

COLOMBIA'S DESCENT TO SOCIALISM: ASSESSING GUSTAVO PETRO'S PRESIDENCY

HEARING BEFORE THE SUBCOMMITTEE ON WESTERN HEMISPHERE OF THE COMMITTEE ON FOREIGN AFFAIRS HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES ONE HUNDRED EIGHTEENTH CONGRESS FIRST SESSION

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COLOMBIA'S DESCENT TO SOCIALISM: ASSESSING GUSTAVO PETRO'S PRESIDENCY

Thursday, July 27, 2023

HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES,
SUBCOMMITTEE ON THE WESTERN HEMISPHERE,
COMMITTEE ON FOREIGN AFFAIRS,
Washington, DC.

The subcommittee met, pursuant to notice, at 2:20 p.m., in room 210, House Visitor Center, Hon. Maria Elvira Salazar (chair of the subcommittee) presiding.

Ms. SALAZAR. The Subcommittee on the Western Hemisphere will come to order.

The purpose of this hearing is to examine the current Administration in Colombia and the impacts of its policies on the bilateral relationship.

Now I recognize myself for an opening statement, and thank you to the witnesses for being here and taking time to present your statements.

Socialism is the creed of evil and has descended on Colombia, one of the crown jewels of Latin America. The White House should fear this corrupt ideology spreading into our hemisphere and protect Latin America's oldest democracy, Colombia.

It's our duty as Americans to rescue other countries from this nefarious path. But instead, unfortunately, the president of the country, Presidente Gustavo Petro, got a congratulatory call from President Biden 36 hours into his presidency, an honor that Ecuador's conservative president, Guillermo Lasso, had to wait 13 months to receive from the White House.

On top of that, President Petro was invited to come to the Oval Office, a gesture extended to very few other Latin American presidents, and is still receiving abundant political favors. For example, the United States at this hour is not going to be monitoring Colombian coca crops anymore.

I'm going to repeat it. The United States is not going to be monitoring Colombian coca crops anymore. For me, that's outrageous. The coca harvest has already grown to over 300,000 hectares, up from 200,000 a few years ago.

At this hour Colombia is the source of 97 percent of cocaine in the United States and its production capacity has now passed 1,000 metric tons. On top of that, President Petro has adopted a laissez-faire approach in the war against this lethal drug inside Colombia.

He is hoping that Colombia farmers will destroy their crops voluntarily, reinstating a policy that failed 5 years ago. Petro himself used the world stage of the United Nations to argue that oil is more dangerous than cocaine. Maybe that's why he is hitting the Colombian oil industry harder than he is hitting the drug cartels.

But, unfortunately, the United States is applauding his behavior because when Secretary of State Blinken met with President Petro he said he strongly supports the approach Petro is taking to counter narcotics.

My understanding was that the United States is in the business of fighting drug trafficking nor abiding it. Once again at this hour Colombia is sinking into the dark days of the 1980's when it was infamous for drugs and violence to the chagrin of respectable Colombians, many of them living in my district, Florida 27.

On the political front, President Petro displayed his poor judgment in Belgium when he said that he did not see a difference between siding with the United States or siding with Russia. Between the United States or Russia.

Well, I do not think there is any doubt that Russia at this hour is a global pariah whose brutal war against Ukraine has killed hundreds of thousands of people and has caused levels of destruction not seen in Europe since the Nazis. Closer to home Petro has embraced one of Russia's most important allies in the Western Hemisphere, Venezuela.

When Petro—President Petro reopened their shared border dictator Nicolas Maduro and thief in chief Freddy Bernal were there to greet him. You may know Maduro but if you do not remember who Bernal is he was a close confidant to Hugo Chavez and the leader of the repressive apparatus against the Venezuelans. On top of that, Bernal is on the United States black list.

Now, let's go to the environment. President Biden is aligned with Petro on a very dirty climate agenda and the question is where are the environmentalists. United States and Colombia produce some of the world's cleanest energy but both countries have halted their domestic production.

We in the United States are buying oil from Venezuela whose refineries break all environmental regulations, resulting in the dirtiest oil produced on Earth, and I have not heard one single Biden official or supporter protesting this pro-pollution policy.

On the crime front, President Petro is negotiating with the two largest drug traffickers in Colombia. First, Clan del Golfo. Presence in 28 countries, has 4,000 members. They traffic 200 tons of cocaine a year and they're the number-one trafficker of men, women, and children through the jungles of Central America to the American border.

No. 2, he's negotiating with a group called ELN, the Marxist guerrilla National Liberation Army. Five days ago the ELN sprayed

[speaks in Spanish] Death to Maria Corina all over her offices in Venezuela. If you do not know who Maria Corina is, Maria Corina Machado is the top Presidential candidate against Maduro and the best hope for democracy in Venezuela.

So when looking at Colombia a major course of correction is needed. Over the last 30 years Colombia has made incredible progress. The scourge of Pablo Escobar was removed. Plan Colombia, with our help, triumphed.

Alvaro Uribe defeated the guerrillas and brought security back to the Colombians. A new era of prosperity, democracy, security swept over this critical country. But now it looks like that will be

all erased and there's one man to blame, Presidente Gustavo Francisco Petro Urrego.

For the sake of my Colombian brothers and sisters, this must not happen and we, the United States and the U.S. Congress, should help the good people of Colombia.

So I just want to say a few words for those who may be watching in Colombia.

[Speaks in Spanish.]

Ms. SALAZAR. I yield back. The chair now recognizes the ranking member, the gentleman from Texas, Mr. Castro, for his opening statements.

Mr. CASTRO. Thank you, Chairwoman, and good afternoon to everybody. Thank you to our witnesses for your testimony and for being here today. I want to specifically thank Mr. Wells and Mr. Natiello for joining us. It's good to see you both again.

I appreciate the opportunity to hear from our distinguished witnesses and to discuss the challenges and opportunities facing our two countries.

I deeply value the relationship between the United States and Colombia and between the people of our two nations. For years our deep ties with Colombia have enjoyed strong bipartisan support in the U.S. Congress and I hope that we can continue that tradition in pursuit of a relationship that is based on mutual respect for democracy, human rights, economic prosperity, and regional security.

Colombia is in the midst of change. That much is undeniable. A year ago Colombia inaugurated President Gustavo Petro and Vice President Francia Marquez, Colombia's first Afro-Colombian executive, who were both elected on a platform of change and departure from the status quo.

As allies and friends of the Colombian people, the United States needs to be responsive to what the Colombian people have clearly called for through the exercise of their democratic rights. It's not the role of the United States to handpick any nation's leaders and the Colombian people have spoken.

To those who are concerned about change I would say this. The ties between the United States and Colombia run deep and I have faith in the democratic institutions of Colombia. Our relationship remains beneficial for both countries and our financial and security support is essential to address key regional issues.

I'm going to lay out a few of the priorities as I see it for U.S.-Colombia ties and I hope to hear from the witnesses on these issues.

The first is on the issue of peace and security. The Colombian people had great courage in negotiating the 2016 Peace Accords with the FARC. The agreement was a significant step forward for peace after decades of conflict but much of the agreement remains unimplemented, particularly the ethnic chapter.

I'm glad that President Petro has committed to fully implementing this agreement and the United States as Colombia's ally should support these efforts.

Yet, it's also important to recognize that Colombia still faces conflict including from the ELN and other armed groups that impedes economic inclusion and security. The Colombian government has elevated efforts to negotiate a peace agreement with the ELN. I

urge the Biden Administration to be open minded and provide technical support if requested.

The second policy priority for the U.S.-Colombia relationship is cooperation to address shared challenges with forced migration. I want to start off by commending Colombia's decision to provide temporary protected status to almost 2 million Venezuelans fleeing the economic collapse and political crisis in neighboring Venezuela.

We need to remind ourselves it is countries like Colombia and Peru, Panama, Costa Rica, Mexico, and so many others that face the immediate and most direct impacts of forced migration. After the Los Angeles declaration on migration protection recognized that migration is a hemispheric challenge.

As partners we need to support Colombia and its efforts to fully integrate those who have fled Venezuela and I'm glad that President Biden's budget request for Fiscal Year 2024 includes \$33.7 million to assist Colombia with these efforts.

Colombia is a country of 50 million people that has taken in nearly 3 million Venezuelans with open hearts. To underscore the scale of this, that would be like the United States taking in almost 20 million people, a number far beyond the half a million we have currently living in our country.

As we recognize Colombia's actions I reiterate my call for the Biden Administration to pair their welcome efforts to support countries like Venezuela with open hearts of our own. I was incredibly disappointed by the Biden Administration's failure to redesignate temporary protected status for Honduras, El Salvador, and Nicaragua, efforts that would have brought relief to those who have been in the United States for decades.

I continue to believe in the need for redesignations for these countries and for Guatemala and call on the Administration to revisit their decision.

The last thing I want to mention is the opportunities for the United States and Colombia to work together to combat climate change and promote economic—inclusive economic prosperity.

That includes collaborating on renewable energy, especially within the framework of the Inflation Reduction Act and expanding regional integration through the America's Partnership for Economic Prosperity. I had the opportunity to meet President Petro and his cabinet in May and I know that these issues are a priority for him in that they value Colombia's relationship with the United States.

With that, Chairwoman, I yield back.

Ms. SALAZAR. Thank you. Other members of the committee are reminded that opening statements may be submitted for the record and we are pleased to have a distinguished panel of witnesses from the State Department and the United States Agency for International Development, who lead on the United States effort toward Colombia, starting with Mr. Mark Wells is the deputy assistant secretary for the Bureau of Western Hemisphere Affairs at the Department of State. Welcome, sir.

And we have Mr. Peter Natiello, who is the senior deputy assistant administrator for the Bureau for Latin America and the Caribbean at the United States Agency for International Development. Thank you for being here.

Your full statements will be made part of the record and I'll ask each of you to keep your spoken remarks to 5 minutes in order to allow time for member questions.

I now recognize Mr. Wells for his opening statement.

STATEMENT OF MARK WELLS, DEPUTY ASSISTANT SECRETARY, BUREAU OF WESTERN HEMISPHERE AFFAIRS, U.S. DEPARTMENT OF STATE

Mr. WELLS. Chairwoman Salazar, Ranking Member Castro, distinguished members of the subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to discuss our current approach to Colombia, a historic ally in the region.

As one of the oldest democracies and market-driven economies in Latin America, Colombia works closely with us to advance shared priorities in trade, security, migration, democracy, and climate as well as the full implementation of Colombia's 2016 Peace Accord.

During their April 20 meeting at the White House President Biden and President Petro reaffirmed the strategic importance of the U.S.-Colombia partnership based on principles of friendship, mutual respect, cultural ties, and a shared commitment to democracy and human rights.

The United States has proudly supported security, good governance, and rule of law for many years, which has contributed to Colombia's long-standing commitment to democracy.

Our investments have paid dividends over the course of our partnership, enabling close cooperation under successive Colombian governments with differing political perspectives. The U.S. and Colombian people enjoy the benefits of a successful economic relationship built on the solid foundation of the U.S.-Colombia trade promotion agreement.

Since the agreement took effect U.S. trade with Colombia is near an all-time high. We engage closely with the Colombian government in the context of the agreement to improve labor and environmental standards.

The United States has been the strongest and most consistent contributor to the implementation of the 2016 Peace Accord, providing more than \$1.5 billion in assistance since 2017.

We work closely with civil society, the private sector, and the Colombian government to prioritize the advancement of and equity of women, girls, Afro-Colombians, and indigenous people, all of whom have been disproportionately victimized by the conflict.

The United States and Colombia coordinate closely to address irregular migration, to promote safe and humane migration management, and to support long-term migrant socioeconomic integration in Colombia.

In April, President Biden and President Petro underscored our joint commitment to counter human smuggling in the Darien region on Colombia's border with Panama. Colombia hosts some 2.5 million Venezuelans, the largest number of displaced Venezuelans in the region.

In 2022, the United States programmed \$104 million to Venezuelan migrants in Colombia. President Biden and President Petro committed to a comprehensive counter narcotics approach

that includes interdiction, anti-money laundering, and rural economic development.

We commend Colombia's efforts to expand land titling, which allows individuals in rural communities to own their own land, and pursue economic alternatives to illegal drug cultivation.

At the same time, we remain concerned about record levels of coca and cocaine production as well as alarming trends in homicide and violence that serve to undermine democracy.

We are expanding and intensifying bilateral cooperation in intelligence and interdiction to dismantle transnational criminal networks and to counter illicit activities that displace rural communities.

Investing in Colombian institutions that fight corruption and improve security and justice like the attorney general's office, the court system, the Peace Accord transitional justice mechanisms, and the national police force is a strategic priority that will protect both our peoples' health, safety, the environment, the economy, and rule of law.

As the second most biodiverse country in the world Colombia plays a vital role in addressing the climate crisis. The United States supports programs that advance environmental protection by countering the drivers of deforestation, supporting conservation of the Amazon, and promoting climate smart agricultural practices.

In addition to our bilateral work, the United States and other democratic nations have a responsibility to stand up for democratic principles and protect the rules-based international order.

Colombia and the United States share a vision for a peaceful return to democracy in Venezuela and work closely to strengthen inter-American institutions.

In conclusion, the Biden-Harris Administration is committed to ensuring that the U.S.-Colombia relationship remains strong and productive for the benefit of U.S. citizens, the Colombian people, hemispheric stability, and the wider world.

We have overcome many historic challenges together and we are confident that our partnership will continue to thrive for many generations to come.

Once again, thank you for the opportunity to appear before you today. I welcome your questions.

[The prepared statement of Mr. Wells follows:]

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**Statement of Mark Wells, Deputy Assistant Secretary of State
for the Bureau of Western Hemisphere Affairs, Before the
House Foreign Affairs Sub-Committee for the Western
Hemisphere: Colombia**

Thursday, July 27, 2023, 2:00PM, 5 minutes

Chairwoman Salazar, Ranking Member Castro, distinguished members of the sub-committee, thank you for the opportunity to discuss our current approach to Colombia, a historic U.S. ally in the region. As one of the oldest democracies and market-driven economies in Latin America, Colombia works closely with us to advance shared priorities in trade, security, migration, democracy, and climate, as well as the full implementation of Colombia's 2016 Peace Accord.

During their April 20 meeting at the White House, President Biden and President Petro reaffirmed the strategic importance of the U.S.-Colombia partnership based on principles of

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friendship, mutual respect, cultural ties, and a shared commitment to democracy and human rights. The United States has proudly supported security, good governance, and rule of law for many years, which has contributed to Colombia's longstanding commitment to democracy. Our investments have paid dividends over the course of our partnership, enabling close cooperation under successive Colombian governments with differing political perspectives.

The U.S. and Colombian people enjoy the benefits of a successful economic relationship, built on the solid foundation of the U.S.-Colombia Trade Promotion Agreement. Since the agreement took effect, U.S. trade with Colombia is near an all-time high. We engage closely with the Colombian government in the context of the agreement to improve labor and environmental standards.

The United States has been the strongest and most consistent contributor to the implementation of the 2016 Peace Accord, providing more than \$1.5 billion in assistance since 2017. We work closely with civil society, the private sector, and the Colombian government to prioritize the advancement and equity of women, girls, Afro-Colombians, and indigenous people, who have been disproportionately victimized by the conflict.

The United States and Colombia coordinate closely to address irregular migration, to promote safe and humane migration management, and long-term migrant socio-economic integration in Colombia. In April, President Biden and President Petro underscored our joint commitment to counter human smuggling in the Darién region. Colombia hosts more than 2.5 million Venezuelans, the largest number of displaced

Venezuelans in the region. In 2022, the United States programmed \$104 million to Venezuelan migrants in Colombia.

President Biden and President Petro committed to a comprehensive counternarcotics approach that includes interdiction, anti-money laundering, and rural economic development. We commend Colombia's efforts to expand land titling, which allows individuals in rural communities to own their own land and pursue economic alternatives to illegal drug cultivation. At the same time, we remain concerned about record levels of coca and cocaine production as well as alarming trends in homicides and violence that serve to undermine democracy. We are expanding and intensifying bilateral cooperation in intelligence and interdiction to dismantle transnational criminal networks and counter illicit activities that displace rural communities. Investing in

Colombian institutions that fight corruption and improve security and justice – like the Attorney General’s Office, the court system, Peace Accord transitional justice mechanisms, and the national police force – is a strategic priority that will protect both our peoples’ health, safety, the environment, the economy, and rule of law.

As the second most biodiverse country in the world, Colombia plays a vital role in addressing the climate crisis. The United States supports programs that advance environmental protection by countering the drivers of deforestation, supporting conservation of the Amazon, and promoting climate-smart agriculture practices.

In addition to our bilateral work, the United States and other democratic nations have a responsibility to stand up for

democratic principles and protect the rules-based international order. Colombia and the United States share a vision for a peaceful return to democracy in Venezuela and work closely to strengthen Inter-American institutions.

In conclusion, the Biden-Harris Administration is committed to ensuring that U.S.-Colombia relations remain strong and productive, for the benefit of U.S. citizens, the Colombian people, hemispheric stability, and the world. We have overcome many historic challenges together, and we are confident that our partnership will continue to thrive for many generations to come.

Once again, thank you for the opportunity to appear before you today. I welcome your questions.

Ms. SALAZAR. Thank you, Mr. Wells.
And I recognize Mr. Natiello for his opening statement.

STATEMENT OF PETER NATIELLO, SENIOR DEPUTY ASSISTANT ADMINISTRATOR, BUREAU FOR LATIN AMERICA AND THE CARIBBEAN, U.S. AGENCY FOR INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Mr. NATIELLO. Chairwoman Salazar, Ranking Member Castro, and distinguished members of the subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to testify today on USAID's long-standing partnership with Colombia.

USAID's work in Colombia spans several decades, five U.S. Administrations and five Colombian presidencies. We partner with a broad range of Colombian stakeholders, democratically elected government certainly, Colombia's independent control organizations, its vibrant private sector, its active civil society, and marginalized communities.

USAID supports Colombia's own efforts to invest in its historically marginalized and violence prone territories in the following ways: first, to strengthen State presence in those territories; second, to advance sustainable licit economic development in those regions; and third, to create a culture of citizen rights and responsibilities associated with democratic governance.

We support implementation of the 2016 Peace Accord because it creates the conditions to achieve those objectives. USAID has been a long-standing partner in bringing greater State presence to Colombia's conflict prone regions home to illicit economic activities including narco trafficking, land grabbing, illegal mining, and illegal logging.

With the U.S. Interagency we've supported successive Colombian governments to increase public investment in these regions, helping to improve schools, roads, health care, justice services, and protection of social leaders.

The Peace Accord strengthens the conditions for developing the agricultural bounty of the Colombian countryside while conserving Colombia's rich biodiversity and expansive tropical forests.

USAID's long-term commitment to these regions has enabled thousands of farmers to abandon coca production in favor of licit agricultural products like the country's renowned specialty coffees which Colombians are so rightfully proud of, and cacao, an important and growing sector thanks in part to USAID's long-term commitment to that sector.

The private sector has been a key partner in these efforts. USAID has accomplished pioneering climate change mitigation and adaptation work with Colombia.

Our work has helped generate \$27 million to date in carbon credit sales for Afro-Colombian and indigenous communities along the impoverished and isolated Pacific coasts.

USAID has been at Colombia's side for many years to ensure that conflict victims can be afforded the truth, justice, restitution, and commitments of non-repetition enshrined in the 2016 Peace Accord.

With the Truth Commission USAID has worked to compile and publicize testimonies that have helped tens of thousands of victims

understand what happened to them and to their loved ones. With that truth they can begin the long and arduous healing process.

Additionally, we've helped the victims organizations to bring cases before the Special Jurisdiction for Peace, the Transitional Justice Court charged with holding all parties to the conflict accountable.

Advancing the full social and economic inclusion of Afro-Colombian and Indigenous Peoples is key to a stable and lasting peace and a steady focus of the United States' work in Colombia.

USAID advocated for the participation of these groups and other historically marginalized Colombians in the peace process and advocated for inclusion of the Chapter on Ethnic Perspectives in the Peace Accord.

I note Representative Meeks' presence here today and thank him for spearheading so many efforts on that front.

We recognize that despite the signing of the Accord and the important advances in human rights over the past decade, attacks against Colombia's human rights and environmental defenders have risen in the years since the Accord's signing in 2016.

For this reason USAID continues working with Colombian partners to protect human rights leaders and environmental defenders, prevent violent attacks against them, and reduce impunity for these crimes. More must be done to address this violence and we're committed to ensuring it remains a top priority of our foreign assistance.

In addition to the challenges of building peace in the country's marginalized regions, Colombia and the broader region are confronted with unprecedented migration challenges.

Colombia is creating a model for effective migrant integration that holds lessons for this hemisphere and beyond.

USAID has partnered with the government of Colombia as it implements generous Temporary Protective Status and regularization policies, which help Venezuelans fleeing the disastrous Maduro regime, and helping integrate Venezuelans into Colombian society deters them from having to make the dangerous journey through the Darien Gap.

With the generous support from Congress USAID continues to assist Colombia in its efforts to register Venezuelan migrants and help them to integrate into Colombian communities.

After more than five decades of war Colombia has taken important steps toward lasting peace, security, stability, and prosperity. The Colombian people still have much work to do and USAID is committed to accompanying them in pursuit of our common interests.

And we're grateful for Congress' unwavering bipartisan support for the U.S.-Colombia relationship over the past two decades, which has made USAID's work to build an enduring partnership with the people of Colombia possible.

I look forward to your questions. Thank you.

[The prepared statement of Mr. Natiello follows:]

Remarks of Peter Natiello
USAID Senior Deputy Assistant Administrator for Latin America and the Caribbean
Before the House Foreign Affairs Subcommittee on the Western Hemisphere
July 27, 2023

Chairwoman Salazar, Ranking Member Castro, and distinguished members of the subcommittee – thank you for the opportunity to testify today on USAID’s longstanding partnership with Colombia.

It is in the interest of the United States to partner with a peaceful, democratic, stable, and prosperous Colombia on the global challenges we face in the Americas and beyond. Defending democracy, addressing climate change, and managing migration are key areas that require our continued close collaboration. USAID’s decades-long partnership with Colombia has helped advance the United States’ long-term interests.

USAID’s work in Colombia crosses several decades, five U.S. administrations, and five Colombian presidencies. We partner with a broad range of Colombian stakeholders – democratically elected governments, the vibrant private sector, active civil society, and marginalized communities.

USAID supports Colombia’s own efforts to invest in its historically marginalized and violence-prone territories in the following ways: first, to strengthen state presence; second, to advance sustainable, licit economic development; and third, to create a culture of citizen rights and responsibilities associated with democratic governance.

We support implementation of the 2016 Peace Accord because it creates the conditions to achieve these objectives.

Additionally, and since 2017, USAID has moved with purpose to support Colombia’s generous efforts to integrate the nearly three million Venezuelans, forced to leave their country as a result of the corruption, gross mismanagement, and human rights abuses of the autocratic Maduro regime. Of the 7 million people displaced from Venezuela, approximately 6 million have relocated within South America and more than half that number have settled in Colombia.

Strengthening State Presence

USAID has been a longstanding partner in bringing greater state presence to Colombia’s conflict-prone, marginalized regions. The country’s historically neglected rural areas are characterized by violence, narco trafficking, illegal economies, human rights violations, corruption, and underdevelopment.

USAID has supported the efforts of successive Colombian governments to move beyond the country’s powerful, modern cities of Bogota, Medellin, Cali, Cartagena, and others, and to lay the foundations of democratic governance in what many have referred to as *Colombia Profunda* (“Other Colombia”). The Peace Accord is an important step in creating improved conditions for tying those marginalized territories to the rest of the nation.

Over the years, USAID has closely collaborated with U.S. Government partners, including the Departments of State and Defense, to support successive Colombian governments to increase public investment in these regions, resulting in improved security, schools, roads, healthcare, justice services, and protection of social leaders. There is still much work to be done but these territories are where USAID's commitment and focus lie.

More recently, and consistent with chapter one of the Peace Accord, USAID assisted Colombia's national and local governments to extend land titles to over 11,000 rural citizens through 30 municipal and regional land offices. This work spurs development in depressed rural areas, and can help stem narcotrafficking as experience tells us that farmers are less likely to replant coca on land they hold legal title to.

Strengthening Sustainable Licit Economic Development in Rural Areas

The Peace Accord strengthens the conditions for developing the agricultural bounty of the Colombian countryside while conserving Colombia's rich biodiversity and expansive tropical forests as key assets in the fight against climate change. Colombia's conflict-prone rural areas have long been home to illicit economic activities, including narcotrafficking, land grabbing, illegal mining, and illegal logging.

USAID's long-term commitment to these regions has enabled thousands of farmers to abandon coca production in favor of the renowned specialty coffees Colombians are so rightfully proud of; a flourishing cacao sector that increased total production by 36.5% from 2014-2021; and a wide range of agricultural products found on shelves in the country's busy supermarkets.

USAID's work with Colombia's powerful private sector has been an important element of these achievements. For example, with a combination of very modest investments in technical assistance and loan guarantees to several Colombian banks, USAID helped unlock over one billion dollars in commercial finance for nearly 900,000 small businesses and smallholder farmers.

Additionally, USAID has accomplished pioneering climate change mitigation and adaptation work with Colombia, enabling Afro-Colombian and Indigenous communities to generate important revenue streams through the sale of carbon credits from the protection of the country's vast tropical forests. Since 2020, our work has helped generate \$27 million in carbon credit sales for these communities. Soon we will expand these efforts from the forests of the country's Pacific coast to its Amazon region.

Building Democratic Citizenship

In a country of about 50 million people, Colombia's 52-year conflict left over 9 million victims in its wake – including Afro Colombians, Indigenous peoples, women, young people, social leaders, human rights activists, and journalists. It is precisely to attend to the needs of victims that the Peace Accord was signed.

USAID has been at Colombia's side for many years to ensure that conflict victims can be afforded the truth, justice, restitution, and commitments of non-repetition enshrined in Chapter 5 of the Peace Accord. For example, USAID supported the drafting of the Victims and Land Restitution Law of 2011 and served as Colombia's number one partner in the implementation of this important policy and precursor to the Accord.

With the signing of the Accord, USAID supported Colombia's Integrated System for Peace, which includes the Truth Commission, the Special Jurisdiction for Peace, and the Unit for the Search of Disappeared Persons. With the Truth Commission, USAID worked to compile and publicize testimonies that have helped tens of thousands of victims understand what happened to their loved ones. With that truth, they have begun the long and arduous healing process. Additionally, we have helped victims organizations to bring cases before the Special Jurisdiction for Peace, the Transitional Justice Court charged with holding all parties to the conflict accountable.

Advancing the full social and economic inclusion of Afro-Colombian and Indigenous Peoples - disproportionately victimized by the armed conflict - is key to a stable and lasting peace and a steady focus of the United States' work in Colombia. USAID championed the participation of ethnic groups and other historically marginalized Colombians in the peace process and advocated for inclusion of the "Chapter on Ethnic Perspectives" in the Peace Accord. Last year, the United States became the first international companion to that chapter.

I want to recognize the House Foreign Affairs Committee's Ranking Member, Congressman Gregory Meeks, and the entire Congressional Black Caucus for steadfastly championing Afro-Colombian and Indigenous communities and mobilizing U.S. resources to support their self-determined development and their full participation in the Peace Accord.

We recognize that, despite the signing of the Accord and the important advances in human rights over the past decade, attacks against Colombia's human rights and environmental defenders have risen in the years since the Accord's signing in 2016. Last year marked the highest number of recorded homicides against human rights defenders to date, according to Colombia's own statistics. Respected NGOs, including Frontline Defenders and Global Witness, consider Colombia the deadliest place for environmental and human rights defenders globally.

For this reason, USAID continues working with Colombian partners to protect human rights leaders and environmental defenders, prevent violent attacks against them, and reduce impunity for these crimes. We provided technical assistance to the Office of the Attorney General that resulted in prosecutions of 112 homicides.

We will not stop there. More must be done to address this violence and we are committed to ensuring it remains a top priority of our foreign assistance.

A Model for Managing Migration

In addition to the challenges of building peace in the country's marginalized regions, Colombia, and the broader region, are presently confronted with complex and unprecedented migration challenges. As it takes robust action to meet these daunting challenges head on, Colombia is creating a model for effective migrant integration that holds lessons for this hemisphere and beyond.

USAID has provided technical assistance to the Government of Colombia including recruiting over 300 officials to support nearly 100 registration points and providing crucial technology like biometric systems, to implement the generous Temporary Protected Status (TPS) and regularization policies which help Venezuelans fleeing the disastrous Maduro regime to permanently settle in Colombia and provide a humane alternative to the dangerous journey through the Darién.

With USAID support, Colombia has already pre-registered nearly 2.5 million people and approved TPS status for more than 1.9 million migrants. According to recent data collected by Colombia's migration agency, it is estimated that only 1.8% of the migrants making the dangerous journey through the Darién have TPS, demonstrating that the program is a powerful tool for deterring irregular migration.

With the generous support from Congress, USAID continues to support Colombia's efforts to help Venezuelan migrants to integrate into communities, educate their children, access healthcare, get jobs, open bank accounts, and settle where they are. And we know these migrants are less likely to travel to the United States if they can be integrated into Colombian society.

Conclusion

After more than five decades of war, Colombia has taken important steps toward lasting peace, security, stability and prosperity. The Colombian people still have much work to do, and USAID is committed to accompanying them in pursuit of our common interests.

We look forward to deepening the impact of our work and broadening our partnership with every part of Colombia – its democratically elected government, its vibrant private sector, its active civil society, and its marginalized communities – whose will and sacrifice makes change possible.

And we are grateful for Congress's unwavering, bipartisan support for the US-Colombia relationship over the past two decades, which has made USAID's work to build an enduring partnership with the people of Colombia possible.

I look forward to your questions.

Ms. SALAZAR. Thank you, Mr. Wells. I'm sorry. Thank you, Mr. Natiello, for your statement and I recognize myself now for 5 minutes of questioning.

I see that both of you did not mention some of the topics that we consider highly important vis-a-vis their relationship with Colombia and I'm going to start with you, Mr. Wells.

You know, Colombia supplies 97 percent of cocaine to the United States and the question is why did we stop monitoring the coca crops in Colombia?

Mr. WELLS. Thank you for the question. As I understand it, the decision not to have a coca estimate this year was made a couple of years ago before the election of Gustavo Petro as president.

We are the recipient agency of that—

Ms. SALAZAR. Was made by whom?

Mr. WELLS. I believe it was made in the year 2020 and it is by other agencies. You would have to—I would have to refer you to the DNDPCP for—

Ms. SALAZAR. Let me ask you something. Do you think that that is a—that that—is that a good idea? I mean, maybe someone else negotiated it but the Biden Administration could say that's not a really very good idea and not really knowing how many new crops of coca are being planted in Colombia. What do you think about it?

Mr. WELLS. The—there are—

Ms. SALAZAR. Don't you think it's outrageous that we do not know?

Mr. WELLS. There are various counts that are taken. So one is overseen by the ONDCP, which is the Office of National Drug Control Policy. There's also one by the U.N. Office of Drug—

Ms. SALAZAR. Yes, but the U.N. does not—do not you think that the United Nations will know how—well, have the resources and the technology that we have in our intelligence agencies to really know?

I mean, you personally what do you think about that, you being the assistant secretary for the Bureau of Western Hemisphere?

You know, you're in charge of Colombia. What do you think about the fact that the United States will not know how many more coca crops the Colombians are going to be harvesting? What do you think about that.

Mr. WELLS. So, as I said, we have access to other types of measurement. We have the UNODC count which—

Ms. SALAZAR. The U.N. is not the United States.

Mr. WELLS. It is not, but there have been parallel counts for many years. So we know the differences. The two teams discuss. We understand their methodologies and there isn't a resolution yet as to what the next steps are on the coca estimates.

Ms. SALAZAR. I understand that the United States has left the game. I mean, we left the game and we're leaving it up to somebody else.

Mr. WELLS. Let me explain how also we're engaged, though. At the tactical level and operational level in Colombia we assist the Colombian military and the police in doing their own tactical level count. So they're looking for coca all the time.

They use a system called SIIMA, and as someone who has been in the field implementing these programs, that's a very good tool for us to use. It helps us find the coca that we're going after.

Ms. SALAZAR. But you know that it sends a very bad message that the United States is just not looking anymore.

Now, let me move to another question. You know that President Petro is trying to negotiate peace or something with the Clan del Golfo. Clan del Golfo, as I said in my opening statement, is in two ignominious activities, drug trafficking and human trafficking.

So my question is what is there to negotiate? From the United States point of view what is there to negotiate with the Clan del Golfo? I mean, simple. Give it to me simple. What is there to negotiate with this, one of the most important criminal organizations in the world?

Mr. WELLS. So we share your skepticism toward any—

Ms. SALAZAR. Good.

Mr. WELLS [continuing]. Any dialog with the Clan del Golfo. I can tell you the intent is to not only negotiate with the ELN, but also with other politically motivated armed groups, but as well the Colombian government—the Petro government has conceived of negotiating with criminal groups. We are—

Ms. SALAZAR. But what has the State Department said to Petro since the Biden Administration has closed the—closed to this—to the Petro Administration? Have you expressed your concerns to the President?

Mr. WELLS. I'm expressing them now that we are concerned about anything that results in impunity for narco-traffickers, and we would be very skeptical of any processes that give impunity to anyone or organizations trafficking drugs.

Ms. SALAZAR. Good. You are sending a message to President Petro as we speak so maybe he will change his mind. Now, what about the statement and you—and neither one of you said anything in your opening statements about what I'm going to pronounce right now.

You know that President Petro said in Belgium that he sees no difference between the United States and Russia. I mean, that's a pretty unfortunate statement at this hour when we have the war with Ukraine. Do you agree with me?

Mr. WELLS. I agree that the war against Ukraine is unjust and brutal and it's all Russia's fault.

Ms. SALAZAR. And what do you think about Petro saying that he does not know the difference between us and them? What do you—what do you think about that?

Mr. WELLS. What I can say is that three times the government of Colombia has supported votes against Russia's invasion of Ukraine at the U.N. We are not going to agree with every tweet that Gustavo Petro does and in this case we do not agree with that.

But we've been pretty consistent and the Colombians have been supportive in international fora with regard to—

Ms. SALAZAR. So he says one thing but he does another. Well, that's good. Words are not—sometimes they're not like actions. But it's all right.

So besides the difference between the United States and Russia, President Petro also said that oil is more dangerous than cocaine.

Oil more dangerous than cocaine. So what do you think about that? What does the State Department think about that?

Mr. WELLS. Well, with regard to coca, I mean, I think I said we are concerned about the rising levels of coca and cocaine production in Colombia. With regard to his positions on oil I can talk about that. You know, he said when he was elected that he was going to stop all further exploration or any new contracts in oil production. That's been his practice so far. We have not seen him actually cancel any existing ones.

The United States—United States companies are fairly well invested in that area. Petro has expressed a desire to move and transition toward renewable energy and that's something that we support, and I think there's a lot of opportunities for U.S. companies to profit in that space. But I agree there is an uncertainty when it comes to the hydrocarbons industry about what's next.

Ms. SALAZAR. So basically what you're telling me is that he may be saying something but doing something different because the State Department is sending the message to—that we do not agree with—

Mr. WELLS. I'm saying he's doing exactly what he said he would do, not to have any new oil contracts and we have not seen that yet.

Ms. SALAZAR. Yes, but the fact that he's comparing oil to cocaine and saying that cocaine is better than oil it's—for me, it's—I think it's outrageous as well.

And I'm just going to ask one more question. I do not want to abuse my time. But your colleague Todd Robinson said that Colombia is a net exporter of security, right. But we just learned that he wants to negotiate with the ELN and with the Clan del Golfo. So what—how can we interpret a net exporter of security?

Mr. WELLS. I believe the reference was to that Colombians provide security assistance to some of their neighbors north, especially up in Central America. They've done so for decades.

We've partnered with them through SOUTHCOM and through Assistant Secretary Robinson's bureau, INL, and so they have provided some assistance. It's been useful in the past. I do not know about the reference to the ELN.

Ms. SALAZAR. But do you consider that Colombia, since you study it every single day, that Colombia at this hour under Petro is a net exporter of security, being an ally of Venezuela—that Venezuela has the largest refugee migration on Earth.

Mr. WELLS. What I can say about that is that they have a relationship with Venezuela. We do not tell countries with whom they can have relations. He decided to do that when he came into office.

I can say he definitely shares the goal of having a democratic solution in Venezuela. He hosted a conference in April with some 20 countries and there those countries affirmed the need to—for Venezuela to return to the path of democracy and affirm that the process that the international community is undertaking—

Ms. SALAZAR. I thank you. Sorry, I'm interrupting. I have to—my time has expired. I now recognize Ranking Member Castro for 5 minutes. Thank you.

Mr. CASTRO. Chairwoman, I'd like to yield my time to the ranking member of the full committee, Gregory Meeks from New York.

Ms. SALAZAR. OK.

Mr. MEEKS. Thank you, Rep. Castro. I'm tempted to, you know, talk about our former president, who impeached twice, now indicted twice, may be indicted again for resurrection in January 6 and the guy that's friends with Kim Jong-un. I would hope our allies do not look at that or think that is what America is.

We still have strong government institutions. So I'm not going to talk about that. Let me start by just saying this. Democracy in Colombia is not in peril.

The people of Colombia have embraced free and fair elections for decades, even during some of the most challenging years of internal conflict, and I've been involved in Colombia since I've been here.

I've been involved with one, two, three, four, five presidents from Pastrana, Uribe, Santos, Duque, and now Petro, and that's our job is to deal with who the people decide they want to be their president. That's democracy. Elections. Count the votes. Don't deny him after they're counted. Count the votes and the people decides who their president is.

What would imperil Colombia and, indeed, the region are the Republican proposed cuts, roughly, 30 percent for our entire State foreign operations and related programs budgets. These steep cuts would deeply impede our ability to provide humanitarian and development assistance at this pivotal time in Colombia.

And I might add that last year we just celebrated our 200-year-long bilateral relationship, applauded free and fair elections, witnessed a peaceful transfer—transition of power and supported the ushering in of a diverse, inclusive, and progressive Administration under President Petro and Vice President Marquez.

The narrative that Colombia has, quote, "big problems with democracy" with its institutions, with the economy, and with President Petro's total peace policy is divisive and counterproductive, particularly when that narrative is used against his interest in negotiating with the ELN to extend peace beyond the 2016 Peace Accord.

Colombia is a democratic country with a democratically elected government and democratic institutions and process in place. One change in policy that we may disagree with does not change our shared common values and histories. As we strive to reach common goals we should do so in partnership.

Additionally, I'm deeply concerned that withholding funding in Colombia runs contrary to the United States drug policy, security, and commercial interests. The shared challenges we have can only be addressed if we support Colombia's efforts toward lasting peace and strengthening institutions and access to justice.

We must help Colombia buildup civic participation and civilian services in the most rural areas, those areas where oftentimes indigenous and African Colombians live and which Petro says he is focused on.

I was there at his inauguration and for the first time I heard those communities talk about extensively—I heard it under President Uribe and I heard it under President Santos also.

The assistance that we provided for decades in a bipartisan fashion does just that. It competes with the drivers of illicit economies

and violence to renew belief in democracy and ushers in much needed change.

What's confusing and shocking to me is watching my colleagues across the aisle complain about the influence of China and other adversaries while simultaneously proposing to no longer support our strongest allies in the region.

We do not advance United States interests if we withdraw from the table nor do we address these challenges if we shut out and deny regional stakeholders from being at the table.

A peaceful future for Colombia may require dialog with a Cuba or a Venezuela, particularly when it concerns negotiation with the ELN or addressing the migration challenge head on.

Colombia is not sliding into a socialist State. I've worked closely, as I said, with every Colombian president since I was elected to Congress because I believe in the potential of the Colombian people. I've fallen in love with the Colombian people and their strife in moving for democracy.

I've seen them at each one of these elections stand in line and make sure that their voices are heard with their vote. I saw it in this last election that elected Petro.

That's democracy, not someone coming from someplace else and saying that you should not be. I know the constructive that constructive dialog and cooperation between our countries will reap benefits on both sides of our bilateral relationship.

And, again, I want to thank the witnesses that are here. I do not want to take up any more time from this distinguished panel. But let me just say that we've got to listen and work with our allies in the region, not just be above them and tell them you do what we tell you to do.

But let's promote those democracies and look at those things that we have in common, and as what took place when President Petro came here to visit President Biden and Members of Congress he's indicated that he's willing to continue to do just that.

And I yield back.

Ms. SALAZAR. Thank you, Chairman Meeks. And I just want to add that we are also in love with the Colombian people and I represent hundreds of thousands of them, and reality is that we want to keep it that way for 200 years, like you said.

We want to keep free and fair elections for the Colombians. Our concern is that Petro may stop that for the next 200 years. But thank you.

Now I recognize Congressman Self for 5 minutes.

Mr. SELF. Thank you, Madam Chair.

We just heard the term decades. Here in our own country we realize that the past decades really do not matter because of the open border policy under this current president. So my point is that current presidents make a difference. Witness our own open border policy. Words, not actions.

So my question is we've heard a lot about this 2016 agreement with the FARC. Does the FARC EP and Segundo Marquetalia represent a threat to Colombia?

Mr. WELLS. Thank you for the question, Congressman. Yes, both of those are foreign terrorist organizations under our law. Both the

FARC EP and the Segundo Marquetalia are derivatives of the old FARC that signed the 2016 peace agreement.

Mr. SELF. So what is your assessment of their future? Because the FARC was years and years in Colombia. What is their—what is your assessment of their future in Colombia?

Mr. WELLS. So these are people who either did not agree with the original Peace Accord or they never—or they signed it and then later defected from that.

In the Segundo Marquetalia case, many of them have taken up residence in Venezuela. In the case of the FARC EP—and I'm speaking very generally here—they function inside the Colombian borders.

They are politically motivated but I would say predominantly they are narco-trafficking organizations solely dedicated to trafficking.

Mr. SELF. OK. Do you believe your words on page two, long-standing commitment to democracy? I think Mr. Meeks just addressed that. Counter smuggling in the Darien region—you talked about we now see Darien peaking at, like, 400,000.

You—intensifying bilateral cooperation in intelligence and interdiction to dismantle transnational criminal networks and counter illicit activities—do you believe those words? Then fight corruption and improve security and justice with the Colombian institutions—is that—that is that going to happen or is that cooperation possible under this president?

Mr. WELLS. So earlier this summer, Congressman—and thank you for that question—we worked with the Colombians and the Panamanians to undertake law enforcement activities and border control enforcement on both sides of that border in the Darien region.

They did that with some technical assistance from SOUTHCOM. The idea was to go after human smuggling rings in that area and try to at least counter over the summer the effect of those.

When it comes to the institutions I'll refer you to the attorney general's office, which has a long-standing tradition of independence. It is, in fact, investigating some of the allegations made against President Petro.

We have invested maybe hundreds of millions of dollars in that organization over the years. It's the organization that took down Pablo Escobar and does prosecutions against any—all manner of drug traffickers.

Mr. SELF. Why your focus on Venezuela in your testimony?

Mr. WELLS. Well, Venezuela and Colombia are sister republics. They have a shared population. When the FARC was attacking the Colombian people so violently in the 1990's many Colombians fled into Venezuela, and now you're seeing a reverse of Venezuelans fleeing the misery and poverty brought on by the Maduro regime into Colombia.

Mr. SELF. Exactly. Thank you. So that's why I think we have got to focus on what is happening there, not the rosy perspectives that you gave us. And one more point about the Darien Gap and my time will be up.

It is so dangerous, and you probably know this, that your government, the United States government—it is so dangerous that we issue prerape kits to the females transiting the Darien Gap.

Madam Chair, I yield back.

Ms. SALAZAR. Thank you. Now we're going to recognize Congresswoman Kamlager-Dove for 5 minutes.

Ms. KAMLAGER-DOVE. Thank you. Thank you, Madam Chair, and I want to thank you witnesses for being here today. I want to first State that I do not support the premise of this hearing, which is that we should be attacking a partner because the elected government's priorities do not align with our domestic views.

It is patronizing and paternalistic and anti-democratic to weaponize our relationship in order to wield veto power over the domestic political process of our democratic partners and it brazenly resurrects a destructive cold war approach that caused deep instability and dangerous mistrust and ruptured relations in ways we are still trying to repair.

And as I just have been listening, I—you know, talking about, well, you have a president who's saying something, do you agree with what they've said. You know, I do not want to follow our ranking member but we did have a former president who said a whole bunch of things, who said that he could shoot somebody in the face walking down Fifth Avenue and nothing would happen to him, who said he could grab someone—a woman by her genitalia, who said we should have a complete and total shutdown of Muslims entering the United States, who said that laziness is a trait in Blacks, who said about Mexican-Americans they're rapists even though some of them, I assume, are good people. I could go on and on.

I would hope that no one on this committee supports those kinds of statements. It's about allowing people to have free and fair elections in their own country. I hear things on the floor that I do not agree with. It's not about attacking that individual person.

I also want to say before I mess up my notes that the United States remains Colombia's main trading partner. Colombia is a top destination for United States agricultural exports valued at more than \$4.2 billion.

Over 500 American companies have arrived in Colombia over the past decade with investments worth \$26 billion. We're talking about GE, Amazon, Cisco, IBM. Colombia and the United States share one of Latin America's most comprehensive defense cooperation frameworks.

Since Petro has been sworn in over eight multinational operations have been conducted between the Colombian navy and the United States.

Colombian national police have conducted over 104 joint operations with U.S. law enforcement agencies, operational results against drug trafficking, and do not get me started on our drug policy in the United States because we only seem to want to go after certain people and maybe if people stopped using drugs we'd have to stop having drug policies that disproportionately impact Black and brown people. I digress.

Operational results against drug trafficking since President Petro took office show figures on interdiction, seizures, and the destruc-

tion of criminal infrastructure, 609,000 tons of cocaine seized, 887,000 tons of coca leaf seized, 61,000 tons of coca base seized.

It sounds to me like we have a good partner. Last I checked in any kind of relationship, you know, an effective partnership isn't you agree 100 percent of the time on 100 percent of things. I do not know a partnership like that. I do not know a marriage like that.

So I do not know why we're trying to be very discriminatory when it comes to Colombia. So none of those were questions. I apologize. But I'm irritated.

But I will ask you both a question. Help me, Jesus. Can you speak in just—maybe not—maybe in 30 seconds or less, very interested in the ways that your programs and your engaging of the Colombians and the Colombian government are addressing issues like illegal mining and discrimination against Afro-Colombians and human rights issues because those are also important things as well as reminding people how important it is to tell the truth. You only have 18 seconds. I'm so sorry.

Mr. NATIELLO. Yes. Thank you so—thank you so much for the questions, Representative. I'll just say in the short time that I have that USAID is actively involved in working with the Colombian government-successive Colombian governments-and communities in mining areas to help formalize informal miners so that they can protect workers rights, so they can pay taxes, they can sell their gold through legal markets, et cetera.

We've been doing that for many years and we've had some important successes with it, pilots that Colombia can then use to scale to reach this issue on a broader scale with more people and more miners and more communities.

And just in terms of our work with Afro-Colombians and indigenous, thanks to the generosity of this Congress and really—

Ms. SALAZAR. Your time is up.

Mr. NATIELLO. Yes. Thank you very much.

Ms. SALAZAR. Thanks to you. Thank you, Congresswoman Kamlager-Dove.

And then a vote has been called on the House floor, as you know. Therefore, the subcommittee will have to recess and we will reconvene following the vote. There's only one vote. So the subcommittee stands in recess.

[Recess.]

Ms. SALAZAR. So the subcommittee will reconvene and I will now recognize Congressman Stanton for 5 minutes.

Mr. STANTON. Thank you very much, Chair—thank you very much, Chairwoman. Thank you, both of our witnesses, for being here today and your patience with the votes in the middle of our hearing.

I represent Arizona, which is no stranger to the challenges and opportunities of migration, the harms of drug trafficking, or the competition posed by China.

These are complex issues that require multilateral solutions and strong bilateral ties and Colombia has been a reliable partner on these fronts, recently working with our State Department have set up a regional processing center for migrants journeying through Latin America.

These centers prescreen individuals to see if they are eligible to enter the United States legally and are intended to slow the flow of migration after the end of Title 42.

Colombia is one of only three Latin American countries working with the United States on this important project. Colombia also hosts more than two and a half million Venezuelan migrants and refugees who have fled the autocratic Maduro regime.

These migrants need help settling in Colombia and the United States Agency for International Development provides funding for just that purpose.

Last year USAID granted around \$30 million to support food security, health care, job training so that Venezuelan migrants could find a home in Colombia rather than making the dangerous trek north to the United States.

Our country has also worked with Colombia on counter narcotics efforts. 2021 U.S.-Colombia Counter Narcotics Strategy set about holistically reducing coca supplies by targeting laboratories and traffickers, investing in the security and economic development of the rural areas, and restoring tropical rainforests that have been turned into coca fields.

Finally, while I hope that Colombia establishes diplomatic ties with Taiwan I also recognize that Colombia is one of only 12 Latin American or Caribbean countries that is not a member of China's Belt and Road Initiative.

Instead, it maintains close ties with the United States, which is its largest trade and investment partner. With this strong relationship as a backdrop, I have a few questions for Deputy Assistant Secretary Wells.

Recently, the State and Foreign Operations Appropriations Subcommittee voted to defer funding to Colombia, potentially leaving the State Department and USAID with no designated funding system to work on projects with Colombia.

Does this undermine the progress we've made to make America safer?

Mr. WELLS. Thank you for the question, Congressman.

Let me just say that the shared goals that we have in Colombia include countering transnational crime and drug trafficking, promoting peace and security, protecting the Amazon, preventing and responding to human rights violations, reducing irregular migration influx, and supporting the government of Colombia to integrate the Venezuelan communities.

We use the funds we get to do some of these things. It's to increase the operational capacity of the Colombian national police and their military, which serve as staunch allies for us in the region in all kinds of operations.

We support the attorney general's office and Colombia's justice sector, which are critical components in maintaining Colombia's constitutional checks and balances. We also do Peace Accord implementation.

We protect human rights and social and environmental defenders who face increased risk of attack and we support, as I mentioned, the programs that allow us to help Venezuelans.

Instead of going north they settle down in Colombia and integrate into Colombian society, and we protect the Amazon including

support to programs to counter deforestation and promote agriculture that does not harm the environment. Those are all things that we can do when we have a consistent flow of assistance.

Mr. STANTON. If we were to defer this funding, as the Subcommittee on—in Appropriations recently voted on how would such a deferral encourage Colombia to create closer ties with China?

Mr. WELLS. So their relationship with China, as you mentioned, you know, we are still the number-one investor. We are the number-one trading partner with them. As you mentioned, they have not signed the Belt and Road Initiative. I know that President Petro has talked about that or has considered that.

But the U.S. companies are still quite vibrant there and we have a robust—we have a trade agreement. They do not have one with China. Were we to back out of this decades-long investment in security and social ties we would be surrendering a vital strategic ally in the region and a partner that can work with us on an array of issues.

Mr. STANTON. Final question. Same thing. If we were to defer funding how would it impact Colombia's ability work with the U.S. on migration and counter narcotics?

Mr. WELLS. So in the same way, we depend on the Colombian military and police to effect all kinds of seizures, detection, and monitoring.

They're fully integrated with the U.S. military when it comes to detecting and monitoring cocaine shipments through the region. We would—that would—suffer if we did not have that funding.

Mr. STANTON. Thank you very much. I yield back.

Ms. SALAZAR. Thank you, Congressman. And now I'm going to recognize myself for 5 minutes. I just have few more questions that I would like to share with you and, specifically, Mr. Wells, you said during your testimony that President Petro works very well with the rest of Central American countries that are exporting people to the United States.

But I just want to share with you the fact that the Panamanian foreign minister and some people at the highest level of the Panamanian government came to my office and told me specifically that they have a problem with Colombia because more than 400,000 people have arrived through the Darien jungle and Colombia really does not stop them.

On the contrary, Colombia and under the Petro Administration lets them come through and the Panamanians find themselves having a major problem because they cannot absorb so many people trying to go through Central America to get to the Mexican border.

So could you please explain to me what is the difference between your statements and what the Panamanians are living, are experiencing on the ground?

Mr. WELLS. Thank you for the question. As I mentioned, there are 2.5 million Venezuelans who have stayed in Colombia so the Colombians are playing host to that group. That's a group that is not going north.

There are a lot going north and the United States engages in a multi-country and multi-agency effort to basically take three lines of action. One is enforcement. One is diplomacy—

Ms. SALAZAR. But I do not think that's what I asked you. I asked you the relationship between Colombia and Panama. Specifically, the Panamanians do not think that the Colombians are helping them stop the traffic.

Mr. WELLS. I think it is a regular problem. I mentioned earlier we help them forwarding—

Ms. SALAZAR. But are you aware what the Panamanians—but are you aware what the Panamanians are saying? I'm sure the Panamanians have come to the State Department and explained their concerns. They need Colombia's help in order to stop the flow of people through the Darien jungle.

Mr. WELLS. And when I served in Bogota from 2019 to 2021, I got the same complaint that the Colombians do not do enough to stop the trafficking or the free movement of Venezuela mostly through the—

Ms. SALAZAR. But do not you think that now things have gotten worse and that Colombia is helping less?

Mr. WELLS. I think there is an uptick in trafficking as the situation in Venezuela worsens. There are greater outflows of migrants and we do continue to work with both sides of the Darien.

Ms. SALAZAR. But you have not helped—you have not heard from the Colombians that concern that I just explained to you? You have not heard that from the—from the Panamanians?

Mr. WELLS. I have heard that in the past, yes.

Ms. SALAZAR. But no—now in the present?

Mr. WELLS. And I hate to apologize but I actually do not cover Panama. So, but I know that it is a complaint and I know that we work with them. It's why I mentioned the joint operations in the Darien that we worked on earlier this summer.

Ms. SALAZAR. OK. Now, what about the ELN? You know, as I explained during my opening remarks, that the Petro government is negotiating with the ELN, which is one of the two guerrilla movements in Colombia. The ELN right now is on the terrorist list.

By any chance is the State Department is thinking or considering the possibility of removing the ELN from the terrorist list due to the fact that the Petro Administration is wanting to negotiate peace with them?

Mr. WELLS. No, we are not considering removing the ELN from the foreign terrorist organization list.

Ms. SALAZAR. Good.

Mr. WELLS. The ELN process is something that we are watching, we're monitoring, and we are in constant communication with the Colombian government about it. I think, as I mentioned earlier, we want to maintain some healthy skepticism about it because the ELN is a terrorist organization.

They have started peace processes in the past and they have not fulfilled it. Next week there is a 6-month cease-fire that's supposed to go into effect, and we call on the ELN to protect civilians and any victims of their terrorist activities. They need to be accountable for holding up that cease-fire.

Ms. SALAZAR. And what do you think about the fact that the ELN sprayed graffiti on Maria Corina Machado's office? The Biden Administration has been working with the Maduro government and my question is do not you think that maybe we should be sending

a message to President Petro and President Maduro that Maria Corina should be protected and should be guarded against any type of threats?

Mr. WELLS. We, obviously, condemn that act and we——

Ms. SALAZAR. Did you know about it?

Mr. WELLS. Yes, and we were pleased to see that President Petro also condemned it and he called on the suspension of Maria Corina Machado's disqualification to be lifted because——

Ms. SALAZAR. Good.

Mr. WELLS [continuing]. He himself experienced a similar treatment years ago.

Ms. SALAZAR. Of course. Of course. We all want democracy in both countries. Now, based—finally, you also know the—some of the comments that President Petro has made against the Colombian press. He called them specifically racist, enemy of the people, and that they have incited genocide.

What do you think about the Colombian press? You have many of those members among you here in this hearing. In my understanding the Colombian press is pretty impartial and they do a good job.

Do you agree with what President Petro is saying, that they are racist, the enemy of the people, specifically the enemy of the people?

Mr. WELLS. No. Independent press is not the enemy of the people anywhere. I believe that Colombian journalism is excellent.

They have a lot of investigative journalism and, in fact, they're the ones that have investigated a lot of the corruption allegations that President Petro is facing now. And so——

Ms. SALAZAR. Good.

Mr. WELLS [continuing]. They will continue to do that because——

Ms. SALAZAR. This is a very important message that you're saying, Mr. Wells, and I'm very happy that you're doing—that you're saying it because the Colombians have a very independent, rigorous news media and we need to preserve them regardless of how they are covering the news.

That's up to them, which is the same case in the United States. So I'm glad that the State Department is sending that message to the Petro Administration do not touch the press. Do you agree with me?

Mr. WELLS. Yes. In fact, the existence really shows the strength and vitality of Colombian democracy today.

Ms. SALAZAR. Indeed, and that's why we need to preserve that vibrancy in the Colombian democracy. You agree with me?

Mr. WELLS. I agree.

Ms. SALAZAR. And do you feel by any chance that Mr. Petro—President Petro may be one of those hindrances or the forces against the continuation of that democracy?

Mr. WELLS. As I said earlier, we have relationships with the institutions. I do not want to comment on every single tweet he puts out.

I think he issues more than a dozen tweets a day. He is one of the most prolific tweeters. I will say we support Colombian institutions. We believe that Colombian democracy remains strong today.

Ms. SALAZAR. And do you have any fear that those Colombian institutions may be under threat?

Mr. WELLS. I do not.

Ms. SALAZAR. Good. Well, let's keep it that way. Thank you, sir. And now I recognize the ranking member, Mr. Castro.

Mr. CASTRO. Thank you.

Mr. Wells, you made a comment and there was some discussion about the migration—the migration situation of Venezuelans to Colombia, and can you describe how Venezuelans have been treated in Colombia who are arriving from Venezuela there?

Or either one of you and whoever is best suited to answer that. For example, have they been provided work permits, food, shelter, so forth?

Mr. NATIELLO. Yes, I'll take that, Representative Castro. Thank you for that.

So it's noteworthy that Colombia has pre-registered for temporary protective status to two and a half million Venezuelans. Colombia has advanced rapidly to register close to 2 million of those folks.

By being registered those Venezuelans have access to health care in Colombia. They can enter the job market in Colombia. They would pay taxes, I believe, in Colombia. They could put their children in school.

And so USAID has been an important partner to Colombia in helping them do that. Colombia has established dozens of integration centers around the country to help that process. USAID is supporting Colombia in 11 of the centers that receive the biggest flow through of Venezuelan migrants.

And, again, our support has helped that registration process. It's helped them get connected to health care, to help their kids get in school and we also work with microfinance banks to provide credits to Venezuelan migrants so they can start businesses and we provided business training as well to thousands—

Mr. CASTRO. And let me—well, first, I want to say thank you to USAID, to the State Department. Thank you for your work there. And is it safe to say, fair to say, that if Venezuela was not—I'm sorry, if Colombia was not so receiving of Venezuelans that many of those Venezuelans might try to make it up north including to the United States?

Mr. NATIELLO. So, I would say that Colombia's efforts to register and integrate Venezuelans is deterring them from going through the Darien Gap and from going north and that's one of the reasons why USAID works closely with Colombia to just to help them to support their Venezuelan brothers and sisters.

Mr. CASTRO. And, you know, I know because we've been discussing political leaders and so forth and the actions of nations with respect to migration, and then you compare that to the barbaric actions of Texas Governor Greg Abbott, who put death traps at the U.S.-Mexico border and the Rio Grande, laid razor wire including in areas of the river that rise such that razor wire becomes invisible to people who make their way and get caught in it, and also installed barrel traps with netting so that people get caught in those barrel traps.

So if those folks had not stayed in Colombia it's likely that some of those Venezuelans would have encountered these death traps on the Rio Grande. It's gotten so bad that there was a 4-year-old girl who was passing out in the water and was instructed by Texas State trooper leadership to be pushed back into the water toward Mexico. Very barbaric inhumane policies that you might expect to see come out of a place like North Korea or somewhere like that.

So I want to say thank you to Colombia, to both its conservative and liberal presidents who have maintained that policy of treating folks humanely in both conservative and more progressive governments, and thank you all for your work in supporting them.

I also want to ask you just one more question. President Petro represents change in Colombian politics but I believe there's still substantial continuity in U.S.-Colombian relations.

Can you both speak or either one of you speak, because I'm short on time, to whether you've seen a significant change in our relationship with Colombia, particularly cooperation on such areas of national and regional interests since President Petro was elected? Has something significantly changed in the U.S.-Colombia relationship, in your estimation?

Mr. WELLS. Thank you for the question. No, in the regional context we still have great cooperation with the Colombians.

As I mentioned, they held a conference on Venezuela and convened 20 countries to talk about the international community's response for Venezuela and encouraging a democratic return to democracy.

I'd also say as was previously mentioned—just that there is a continuation of extraditions. There's a continuation of military exercises. There has been no interruption that we can see in joint police operations to confiscate drugs.

So institutionally all of those pieces we see as having no change, and we continue to have good cooperation even though there is a change in political perspective in the presidency.

Mr. CASTRO. Thank you, gentlemen, for your testimony. I yield back, Chair.

Ms. SALAZAR. Thank you, Ranking Member, Mr. Castro, and I want to thank the witnesses for their valuable testimony.

Mr. Natiello, sorry that I did not get to talk to you too much but I'm sure there will be a next time. And to Mr. Wells for being here and the rest of the members of this committee—subcommittee for their questions.

The members of the subcommittee may have some additional questions for the witnesses. We will ask you to respond to them in writing.

So pursuant to committee rules, all members may have 5 days to submit statements, questions, and extraneous material for the record, subject to the length limitations.

Without objection, the committee now stands adjourned.

[Whereupon, at 3:53 p.m., the committee was adjourned.]

APPENDIX



**COMMITTEE ON FOREIGN AFFAIRS
FULL COMMITTEE HEARING NOTICE
U.S. HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES
WASHINGTON, DC 20515-6128**

**Subcommittee on the Western Hemisphere
Maria Salazar (R-FL), Chairwoman**

July 20, 2023

Revised

TO: MEMBERS OF THE COMMITTEE ON FOREIGN AFFAIRS

You are respectfully requested to attend an OPEN hearing of the Committee on Foreign Affairs to be held by the Subcommittee on the Western Hemisphere at 2:00 p.m. in room 210 of the House Visitor's Center on July 27, 2023. The hearing is available by live webcast on the Committee website at <https://foreignaffairs.house.gov/>.

DATE: Thursday, July 27, 2023

TIME: ~~2:00 p.m.~~ **2:30 p.m.**

LOCATION: HVC-210

SUBJECT: Colombia's Descent to Socialism:
Assessing Gustavo Petro's Presidency

WITNESSES: Mr. Mark Wells
Deputy Assistant Secretary
Bureau of Western Hemisphere Affairs
U.S. Department of State

Mr. Peter Natiello
Senior Deputy Assistant Administrator
Bureau for Latin America and the
Caribbean
U.S. Agency for International Development

*NOTE: Witnesses may be added.

By Direction of the Chair

The Committee on Foreign Affairs seeks to make its facilities accessible to persons with disabilities. If you are in need of special accommodations, please call 202-226-8467 at least four business days in advance of the event, whenever practicable. Questions with

regard to special accommodations in general (including availability of Committee materials in alternative formats and assistive listening devices) may be directed to the Committee.

COMMITTEE ON FOREIGN AFFAIRS
MINUTES OF FULL COMMITTEE HEARING

Day Thursday Date July 27, 2023 Room HVC-210

Starting Time 2:22pm Ending Time 3:52pm

Recesses 1 (3:10pm to 3:30pm) (____ to ____) (____ to ____) (____ to ____) (____ to ____) (____ to ____)

Presiding Member(s)
Rep. Maria Salazar

Check all of the following that apply:

Open Session ☒

Electronically Recorded (taped) ☒

Executive (closed) Session ☐

Stenographic Record ☒

Televised ☒

TITLE OF HEARING:

Colombia's Descent to Socialism: Assessing Gustavo Petro's Presidency

COMMITTEE MEMBERS PRESENT:

Rep. Keith Self, Rep. John James, Ranking Member Gregory Meeks, Rep. Joaquin Castro, Rep. Greg Stanton, Rep. Sydney Kamlager-Dove.

NON-COMMITTEE MEMBERS PRESENT:

HEARING WITNESSES: Same as meeting notice attached? Yes ☒ No ☐

(If "no", please list below and include title, agency, department, or organization.)

STATEMENTS FOR THE RECORD: *(List any statements submitted for the record.)*

Ranking Member Gregory Meeks

Rep. Jim McGovern

TIME SCHEDULED TO RECONVENE _____

or
TIME ADJOURNED 3:52pm

Meg Wagner
Full Committee Hearing Coordinator

Committee on Foreign Affairs
Subcommittee on Western Hemisphere

118th Congress

ATTENDANCE

Meeting on: Colombia's Descent to Socialism: Assessing Gustavo Petro's Presidency

Date: 7.27.2023

Convened: 2:22 pm

Adjourned: 3:52 pm

Representative	Present	Absent	Representative	Present	Absent
Ms. Salazar	X		Mr. Castro	X	
Mr. Green		X	Mr. Stanton	X	
Mr. Huizenga		X	Mr. Moskowitz		X
Mr. Davidson		X	Ms. Kamlager-Dove	X	
Mr. Self	X		Mr. Meeks	X	
Mr. James	X				

STATEMENT FOR THE RECORD FROM RANKING MEMBER
MEEKS

Ranking Member Gregory W. Meeks

**Western Hemisphere Subcommittee Hearing “Colombia’s
Descent to Socialism: Assessing Gustavo Petro’s Presidency”**

Thursday July 27, 2023

[REMARKS]

Let me start by saying that democracy in Colombia is not in peril; the people of Colombia have embraced free and fair elections for decades even during some of the most challenging years of internal conflict.

However, what would imperil Colombia, and indeed the region, are Republican proposed cuts, roughly 30 percent of our entire State, Foreign Operations, and Related Programs budget. These steep cuts would deeply impede our ability to provide humanitarian and development assistance at this pivotal time in Colombia.

And, I might add, that last year we celebrated our 200 yearlong bilateral relationship, applauded free and fair elections, witnessed a peaceful transition of power, and supported the ushering in of a diverse, inclusive, and progressive administration under President Petro and Vice President Marquez.

The narrative that Colombia has quote “big problems with democracy, with its institutions, with the economy, and with President Petro’s Total Peace policy” is divisive and counterproductive, particularly when that narrative is used against his interest in negotiating with the ELN to extend peace beyond the 2016 Peace Accord.

Colombia is a democratic country, with a democratically elected government, and democratic institutions and processes in place.

One change in policy that we may disagree with does not change our shared common values and histories. As we strive to reach common goals, we should do so in partnership.

Additionally, I am deeply concerned that withholding funding in Colombia runs contrary to US drug policy, security, and commercial interests. The shared challenges we have can only be addressed if we support Colombia's efforts toward lasting peace and strengthening institutions and access to justice. We must help Colombia build up civic participation and civilian services in the most rural areas, address historic land and economic inequalities, and provide opportunities for historically disenfranchised groups, including women, especially those in the Afro-Colombian, indigenous, and rural communities.

The assistance we've provided for decades in a bipartisan fashion does just that. It competes with the drivers of illicit economies and violence to renew belief in democracy, and ushers in much needed change.

What's confusing and shocking to me is watching my colleagues across the aisle complain about the influence of China and other adversaries, while simultaneously proposing to no longer support our strongest allies in the region.

We do not advance U.S. interests if we withdraw from the table, nor do we address these challenges if we shut out and deny regional stakeholders from being at that table. A peaceful future for Colombia may require dialogue with Cuba and Venezuela, particularly when it concerns negotiation with the ELN or addressing the migration challenge head-on.

Colombia is NOT sliding into a "socialist" state. I have worked closely with every Colombian President since I was elected to congress because I believe in the potential of the Colombian people,

and I know that constructive dialogue and cooperation between our countries will reap benefits on both sides of our bilateral relationship. I want to again thank our witnesses for being here today and I hope to hear productive dialogue on how to further our bilateral relations and assist our Colombian friends in realizing their goals for peace, democracy, and opportunity.

STATEMENT FOR THE RECORD FROM CONGRESSMAN
MCGOVERN

House Committee on Foreign Affairs
Subcommittee on Western Hemisphere

Hearing on

Colombia's Descent to Socialism: Assessing Gustavo Petro's Presidency

Thursday, July 27, 2023 – 2:30 p.m.

Statement Submitted for the Record

James P. McGovern
Member of Congress

I want to thank Chairwoman Salazar and Ranking Member Castro for the privilege of submitting this statement into the Record of this hearing.

The United States is the destination of choice for tens of thousands of people fleeing the endemic violence and extreme poverty that characterize many Latin American countries. For years U.S. leaders have insisted that, in the long run, the best way to respond to the migration issue is by addressing the “root causes” so that people will not need to flee, but instead can remain in their countries of origin and contribute to the development of their societies. The appropriate lens, therefore, for assessing the policies of a foreign government is whether those policies protect the rights of its citizens and improve their quality of life. Gustavo Petro has not yet completed a year in office. But there is plenty to suggest that his government is in fact trying to respond to the root causes of the violence and poverty that have plagued Colombia, while embracing and respecting human rights.

I have traveled to Colombia many times over the past 22 years. I have visited Arauca, Montes de Maria, Cauca and Valle, Cali and Sumapaz. I have spent days in Cartagena and Barrancabermeja, Sucre, Putumayo, Cordoba, and Antioquia. I have had the privilege to meet in their home communities with people victimized by the armed conflict, human rights defenders, journalists, Afro-Colombian and indigenous leaders, parents who have lost children to violence, campesinos forced off their land, and women who organize to sustain their communities. They have in common their desire for peace and social justice.

As Members of this subcommittee are aware, Colombia has been ravaged by internal armed conflict for decades. The U.S. strategically supported the negotiations that produced the 2016 peace accords with the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia guerrilla movement (FARC), leading to the demobilization of 13,000 FARC members, most of whom remain committed to civilian life today. The 2016 accords provided a comprehensive framework for addressing deeply rooted structural inequalities in the rural sector, which not incidentally contributed to incentivize coca production. But Colombia's prior government, led by Ivan Duque, failed to fully implement the accords, which left the rural population at the mercy of other illegal armed actors and allowed the drug trade to continue to flourish. At the end of the Duque presidency, illegal armed groups were present throughout the country and coca leaf

production was at a record high, in spite of more than 20 years of record U.S. investment in counter-narcotics, and de facto, counter-insurgency.

The Petro government is deeply committed not only to fully implementing the 2016 accords, but to advancing peace processes with other illegal armed groups in order to consolidate peace throughout the country. The government's plans are ambitious – they may be overly ambitious. But after a year in office, the government has held three rounds of negotiations with the last remaining major guerrilla group, the National Liberation Army (ELN), and a fourth round is scheduled to begin August 14. The UN Security Council, the European Union, the OAS, Canada, and the United Kingdom are all on board.

Surely a Colombia fully at peace is in the interests of the United States. Yet some Members of Congress are seeking to put obstacles in the path of these negotiations because Cuba is a guarantor country – as it was for the negotiations with the FARC. I am thankful that the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops has just come out strongly in support of Colombia's peace process with the ELN.

On counter-narcotics, the Petro government has been clear that it will pursue a different strategy that will target large drug traffickers, money launderers, corrupt officials, and organized crime, instead of small cultivators. The government's interest in trying something different can hardly come as a surprise. In 2020 the final report of the congressionally-mandated Western Hemisphere Drug Policy Commission found that “[w]hile Plan Colombia was a counterinsurgency success, it was a counternarcotics failure.” The war on drugs in Colombia has been costly in money and lives, and it has not produced the desired results. We should, at a minimum, remain open to the opportunity to develop a new approach with our long-standing ally.

In 2022, as the government of Ivan Duque was drawing to an end but before the election of Gustavo Petro, the Organization of Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), of which Colombia is a member state, reported that Colombia had “one of the highest levels of poverty, income equality and labor market informality in Latin America.” The OECD recommendations to Colombian authorities included raising more revenue from personal income taxes; fostering the formalization of employment; merging the two existing public health systems into a single system; and creating a basic non-contributory pension benefit. These recommendations targeted structural problems in the Colombian economy that have existed for decades that successive governments failed to adequately address and that contributed to the explosion of street protests in 2021 that the Duque government brutally repressed.

The labor, health and pension reforms presented by the Petro government and currently being considered in the Colombian congress, and the new National Development Plan, approved by a vote of 120-12 and focused on environmental protection and green energy transition, may or may not be sufficient to fix these long-standing structural distortions. But the Petro government's decision to attempt reform is an appropriate response to deep-seated problems that have long fostered social unrest. Members of Congress should encourage these initiatives, monitor their development closely, and refrain from dismissing them out of hand.

At a time of constant concern over democratic backsliding and growing fear of the spread of authoritarianism, Colombia is a bright spot. Not only does Freedom House rate Colombia as “free,” but in a report marking the 17th consecutive year of decline in global freedom, Colombia showed the greatest positive improvement in the western hemisphere. Civil society is vibrant and active; there is no foreign agent law; and there are no barriers to receiving foreign resources. Over the last year, protests by opponents of the Petro government, including retired military and police openly calling for the removal of the government, have proceeded without repression or killings, in stark contrast to the treatment of protesters by the Duque government, which earned rebukes from the Inter-American Human Rights Commission and the UN. Upon assuming office, Petro immediately moved to strengthen compliance with international human rights standards by joining new agreements, removing limitations on visits and investigations by international rights bodies, and renewing the mandate of the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights for another nine years. Well-known human rights defenders staff key positions in the new administration, up to and including the Minister of Defense. The reforms the government has proposed are being debated and approved – or not – in the Colombian congress.

President Biden and the State Department have been both supportive and judicious in their support of many of the economic, social, development, and human rights initiatives of the Petro government. In short, long-held U.S. and congressional priorities and investments in Colombia continue to advance. Of particular note is the bilateral agreement to work with Colombian Vice President Francia Elena Márquez Mina, a former human-rights and environmental activist and lawyer, on the implementation of the ethnic chapter of the 2016 peace accord. Also notable is the cooperation between our countries on issues such as extradition, migration, and Venezuela. While discussions continue around the best counterdrug strategies to pursue, the new government has had noteworthy successes in narcotics interdictions.

I’m sure the testimony of the hearing’s Administration witnesses will reveal the many important interests that the U.S. has in Colombia. Those interests are best served by respectful, informed engagement and dialogue, and collaboration on mutually beneficial initiatives to improve the wellbeing and lives of the Colombian people.

RESPONSES TO QUESTIONS SUBMITTED FOR THE RECORD

**Question for the Record Submitted to
PDAS Wells by
Representative Sydney Kamlager-Dove (# 1-4)
House Foreign Affairs Committee
July 27, 2023, 2:30**

Question 1:

Does the State Department have plans to restart the United States-Colombia Action Plan for Racial and Ethnic Equality (CAPREE)? How might it be broadened to include the 2016 Colombia Peace Accords Ethnic Chapter and its implementation?

Answer 1:

The State Department and the Government of Colombia plan to restart CAPREE and hold discussions on a strengthened operating structure. The State Department remains committed to ensuring that CAPREE engages and benefits marginalized racial and ethnic communities in the United States and Colombia, including people of African descent and Indigenous communities. One of CAPREE's goals -- fostering dialogue with civil society organizations -- will advance implementation of the Ethnic Chapter of the 2016 Peace Accord.

**Question for the Record Submitted to
PDAS Wells by
Representative Sydney Kamlager-Dove (No. 2 to No. 4)
House Foreign Affairs Committee
July 27, 2023, 2:30**

Question 2:

Illegal mining causes massive environmental degradation of precious natural resources and contributes to human rights abuses against the indigenous communities who live on targeted land.

- **Mr. Wells and Mr. Natiello**, what progress has the U.S. made with the Petro Administration to implement the 2018 MOU to combat illicit mining in Colombia, and what are the main challenges we still face?

Answer 2:

At the March 28 U.S.-Colombia High-Level Dialogue in Washington, both governments agreed to sign a new five-year MOU to address illegal gold mining. The Department of State recently shared our proposed revisions with the Colombian Ministry of Mines and Energy. Opportunities for increased U.S. support to target criminal structures include the following: increasing yellow machinery control, augmenting investigative capacity, strengthening law enforcement collaboration, facilitating training on

organized crime and money laundering prosecutions, and increasing formalization of the licit mining sector. USAID engages with the Government of Colombia to reduce environmental degradation from artisanal and small-scale mining, support alternative livelihoods, and improve gold traceability.

**Question for the Record Submitted to
PDAS Wells by
Representative Sydney Kamlager-Dove (No. 3 to No. 4)
House Foreign Affairs Committee
July 27, 2023, 2:30**

Question 3:

One persistent issue Colombia faces that seems to have gotten worse in recent years is the killing of social leaders, including human rights defenders and community, land, and environmental advocates, by illegal armed groups.

- **Mr. Wells and Mr. Natiello**, how is the U.S. helping to build the capacity of Colombia's justice system, including the Attorney General's office, to hold perpetrators of this violence accountable and combat these threats to democracy?

Answer 3:

The State Department and USAID directly support efforts to protect Colombia's human rights and environmental defenders from threats and attacks through foreign assistance and by leveraging enduring relationships with the government and civil society. USAID programs support the transitional justice system, enhance monitoring and analysis of human rights

conditions, promote stronger human rights legislation, protect vulnerable populations, and foster a culture of human rights and social dialogue.

We also work with Colombian government partners to strengthen their ability to investigate and prosecute threats and attacks against human rights and environmental defenders. For the first half of 2023, the UN reported a 19 percent year-on-year decrease in homicides of social leaders. Through embassy engagement and INL support, the Colombian National Police added 100 additional investigators to the *Cuerpo Elite*, its special unit devoted to investigating crimes against human rights defenders. INL worked with Colombia's Attorney General's Office to increase the cases solved rate by nearly 16 percent over two years. Ultimately, the best way to protect human rights defenders is to dismantle criminal groups that attack them.

**Question for the Record Submitted to
PDAS Wells by
Representative Sydney Kamlager-Dove (No. 4 to No. 4)
House Foreign Affairs Committee
July 27, 2023, 2:30**

Question 4:

Full implementation of the 2016 peace accords is vitally important to Colombia's long-term stability and prosperity. A report recently came out from the University of Notre Dame, which contracts with the State Department to monitor the peace accords in Colombia, highlighting concerns about the slow pace of implementing commitments targeting women and LGBTQ+ people.

- **Mr. Wells and Mr. Natiello**, how is the United States supporting Colombia's efforts to ensure gender is being mainstreamed into the full implementation of the Final Accord?

Answer 4:

Successful Peace Accord implementation creates the conditions for sustainable progress on stability, counternarcotics, strengthening human rights, social justice, inclusion of ethnic communities, conservation, and economic development. The Department of State's FY 2024 budget request included substantial funding to support Peace Accord implementation, address drivers of tension and conflict, and help expand state presence and

services into areas deeply affected by conflict and illicit economies. Funding will support inclusion of marginalized populations in programs that seek to protect against threats of violence and achieve their full integration into communities deeply affected by conflict.

**Questions for the Record Submitted to
Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary Mark Wells by
Representative Joaquin Castro (1-14)
House Foreign Affairs Committee Hearing
July 27, 2023**

Question 1:

(Inflation Reduction Act) How is the Department of State supporting Colombia's integration into supply chains, including for electric vehicles and batteries, under the provisions of the Inflation Reduction Act?

Answer 1:

The United States values our important economic partnership with Colombia, a relationship strengthened by the framework of the 2012 U.S.-Colombia Trade Promotion Agreement. U.S. Embassy Bogotá works closely with business associations to promote investment in nearshoring supply chains to Colombia, particularly on its north coast. To develop Colombia's electric vehicle manufacturing capacity, Colombia's Ministry of Commerce, Industry, and Tourism designed a priority project to strengthen policies and regulatory capacity, and cited IRA tax credits as a potential source of support for the project.

Question 2:

(Inflation Reduction Act) What are the priorities identified by the Colombian government for cooperation between the United States and Colombia on tackling climate change?

Answer 2:

The United States cooperates extensively with the Government of Colombia to combat climate change. During the March 2023 U.S.-Colombia High-Level Dialogue, our governments pledged to cooperate on: improved greenhouse gas monitoring and measurement systems; climate finance; sustainable forest-based economies; countering deforestation and its drivers (including illegal gold mining and other nature crimes); wildfire management; methane emissions reduction in the agriculture and oil and gas sectors; and climate-smart agriculture.

Question 3:

(Peace Process) The Department of State pledged that our government would 'accompany' the Ethnic Chapter of the 2016 peace accords to empower Afro-descendant and Indigenous communities affected by conflict, poverty, and exclusion, and support their rights and aspirations.

- What specific steps is the Biden administration taking to support the full implementation of the 2016 Peace Accords, including the ethnic chapter?

Answer 3:

The U.S. government coordinates with the Colombian government and like-minded partners to bolster the Ethnic Chapter's objectives. U.S. Embassy Bogotá established an Ethnic Inclusion Interagency Working Group that meets regularly with Colombian government and civil society actors to bolster cooperation and strengthen progress toward implementing the Chapter. Our whole-of-government approach supports marginalized communities by increasing their political and economic participation and improving rural security, health, and educational opportunities.

Question 4:

(Small Business Network of the Americas) The Small Business Network of the Americas is a program that has been funded by the US government, including the Department of State, to support the establishment of small business development centers in the Western Hemisphere. That has included at least 117 locations in Colombia. What efforts is the Department of State taking to continue to support the Small Business Network of the Americas in Colombia?

Answer 4:

In 2018, the Illinois Small Business Development Center (SBDC) at Bradley University and EAN University in Bogotá partnered as recipients of a Small Business Network of the Americas (SBNA) small grant, which allowed for a two-way exchange and resulted in EAN creating its first SBDC.

SBNA activities have resumed post COVID-19, and the Department of State continues to convene regional SBDCs. The next SBNA activity is planned for September 5 on the margins of the America's SBDC annual conference. We expect Colombian SBDCs will participate in the event.

Question 5:

How many individuals has the Safe Mobility Centers in Colombia processed to date (August 3rd, 2023)? Which lawful pathways these individuals have been provided access to?

Answer 5:

In Colombia, our international organization partners are reviewing applications and began scheduling appointments on August 1. We do not have exact figures for the first days of interviews starting on August 1, but as of August 10, more than 100 individuals have been referred to the U.S. Refugee Admissions Program (USRAP) from the Colombia Safe Mobility Office (SMO). The Safe Mobility initiative is designed to provide information about and access to a range of lawful pathways to the United States and other countries as well. Third-country resettlement is one option available for those who qualify via SMOs. Those not referred for further consideration for resettlement to the United States through the Safe Mobility initiative receive information on other potential pathways, including humanitarian parole, family reunification programs, and labor pathways to the United States.

Question 6:

How is the Department of State ensuring applicants have the same access and rights as those who would normally apply at the border, including access to legal counsel?

Answer 6:

Safe Mobility Offices (SMOs) provide information about and access to protection pathways (the U.S. Refugee Admissions Program (USRAP) and humanitarian parole) and other lawful pathways (such as labor pathways and nationality-specific parole programs), based on established eligibility criteria. The U.S. Refugee Admissions Program operates exclusively overseas and does not involve a judicial process.

Question 7:

(Human Rights) Colombia has seen an increase in violence against human rights defenders and environmental defenders, particularly those from indigenous or African descent.

- How is State working with Colombian officials to protect human rights defenders and ensure access to justice?

Answer 7:

The State Department and USAID directly support efforts to protect Colombia's human rights and environmental defenders from threats and attacks through foreign assistance and by leveraging enduring relationships with the government and civil society. USAID programs support the transitional justice system, enhance monitoring and analysis of human rights conditions, promote stronger human rights legislation, protect vulnerable populations, and foster a culture of human rights and social dialogue.

We also work with Colombian government partners to strengthen their ability to investigate and prosecute threats and attacks against human rights and environmental defenders. For the first half of 2023, the UN reported a 19 percent year-on-year decrease in social leader homicides. Through embassy engagement and INL support, the Colombian National

Police added 100 additional investigators to the *Cuerpo Elite*, a special unit devoted to investigating crimes against human rights defenders. INL worked with Colombia's attorney general's office to increase the cases solved rate by nearly 16 percent over two years. Ultimately, the best way to protect human rights defenders is to dismantle criminal groups that attack them.

Question 8:

Colombia has been a regional leader in providing status and safety for migrants and asylum seekers around the Americas. Can you elaborate on our collaboration with Colombia on addressing migration and how we and other countries are learning from their model's success and challenges?

Answer 8:

The United States collaborates closely with Colombia to strengthen humane migration management, protect vulnerable migrants, and counter smuggling in the Darién. The Governments of the United States, Colombia, and Panama continue to cooperate to end the illicit movement of people and goods through the Darién, open new lawful and flexible pathways for tens of thousands of migrants and refugees, and launch a plan to reduce poverty and promote economic opportunities in border communities.

Question 9:

Colombia has been a regional leader in providing status and safety for migrants and asylum seekers around the Americas. How is the United States supporting the integration of the millions of Venezuelan refugees in Colombia?

Answer 9:

The United States supports Colombia's efforts to stabilize, protect, and integrate Venezuelan migrant populations into Colombian society, including through facilitating lawful economic opportunities for migrants and expanding temporary protected status to more Venezuelans in Colombia. U.S. Ambassador to the United Nations Linda Thomas-Greenfield announced in March more than \$140 million in additional U.S. government humanitarian assistance and more than \$31 million in development funding to respond to the needs of vulnerable Venezuelans.

Question 10:

What are the priorities for USAID programs in Colombia? How are these programs addressing the issues of peace and security, economic inclusion, drug trafficking, protecting the environment, and migration?

Answer 10:

USAID's programs support Colombia's efforts to become a more stable, peaceful, and prosperous country through inclusive governance and equitable growth. To bolster these efforts, USAID programs focus on supporting the development of a society that is more cohesive, inclusive, and resilient to conflict; strengthening governance to meet citizen needs and increase citizen confidence in the state; promoting equitable and environmentally sustainable economic growth; and enhancing stability in areas impacted by migration from Venezuela.

Specific examples of how USAID programs are addressing the issues of peace and security, economic inclusion, drug trafficking, protecting the environment, and migration include:

- **Peace and Security:** USAID supports Colombia's efforts to secure just and lasting peace by expanding justice and victims assistance services to conflict-affected areas, resolving disputes, and promoting increased respect for the rule of law.
- **Economic Inclusion:** USAID includes marginalized populations, including Indigenous and Afro-Colombian communities, as partners and beneficiaries, and improves their ability to realize their socio-economic and civil rights, and access services and justice.
- **Drug Trafficking:** USAID supports the diversification of the rural economy and the development of sustainable, licit alternatives to coca production.
- **Protecting the Environment:** USAID's programs in Colombia support sustainable integrated rural development to advance inclusive

economic growth, protect biodiversity, contribute to peace, and address climate shocks.

- **Migration:** USAID's programs support civil society organizations, Government of Colombia agencies, and international organizations to address the needs of migrants, returnees, and host communities through access to health, education, and economic opportunities. USAID also supports government agencies in developing a comprehensive policy response to migration.

Question 11:

What are the key United States interests that USAID programs in Colombia support? How would a decrease or suspension of funding impact those United States interests?

Answer 11:

USAID programs in Colombia support key interests of the United States such as promoting peace and stability, countering narcotics trafficking and security threats, ensuring regional security, fostering economic prosperity and trade, upholding human rights and democracy, supporting environmental conservation, and addressing migration challenges.

USAID works with the Government of Colombia (GoC) to manage its borders and expand health, education, and economic inclusion opportunities to the additional Venezuelan population. In addition, USAID collaborates with the GoC to improve the migrants' access to information and services, and provide Temporary Protective Status for a period of 10 years to more than 2.5 million Venezuelan migrants residing in Colombia. A decrease or suspension of funding would reduce USAID's ability to support integration of migrants in Colombia, thereby exacerbating migration

challenges within the region, and increasing the number of irregular migrants making the dangerous journey to the U.S. southwest border.

USAID also focuses heavily on expanding state presence and services into areas deeply affected by the conflict and illicit economies; advancing land formalization; and reducing coca cultivation, illegal mining, and deforestation in support of the 2016 Peace Accord.

In sum, budget reductions would reduce the number of municipalities in which USAID can implement critical programming. Ultimately, reductions in funding would undermine the progress made in promoting peace and stability, weaken counternarcotics efforts and regional security, hinder economic growth and trade partnerships, impede the advancement of human rights and democracy, compromise environmental conservation, and exacerbate migration challenges, thus jeopardizing key U. S. interests in Colombia and regional stability.

Question 12:

(Peace Process) The Department of State pledged that our government would 'accompany' the Ethnic Chapter of the 2016 peace accords to empower Afro-descendant and Indigenous communities affected by conflict, poverty, and exclusion, and support their rights and aspirations.

- What specific steps is the Biden administration taking to support the full implementation of the 2016 Peace Accords, including the ethnic chapter?

Answer 12:

The U.S. government coordinates with the Colombian government and like-minded partners to bolster the Ethnic Chapter's objectives. U.S. Embassy Bogotá established an Ethnic Inclusion Interagency Working Group that meets regularly with Colombian government and civil society actors to bolster cooperation and strengthen progress toward implementing the Chapter. Our whole-of-government approach supports marginalized communities by increasing their political and economic participation and improving rural security, health, and educational opportunities.

Question 13:

The Small Business Network of the Americas is a program that has been funded by the US government, including the Department of State, to support the establishment of small business development centers in the Western Hemisphere. That has included at least 117 locations in Colombia. What efforts is USAID taking to continue to support the Small Business Network of the Americas in Colombia?

Answer 13:

USAID is actively involved in sustaining support for the Small Business Network of the Americas in Colombia through its ongoing commitment to fostering economic development and entrepreneurship. This includes collaborating with local partners, government entities, and business associations to enhance the capabilities of small business. USAID's efforts encompass providing technical assistance, business strengthening programs, e-commerce training, and mentorship opportunities to promote business growth, innovation, and job creation. Additionally, USAID works to facilitate networking and knowledge exchange among small business owners, entrepreneurs, and stakeholders. By strengthening the Small Business Network of the Americas, USAID aims to empower Colombian

entrepreneurs, stimulate economic resilience, and contribute to overall sustainable development in the country.

Question 14:

Colombia has seen an increase in violence against human rights defenders and environmental defenders, particularly those from indigenous or African descent. How is USAID working with Colombian officials to protect human rights defenders and ensure access to justice?

Answer 14:

USAID is collaboratively partnering with Colombian officials at both the local and national levels to address the surge in violence against human rights and environmental defenders, particularly those from Indigenous and African descent backgrounds. This collaboration involves bolstering the capacities of local authorities, law enforcement agencies, and judicial systems to conduct thorough investigations and effectively prosecute instances of violence. USAID's efforts in Colombia extend to safeguarding the rights of social leaders, enhancing protection mechanisms for human rights defenders, overseeing protection commitments, and documenting the human rights landscape in priority areas. Moreover, USAID's programs in Colombia contribute to the implementation of the country's transitional justice system, enhancing the monitoring and analysis of human rights conditions, strengthening human rights legislation, raising awareness to

prevent rights violations, shielding vulnerable populations, and fostering a culture of human rights and social dialogue.