many of our Embassies worldwide.

Question. Can you explain why there is a backlog in providing visas to Colombians and what actions are underway to address the backlog?

Answer. The COVID-19 pandemic has created a backlog of visa applications around the world. As worldwide restrictions due to the pandemic begin to ease, and in line with the President's proclamation regarding the safe resumption of international travel, the Bureau of Consular Affairs (CA) is focusing on reducing wait times for all consular services at U.S. Embassy Bogota and all of our embassies and consulates overseas while also protecting the health and safety of our staff and applicants. In order to achieve this, the Consular Affairs Bureau has focused on reducing the number of people that need to schedule appointments and come into waiting rooms through expanded interview waiver authorities. Working with interagency colleagues, and always focused on protecting national security, we are finding ways to process visa applications more efficiently within statutory mandates.

Question. As you know, Colombia is scheduled to hold congressional elections on March 13, with presidential elections to follow in May. I am concerned, and have

raised this previously, that Cuba, Russia, China and Maduro's regime in Venezuela have a great interest in Colombia electing a new leader sympathetic to them. There's no doubt that these actors will try to influence the elections to their benefit.

What are the Biden administration's top priorities in ensuring the integrity and legitimacy of Colombia's electoral process and what has the Administration done, to date, to help Colombia prepare for these elections?

Answer. Colombia remains a leading example in the region of a successful, vibrant democracy, and we have a high level of confidence in Colombia's democratic institutions. We will continue to support Colombia's strong democratic institutions and look forward to Colombia's upcoming free and fair elections. The Colombian Government has expressed concerns about potential disruptive influence, misinformation, and disinformation campaigns in the lead-up to their elections and requested U.S. support to ensure electoral integrity free from outside influence. The U.S. Government interagency continues to work with the Government of Colombia to provide targeted assistance to counter mal-, mis-, and disinformation and bolster Colombia's cybersecurity capacity to detect and deter cyber threats and intrusions.

Question. Is the Administration planning to support a large-scale independent election observation in Colombia?

Answer. Independent election observation demonstrates our long-standing support of peace and democracy in Colombia. Embassy Bogotá will field observation teams throughout Colombia for the presidential election, in coordination with teams from the EU, UN, and OAS.

Question. In the first Summit of the Americas, held in Miami in 1994, Cuba's dictator, Fidel Castro—was not invited. This year, the United States will host the Summit of the Americas, and three Western Hemisphere nations—Cuba, Nicaragua, and Venezuela—will not meet the basic conditions of democratic governance. This is a clear indication that democracy is in decline in the Western Hemisphere. Does the United States plan on extending invitations to the Diaz-Canel, Ortega, and Maduro regimes to attend the Summit of the Americas?

Answer. The White House will decide which leaders to invite to Los Angeles. The White House will consider the commitment to democracy that countries made at the Third Summit of the Americas in Quebec City in 2001 as one factor to inform its decisions on invitations. We expect the White House to extend invitations to leaders in the region closer to the date of the Summit.

The Summit serves as the region's highest-level forum to further foster effective and accountable democracies in the region that deliver for their people. Building on the Summit for Democracy, the Ninth Summit will focus governments, civil society, and the private sector on taking concrete actions to deliver democracy, bolster transparent and accountable governance, and promote and protect human rights, rule of law, diversity, social inclusion, and gender, racial, and ethnic equity in order to build hope and opportunities for all the people of the Americas.

Question. Is the Administration inviting Interim President of Venezuela Juan Guaidó?

Answer. The United States continues to recognize the authority of the 2015 National Assembly as the last democratically elected institution and of Juan Guaidó as the interim president of Venezuela. As host of the Ninth Summit of the Americas, the United States has discretion over which heads of state and government to invite to the Summit. We expect the White House to extend invitations to the region's leaders closer to the date of the Summit.

Question. What about other countries in the hemisphere that have experienced a noticeable decline in their respect for democratic norms—like Argentina, Mexico, or El Salvador?

Answer. The White House will consider the commitment to democracy that countries made at the Third Summit of the Americas in Quebec City in 2001 as one factor to inform its decisions on which leaders to invite to the Summit.

Question. Mr. Nichols, in a recent communication, you wrote to the Senate that the State Department looks forward to working with Congress to organize the Summit and that this American-led process reinforces a commitment to defending democracy, address migration and promote growth in the region. As the Summit is soon approaching, can you provide this committee with an update on the process?

Answer. The Ninth Summit of the Americas will focus on "Building a Sustainable, Resilient, and Equitable Future" —a shared vision we developed in consultation with the region's governments, civil society, and private sector, and the 13 international organizations that comprise the Joint Summit Working Group and support

the Summit process. People, institutions, and governments across our hemisphere have shared with us their priorities and concerns, and these include the COVID-19 pandemic and the fault lines it exposed in health, economic, educational, and social systems. They include threats to democracy; the climate crisis; and a lack of equitable access to economic, social, and political opportunities that places a heavy burden on the most vulnerable and underrepresented among us.

We recognize this as an opportunity, as Summit chair and host, to build consensus among the leaders of our hemisphere on concrete actions that we can take, together, to address challenges that all too often serve as root causes of irregular migration.

The official Summit agenda will include the leaders' events as well as three stakeholder forums—the CEO Summit of the Americas, the Civil Society Forum, and the Young Americas Forum—to facilitate meaningful dialogue among governments, civil society, the private sector, and youth representatives and ensure our leaders' commitments at the Summit respond to the most pressing needs of the people of our hemisphere.

Since the White House announced the dates and location for the Ninth Summit, preparatory work has accelerated, within the U.S. Government and with external partners. We have introduced our proposed multilateral commitments to the Summit governments and stakeholders, and they responded positively to our ideas on health, climate change, clean energy, digital transformation, and democratic governance. We will continue to engage closely with Summit governments and stakeholders, as well as Members of Congress, to further refine these ideas in the months ahead, as we develop bold, actionable commitments for our leaders to endorse at the Ninth Summit.

Question. Can you confirm the countries that will not be participating at the summit?

Answer. The White House has not yet sent out formal invitations and will not do so until closer to the Summit date, but we anticipate keen interest from many leaders and stakeholders to attend the Summit in person in Los Angeles.

Question. When will I, and the members of this committee, receive a briefing on the upcoming summit?

Answer. The Department looks forward to briefing you, members of the Senate Committee on Foreign Relations, and other interested Members of Congress in the near future at a mutually convenient time.

Question. On February 16, the United States held a high-level meeting with European and Indo-Pacific allies on Venezuela. While I'm glad that the Administration is encouraging allies to take a united stance on the Maduro regime, I'm puzzled by the fact that the government of Venezuela led by Interim President Juan Guaidó was not included, especially when the participants affirmed their commitment to a "Venezuelan-led process."

If the U.S. supports a Venezuelan-led process, why were there no representatives from the Interim President of Venezuela at a meeting about Venezuela?

Answer. The United States continues to recognize the authority of the democratically elected 2015 National Assembly as the last remaining democratic institution and Juan Guaidó as Venezuela's interim president.

Consistent with the Verdad Act, we continue to support the Venezuelan-led negotiations between the Unitary Platform and the Maduro regime. We believe negotiations, undertaken in good faith, represent the best path toward restoring democracy and rule of law in Venezuela.

The meeting included significant participation from Venezuelan representatives. Mr. Gerardo Blyde and Ms. Claudia Nikken, the coordinators of the Unitary Platform negotiation delegation, presented on the status of the negotiations and participated in a question and answer session with attendees.

Question. Can you clarify for the committee, which entity was the Department referring to when it mentioned a "Venezuelan-led process"? Was the Department referring to the Guaidó government or the Maduro regime, which has spent the better part of a decade inflicting unspeakable suffering on the Venezuelan people?

Answer. A Venezuela-led process includes the democratically elected representatives of the Venezuelan people, including President Guaidó and the National Assembly, the Unitary Platform, as well as civil society and other Venezuelans committed to the return of democracy. The United States engages with Venezuelan pro-democracy partners, such as the Guaidó-led interim government and the Unitary Platform, and international allies to urge Maduro to return to the negotiation table and

support talks that help place the country on a democratic path out of the Maduro-created crises.

Question. Did the involvement of Spain in the meeting result in the readout of not including a single mention of the interim government or Venezuelan opposition?

Answer. The U.S.-led high level coordination conference, in which the coordinators of the Unitary Platform's negotiation team participated, encompassed high level representatives from 20 countries and the European Union.

This conference marked an important step in United States efforts to expand and strengthen the group of international partners that share the objective of helping Venezuelans transition their nation away from its current regime-created crises towards a stable, prosperous, and democratic future.

Partners left the conference more united and committed to supporting the negotiations and presenting a united front to the regime to drive Maduro back to the table. All also strongly supported the essential role of the opposition and other democratic actors in Venezuela's efforts to return to democracy.

Question. The U.S. Government's unwillingness to support a comprehensive general capital increase for the Inter-American Development Bank (IDB) in 2010 and for its private sector arm in 2015 opened the doors to China to increase its involvement in the IDB and, as a result, in the whole region. The Summit of the Americas is a great opportunity for the U.S. to highlight its support for the region through a comprehensive approach for the IDB, as Senators of this committee have championed in a bipartisan fashion.

Are you planning to take advantage of this opportunity to support an IDB general capital increase this year, or will the United States continue to lose opportunities to China?

Answer. U.S. support for the IDB remains strong, and the Biden-Harris administration engages actively with IDB management as it works to complete an in-depth report of financial conditions, the bank's use of resources and how that relates to the region's challenges, and the IDB's role within the hemisphere's larger financing and policy landscape. Following the release of this report, mandated by IDB Governors at the IDB Group's March 2021 annual meeting in Barranquilla, Colombia, the Department of State will review the report in collaboration with the Department of the Treasury and other U.S. Government agencies to ensure efficient use of IDB resources to support the region as it emerges from the multiple crises it faces. Discussions on the IDB's resources should take into account the views of all shareholders and we should not preempt such discussions, now in their early stages. We know that the United States must offer our hemisphere a positive vision of democratic prosperity that contrasts clearly with the promise of short-term gains offered by the People's Republic of China, but only in return for political favors, an approach that often exacerbates corruption and other underlying problems. We recognize that the IDB must play a central part in our efforts to do so.

RESPONSES OF MR. TODD ROBINSON TO QUESTIONS
SUBMITTED BY SENATOR MARCO RUBIO

Question. On November 30, the Biden administration delisted the FARC from its list of foreign terrorist organizations (FTOs) while adding two FARC dissident groups to the list. The last time you and Secretary Nichols appeared before this committee, I questioned this move. Especially because the timing of this decision seemed to revolve more around announcing this on the anniversary of the peace accords and not because of developments on the ground in Colombia. In January, we saw intense violence erupt along Colombia's border with Venezuela tied to the drug trade that supports these armed groups.

In your view, do you believe this [FARC delisting] was the right decision taken by the Biden administration?

Answer. Under the Immigration and Nationality Act, the Department is required to review FTO designations every 5 years, and the Secretary must revoke an FTO designation if the circumstances that were the basis for an organization's designation have changed in such a manner as to warrant revocation. The FARC FTO designation was last reviewed in 2015. Following the 2016 Peace Accord with the Colombian Government, the FARC formally dissolved and disarmed, and no longer exists as a unified organization that engages in terrorism or terrorist activity or has the capability or intent to do so. Since then, there is no reliable information indicating that the FARC has conducted attacks or otherwise engaged in terrorism or terrorist activity since the signing of the Peace Accord. New terrorist groups have

emerged since the 2016 Peace Accord. The November 30 designations are directed at those who refused to demobilize and are engaged in terrorist activity.

Question. FARC: On November 30, the Biden administration delisted the FARC from its list of foreign terrorist organizations (FTOs) while adding two FARC dissident groups to the list. The last time you and Secretary Nichols appeared before this committee, I questioned this move. Especially because the timing of this decision seemed to revolve more around announcing this on the anniversary of the peace accords and not because of developments on the ground in Colombia. In January, we saw intense violence erupt along Colombia's border with Venezuela tied to the drug trade that supports these armed groups.

Did the Administration consider the impact of the FARC de-listing on Colombia as it prepares for upcoming elections?

Answer. The Immigration and Nationality Act (INA), requires that the Department review Foreign Terrorist Organization (FTO) designations every 5 years and the Secretary must revoke an FTO designation if the circumstances that formed the basis for an organization's designation have changed in such a manner as to warrant revocation. Following the 2016 Peace Accord with the Colombian Government, the FARC formally dissolved and disarmed, and no longer existed as a unified organization that engaged in terrorism or terrorist activity or had the capability or intent to do so. Consistent with the INA, in 2020, the U.S. Government began its periodic 5-year review of the FARC's presence on the FTO list and determined there was no credible information indicating that the FARC conducted attacks or otherwise engaged in terrorism or terrorist activity since the signing of the Peace Accord.

Question. Which U.S.-supported commitments, if any, will be affected by the delisting changes, and how?

Answer. The decision to delist the FARC allows USAID and other elements of the U.S. Embassy in Bogotá to work with the Colombian Government on Peace Accord implementation, now, without risking the violation of U.S. law, in areas of the country in which demobilized members of the former FARC are also located. The victims of Colombia's decades-long conflict remain the focus of our work. This step aligns U.S. policy with the Colombian Government's policies and programs.

Question. Are members of the FARC (even if they adhere to the peace process) currently allowed to enter the U.S. or receive funding from any U.S. agency?

Answer. Even when the FTO designation is revoked, those who had active ties to the FARC when it was a designated FTO, including those who provided material support to the group, may continue to be inadmissible on terrorism-related grounds under the Immigration and Nationality Act (INA).

Question. One of the U.S.' largest programs to assist law enforcement is in providing assistance to Colombia's law enforcement agencies so that they have the capacity to investigate and eliminate drug trafficking rings that cause untold damage to both Colombians and Americans. During last year's protests in Colombia, many voices here criticized these agencies' role in removing roadblocks that blocked Colombians' access to food and medicine. Some critics even accused the government of supporting human rights abuses. Unlike many of the repressive autocratic regimes in the hemisphere, the Colombian Government responded to these criticisms and the Colombian Congress passed the Police Disciplinary Statute in December and then also passed the Police Career Statute in January. Both of these laws create new institutions and rules to ensure the employees of Colombian National Police respect human rights and are punished for human rights violations.

In your view, do these two laws represent tangible steps in modernizing and improving the Colombian police force?

Answer. Both laws are tangible steps in Colombia's police modernization, reform, and transformation plan. INL has assisted, and will continue to assist, the Colombian Government in implementing these new laws and other relevant police reform plans. On February 8, the Department announced it would provide \$8 million to help Colombia: incorporate human rights principles into police education and practices; require officers to complete human rights and use-of-force programs; develop a human rights plan with inputs from civil society; strengthen the capacity of the new Human Rights Commissioner's Office; accelerate police Office of the Inspector General investigation processes; and carry out procedural justice and relational policing training.

Question. Is it advisable to require a human rights certification before providing counternarcotics assistance to Colombia?

Answer. The Department is concerned increased conditionality could delay INL's ability to deliver assistance to address security and human rights priorities in Colombia, which are key to U.S. national security interests. An additional human rights certification requirement could also send the wrong message and undermine the efforts of our Colombian partners, who are diligently working with the United States to improve their human rights practices. INL remains committed to robust Leahy vetting and prioritizing human rights across our programming and believes flexibility is needed to ensure programs can be adapted to changing conditions on the ground.

Question. If funding is withheld from Colombia, could this lead to an increase in the supply of cocaine flowing into Colombian and American communities?

Answer. Yes, absent a certification, withholding INCLE funding from Colombia could lead to an increase in the supply of cocaine flowing into American communities. In 2021, INCLE assistance helped Colombia eradicate over 255,000 acres of coca and interdict more than 757 metric tons of cocaine and cocaine base. Withholding funding could contribute to increased instability and criminality within Colombia by limiting the Colombian police's ability to eradicate coca and interdict cocaine bound for the United States.

Question. What steps will the Department take to ensure that Colombia is adequately supported to crack down on drug trafficking rings?

Answer. The Department is working closely with the Colombian Government to dismantle narco trafficking rings. For example, in 2021, Colombia made huge strides towards dismantling the Clan del Golfo, Colombia's largest narco trafficking group. Working through the INL-funded programs implemented by the Department of Justice, INL mentors, trains, and advises the prosecutors managing investigations and prosecutions to dismantle these trafficking rings.

RESPONSES OF MR. BRIAN NICHOLS TO QUESTIONS
SUBMITTED BY SENATOR JOHN BARRASSO

CHINA IN COLOMBIA

As part of its Belt and Road Initiative, China offers countries the ability to borrow a lot of money for infrastructure projects. The problem is that these countries are accumulating an indebtedness to China that they often are unable to pay back. As financially strapped countries negotiate with China to escape the massive debt, China is demanding serious concessions, like equity in strategically important assets. Chinese companies have been playing a major role in Colombian infrastructure projects. Chinese investments include the Bogotá metro, the Bogotá regional railway, Colombian 4G and 5G infrastructure projects, and a major new gold mine in Antioquia.

Question. What efforts is the United States taking to counter Chinese influence in Colombia?

Answer. Colombia remains one of our most vital partners in the region, with the United States as Colombia's largest trade and investment partner. We stand committed to Colombia's sustainable recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic, including through the U.S. donation of 6 million vaccines—our second highest donation in the region. We support Colombia in developing the structures and processes to ensure foreign investment, including in its development of a 5G network, does not harm its national security. We work with allies and partners to offer alternatives to problematic PRC investment in critical infrastructure and other sensitive sectors.

Question. How effective has China's debt diplomacy been in achieving its political, economic and strategic goals in Latin America?

Answer. Countries in the region increasingly feel the impact of problematic PRC influence and coercive actions. As we discuss with partners, PRC projects often reflect inadequate labor and environmental standards, which undermine workers' rights under domestic law and fall short of international labor standards. Countries also have concerns about the importation of PRC labor and equipment to complete projects; a general lack of transparency and a disregard for the rule of law; opaque and often unsustainable loan terms; and impact on corruption. This knowledge helps local populations discern the sources of disinformation and PRC attempts to gain access to critical infrastructure and sensitive sectors. We continue to raise problematic PRC influence with partners and recommend alternatives to partners such as

investing in people-to-people relationships, including programs in education, entrepreneurship, English language, and professional exchanges.

FARC

On December 1, 2021, the Biden administration delisted the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Columbia (FARC) from the State Department's Foreign Terrorist Organization list. Following a 2016 Peace Accord with the Colombian Government, the FARC formally dissolved and disarmed. There are still former FARC leaders designated as a Specially Designated Global Terrorist (SDGT).

Question. What are the current terrorist organizations in Colombia?

Answer. Designated terrorist organizations operating in Colombia include Segunda Marquetalia, the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia—People's Army (FARC-EP), and the National Liberation Army (ELN). Hizballah supporters and members also exist in Colombia.

Question. Was the Colombian Government in favor or against the delisting of FARC?

Answer. The Department engaged the Government of Colombia when gathering facts as we conducted the legally mandated 5-year review of the FARC's designation. During the Counterterrorism Ministerial in January 2020, Colombia took steps to impose sanctions on those on Treasury's List of Specially Designated Nationals and Blocked Persons, but specifically excluded the FARC from its own list. That same month, Colombia officially requested the United States designate "FARC dissidents" as FTOs. We pre-notified the Colombian Government in advance of the public announcement.

Question. What were the reactions and results of the U.S. delisting the FARC?

Answer. The revocation, consistent with U.S. law, aligned U.S. Government policy with the Colombian Government's own decision to delist the expired organization as part of the 2016 Peace Accord. The Colombian Constitution incorporates elements of that accord. The revocation also supports the Colombian Government's policies and programs to sustain the vast demobilization of former FARC combatants and helps prevent the 11,000 former FARC combatants committed to the peace process from returning to criminality. The FTO revocation does not remove the visa inadmissibility grounds to which specific former FARC leaders were and remain subject under the Immigration and Nationality Act. We remain committed to robust security partnership with the Colombian Government as it works to counter the ELN, Segunda Marquetalia, and FARC-EP, as well as other terrorist groups. These designation actions allow us to target more precisely and dismantle the active terrorist groups that represent clear and present dangers to Colombian and U.S. interests.

Question. With the delisting of the FARC, does the Department of State plan to change its funding in Colombia with regard to the demobilized FARC soldiers? If so, how?

Answer. The decision to delist the FARC would allow USAID and other elements of the U.S. Embassy in Bogotá to work with the Colombian Government on Peace Accord implementation without the risk of violating U.S. law, in areas of the country in which demobilized members of the former FARC are also located. The victims of Colombia's decades-long conflict remain the focus of our work. This step aligns U.S. policy with the Colombian Government's policies and programs.

Question. How many FARC members demobilized and disarmed as part of the 2016 peace deal?

Answer. Roughly 13,000 FARC ex-combatants have demobilized and participated in the reintegration process based on the 2016 Peace Accord.

Question. How many FARC fighters have refused to demobilize or rearmed?

Answer. The designations of FARC-EP and Segunda Marquetalia are directed at those who refused to demobilize or have rearmed and those who are engaged in terrorism or terrorist activity. Segunda Marquetalia is estimated to have 750 to 1,500 members, and FARC-EP is estimated to have 2,700 to 3,000 members.

RESPONSES OF MR. TODD ROBINSON TO QUESTIONS
SUBMITTED BY SENATOR JOHN BARRASSO

LAW ENFORCEMENT AND CRIME

Over the years, the United States has provided U.S. assistance to help improve, professionalize and expand the Colombian security forces. In February, the U.S. announced \$8 million in U.S. assistance going to the national police force of Colombia. The funds seek to promote within the institution, “accountability of those who violate human rights, investigate abuses, as well as the prosecution of corruption.”

Question. What specific types of U.S. training and police assistance will be provided under the recent announcement?

Answer. The Department’s newly announced programming, funded and implemented by the Bureau of International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs, includes efforts to help Colombia to: incorporate human rights principles into police education and practices; require officers to complete human rights and use-of-force programs; develop a human rights plan with inputs from civil society; strengthen the capacity of the police’s new Human Rights Commissioner’s Office; and carry out procedural justice and relational policing training.

Question. What is the status of last year’s announcement by the Colombian Government to implement a comprehensive transformation of the police?

Answer. President Duque signed two laws to reform the police. In January 2022, he approved a law that includes additional sanctions for police who violate human rights; improves Office of Inspector General (OIG) investigations; establishes a position to investigate alleged human rights violations linked to social protests; requires the police to report annually the status of investigations; increases transparency; and mandates specialized training for OIG personnel and disciplinary judges. In December 2021, Duque enacted a law mandating human rights be a focus in police training and implemented recruitment and retention mechanisms. Both laws are part of a larger reform effort announced in 2021, which INL supports programmatically.

Question. Colombia has played a critical role in the global fight against drug trafficking, money laundering, and organized crime. What is your assessment of the Colombian police’s institutional capacity to counter narcotrafficking, money laundering and organized crime?

Answer. With INL’s assistance, the Colombian police have increased their capacity to counter narcotrafficking, money laundering, and organized crime; however, much work remains. Our new bilateral strategy will further strengthen Colombia’s capacity through holistic and better sequenced assistance. In addition, Colombia exports its expertise on anti-money laundering to other countries in the region through the U.S.-Colombia Action Plan on Regional Security Cooperation, which trains police forces on a range of issues including anti-money laundering.

Question. Colombia has played a critical role in the global fight against drug trafficking, money laundering, and organized crime. What are the biggest challenges to disrupting the production and trafficking of cocaine in Colombia?

Answer. Two major challenges to disrupting the production and trafficking of cocaine in Colombia are insecurity and impunity in neighboring Venezuela and a lack of consistent governmental presence in rural areas of Colombia. The Department is working to address both through its diplomatic and foreign assistance tools.

RESPONSES OF MR. BRIAN NICHOLS TO QUESTIONS
SUBMITTED BY SENATOR TED CRUZ

COLOMBIA / FARC GENERAL

Question. On Nov. 30, the Department of State announced that it was revoking the designations of the Revolutionary Forces of Colombia (FARC) as a Foreign Terrorist Organization (FTO) under the Immigration and Nationality Act (INA), and as a Specially Designated Global Terrorist (SDGT) pursuant to Executive order (EO) 13224. Among the reasons publicly cited for these moves, Administration officials suggested that the delistings would facilitate providing certain types of U.S. assistance to FARC for reintegration into Colombian society.

Have you distributed any such aid and if so, what checks were in place to ensure the funding was not used for terrorism? Did you consult with Congress before doing so?

Answer. We have distributed no such aid. The revocation of the FARC designation supports the Colombian Government's policies and programs to sustain the vast demobilization of former FARC combatants.

Question. Do you believe that the decision to delist the FARC has stabilized the climate in Colombia? And if so, please describe in what ways that you believe it has.

Answer. The delisting lays the groundwork for the Colombian Government to promote greater stability, particularly in rural areas. The revocation aligns with the Colombian Government's own decision to delist the expired organization as part of the 2016 Peace Accord. Colombia's Constitution now incorporates elements of that accord. The revocation also supports the Colombian Government's policies and programs to sustain the vast demobilization of former FARC combatants and prevent the 11,000 former FARC combatants committed to the peace process from returning to criminality.

Question. Alongside removing the FTO and SDGT designations on the FARC, the Administration also announced that it was delisting hundreds of entities originally sanctioned for links to the FARC. Among those entities were five individuals who on January 11 were summoned by Colombia's Special Jurisdiction for Peace (SJP) for their roles in the forced recruitment of children for the conflict and for child trafficking.

Did the State Department consult with the Colombians about these individuals before removing sanctions on them?

Answer. No individuals were delisted from CT authorities as a result of the State Department's revocation of the FARC's FTO and SDGT designations. We defer to Treasury regarding any individuals that were delisted as a result of changes to the FARC's designation under Treasury authorities.

Question. Was the State Dept. aware of the work and impending decision of the SJP when the decision to lift terrorism sanctions was made?

Answer. Revocation of the FARC's FTO designation does not impact prior law enforcement actions related to the FARC's past terrorist activities, or FARC's treatment as a terrorist organization for immigration purposes during the period in which it was engaged in terrorist activity, or if it resumed engaging in terrorist activity. The lifting of terrorism sanctions against members of the FARC does not impact the ongoing work of the SJP or efforts to hold members of the FARC accountable for atrocities and abuses under the law.

Question. The current climate faced by politicians and journalists in Mexico is the deadliest ever. In 2020 more journalists were killed in Mexico than in any other country in the world. It alone accounted for almost a third of journalists killed around the world. Since the start of the electoral process in September 2020, over 80 politicians (including at least 48 candidates for office) were assassinated by criminal organizations and more than 60 candidates suspended their campaigns under duress. Things are if anything getting worse. In January, three journalists were shot dead within 10 days.

Mexican President Lopez Obrador has recently taken several steps aimed at intimidating journalists. In February, he publicly revealed the financial information of one of Mexico's highest profile journalists, Carlos Loret de Mola, in an attempt to intimidate him. These actions come amid an increasingly deadly climate for politicians and journalists in Mexico, including the murder of three journalists in January.

What steps are we taking to convey to the Mexican Government that their behavior is undermining the rule of law, and that in turn is endangering American security and the U.S.-Mexican relationship?

Answer. The Department of State prioritizes cooperation with Mexico to increase transparency and accountability for the murder of journalists and politicians and will continue to urge at the highest levels increased action to respect human rights and ensure necessary protections for public figures. Under the newly established U.S.-Mexico Bicentennial Framework for Security, Public Health, and Safe Communities, Mexico and the United States pledged to broadly work together to protect our people, prevent transborder crime, and pursue criminal networks. The Mexican Government places a priority on the investigation of violence against journalists, civil society members and politicians, which we seek to support.

RESPONSES OF MR. TODD ROBINSON TO QUESTIONS
SUBMITTED BY SENATOR TED CRUZ

Question. In 2019, FBI Deputy Assistant Director Thompson testified in front of the Western Hemisphere subcommittee of this Committee that “The last decade has seen a boom in illicit mining operations in the Western Hemisphere” and that large amounts of illegally mined gold are used by criminal organization and—quote—“especially those involved in drug-trafficking” to move vast sums of money.

What steps is INL taking to deter the illicit mining of gold and ensure U.S. assistance is being used in an effective manner to counter these operations?

Answer. INL funds the Organization of American States to strengthen systems to combat illegal mining financial structures in South America. Through training financial intelligence units, customs and immigration authorities, and agencies responsible for seizing and confiscating assets, we have enhanced regional understanding of money laundering methodologies using illicit gold and worked with these countries to increase their oversight of these illicit operation.

In Colombia, INL provides equipment and logistical support to anti-illegal mining units within the army and police. INL, through the U.S. Departments of Justice and Homeland Security, also mentors and trains prosecutors and investigators on illegal mining financing.

RESPONSES OF MS. MARCELA ESCOBARI TO QUESTIONS
SUBMITTED BY SENATOR TED CRUZ

Question. USAID has a range of equities, responsibilities, and projects aimed at promoting health development in Latin American and Caribbean (LAC), including: (1) near-term pandemic response and recovery, (2) long-term regional health security and health systems resilience, and (3) addressing the secondary economic impacts of health crises. Meanwhile the issue of vaccines and so-called ‘vaccine diplomacy’ has become an increasingly acute one in the context of development assistance. USAID will require flexibility for post-pandemic health systems strengthening.

Congress has an essential role to play as a partner in crafting strategies, and in authorizing and appropriating funding. Please describe:

- Additional authorities or resources USAID requires to meet demands for COVID–19 testing, surveillance, diagnostics, and treatments in LAC countries.
- A description of current and future efforts to address remaining gaps in providing adequate COVID–19 vaccine supply for all eligible populations in LAC countries.
- Additional challenges that USAID faces in promoting ‘vaccine diplomacy’ in LAC countries.

Answer. Throughout the pandemic, USAID has been able to quickly allocate and program funding to continue to strengthen and promote resilience in LAC health systems to respond to new COVID–19 variants and expand access to health services. USAID has rapidly obligated COVID–19 supplemental resources generously provided by Congress to the agency to support health and humanitarian responses related to the pandemic to 29 countries in LAC. USAID expects to fully obligate virtually all the funds Congress provided through supplemental and emergency appropriations, including the American Rescue Plan Act, over the next several months. Going forward USAID must also consider the continued need for resources to strengthen health systems (including a reliable, adequate oxygen supply) to address new COVID–19 variant surges; and to incorporate training and commodities needed to implement “test and treat” strategies that can reduce hospitalization and death in people with COVID–19 and risk factors for severe disease.

To date, the United States has provided approximately 60 million COVID–19 doses to the Latin American and Caribbean (LAC) region with more on the way. This is more doses donated than any other country in the world. In addition to the President’s commitment to turn the United States into the world’s arsenal for vaccines, USAID is committed to the whole-of-government effort through the Initiative for Global Vaccine Access (Global VAX) to accelerate global efforts to get COVID–19 shots into arms and rapidly overcome access barriers to save lives now. Under the auspices of Global VAX, USAID has supported efforts in LAC countries to prepare countries to receive, distribute, and administer COVID–19 vaccines. USAID is helping countries implement national vaccination plans, including by supporting health ministries with distribution plans, training vaccinators, establishing vaccination sites, cold chain management, communication strategies, and data strengthening.

For example, the United States has donated 6 million vaccines to Colombia, with USAID supporting the Ministry of Health (MOH) and subnational authorities to improve planning, monitoring, demand generation, and supply chain capacity, including providing cold chain equipment, to effectively distribute COVID-19 vaccines and the overall rollout of the National Vaccination Plan. USAID supports the implementation of Colombia's National Vaccination Plan in 19 Departments (Districts), also with a focus on low income, marginalized, and uninsured populations.

We have donated more COVID-19 vaccines than any other country, and each vaccine is free with no strings attached. USAID, beginning with Administrator Power and extending to USAID field missions at Embassies throughout the region, has aggressively messaged these donations and complementary technical assistance to ensure that citizens in partner nations are aware of generous United States support. USAID closely coordinates this messaging with the State Department and is committed to continuing these forceful communications campaigns to ensure robust vaccine diplomacy.

