

Remarks Prior to a Meeting With President Iván Duque Márquez of Colombia
March 10, 2022

President Biden. Welcome, folks. I'm honored to welcome President Duque here today. We're friends. We've known each other for a long while. And we were reminiscing about how far back we go and how he knew Beau when—he met Beau when he was here.

And as you know, Mr. President, I've been deeply engaged with the relationship with Colombia for a long time, going back more than 20 years to that old Plan Colombia. And, in fact, when we first met visiting Bogota, I think it was 2018—

President Duque. Yes.

President Biden. —you and I.

And I'm proud that we've been able to work together during my first year of my administration and to continue strengthening what I consider to be—and I've said many times over the years—the essential partnership we need in this hemisphere. Colombia is the linchpin, in my view, to the whole hemisphere, north and south. I really mean it. And it's an essential partnership.

And I want to thank you for immediately condemning Russia's unjustifiable invasion and the atrocities they are committing in Ukraine, and calling for the withdrawal of Russian troops. Not everyone in the hemisphere or anywhere else has done that, and I want to thank you for that.

It's not just a threat to Europe and Ukraine, but it's a threat to the international peace and stability. And so Colombia's voice is making it clear that you share our view and that there's a lot more at stake than just the immediate undertaking.

The American people and the entire world have rallied to support the Ukrainian people. We have donated, thus far, a billion dollars in security assistance and more shipments of defensive equipment are on the way as I speak. We're coordinating deliveries of anti-armor and anti-air capabilities with a wide range of our allies and partners, and we're providing tens of thousands of tons of humanitarian needs, from food, water, and medicine.

And Vice President Harris, today, is in Poland, where she announced that we'll be contributing another \$53 million to the World Food Programme and other humanitarian organizations to support those displaced from their homes. And she also announced the delivery of Patriot missile battery to support our NATO allies in Poland.

And our economic sanctions are crippling the Russian economy right now. The ruble has lost half its value. It now would take literally almost 200 rubles to equal \$1 because of how it's been so damaging. The ruble is—any—we cut off U.S. imports of Russian oil and gas, targeting the main artery of Russia's economy.

And last night the House of Representatives passed a bill that included more than \$13 billion in Ukrainian assistance. And the United States and the people around the world are going to continue to support the Ukrainian people, I believe, as they defend their country. Ukraine will never, never be a victory for Putin.

Now, I've said for a long time, Colombia is the keystone to our shared efforts to build a hemisphere that is prosperous, secure, and democratic. And we talked about the struggle of democracies in the 21st century.

And I want to thank you, Mr. President, for your leadership on issues that matter to everyone in this region: combating the pandemic, advancing health security, taking on the climate crisis with urgency and genuine ambition, and for welcoming refugees from Venezuela and working toward an orderly, secure, and humane way to tackle the unprecedented levels of migration.

Colombia has done an incredible job, and I know the political consequences for taking that kind of stand, which is the right stand, are not always the most popular.

Our hemisphere migration challenges cannot be solved by one nation and—or any—and any one border. We have to work together.

And so today I'm calling for a new framework of how nations throughout the region can collectively manage migration in the Western Hemisphere. There's something we've been discussing with partners throughout the region, including you, Mr. President. And our goal is going to be to sign a regional declaration on migration and protection in June in Los Angeles when the United States hosts the Summit of the Americas, which we talked a little bit about.

And this can be a piecemeal approach, in my view. It needs to include far more support for countries like Colombia that are hosting the lion's share of the refugees and migrants. It is an obligation of all of us, not just Colombia. And it needs to include far more support, as I said. And it needs to dramatically expand access to resettlement and other legal pathways to migration. And it needs to aggressively pursue the criminal smugglers and traffickers who prey on all these folks for profit.

That's the best way, in my view, for us to live up to our collective values and welcome immigrants and refugees, keep migrants safe, and secure all our countries.

Mr. President, the United States is going to continue to do our part to support Colombia as you care for Venezuelan refugees. We've already shared 5.5 million doses of COVID-19 vaccine with Colombia now. And I'm pleased to say I'm going to be able to send an additional 2 million doses to help vaccinate the migrant population.

And we're also going to continue to strengthen our longstanding bilateral security arrangements to fight the transnational criminal activities that occur in this hemisphere and to meet the regional and global challenges that we face, both north and south.

Today I'm proud to announce that I intend to designate Colombia a major non-NATO ally, because that's exactly what you are, a major, major non-NATO ally. And this is a recognition of the unique and close relationship between our countries. And we're approaching, as you pointed out to me and we talked about, the hundredth anniversary of the—that relationship.

We stood with Colombia as you fought for your country and negotiated historic peace. And we're going to continue to stand together and build peace, reconciliation, and, God willing, a prosperous future for all Colombians.

And finally, as we're celebrating 200 years of diplomatic relations—I said 100; you can tell I'm getting old—it was 200 years of diplomatic relations between our countries, and we've a long, shared history. And we're looking forward to a future that our nations will build together.

To that end, Mr. President, I'm pleased that our nations are agreed on a new bicentennial partnership that's going to form the basis of a comprehensive cooperation going forward between our countries. The U.S.-Colombia relationship is the foundation, in my view, of regional security and prosperity, and it's only going to grow more important in the years ahead.

So thank you for the visit. It's wonderful just to be with you in person. And I look forward to our discussion today.

And we did talk about so much more that we can do together, which we had a chance to talk about when you and I had our conversation. We finally both had to look at one another and said, "I guess we have people out there." [Laughter] We were so wrapped up in our discussions.

But thank you, again, Mr. President, for being here. You're welcome. You're always welcome here.

President Duque. Thank you, Mr. President.

President Biden. The floor is yours.

President Duque. Thank you so much, President Biden, for having us here at the White House. It's a great honor for us to visit you. But it's also a great honor for us to celebrate 200 years of the bilateral relationship that we have built based on values and based on principles.

We have to also express not only our gratitude, but the continuous gratitude for you being one of the architects of Plan Colombia. That was a milestone in the bilateral relationship and that allowed Colombia to face and defeat many challenges that we had over the last two decades. So I also want you command—to commend you for that.

We also believe that the partnership that we have built has been bipartisan, bicameral, and has demonstrated that over time this relationship only gets to a higher level. And we appreciate a lot that you have made the decision to designate Colombia a primary non-NATO ally because that is the recognition of the values and the principles that we have shared.

We also want to thank your support for being the major donor of vaccines to Colombia. You have been able to contribute to save the lives of millions of citizens. And this additional 2 million donation of vaccines to Colombia will also be used to attend the needs of many migrants that are in our country.

We also want to reiterate that the next Summit of the Americas is going to be a great opportunity to embrace the cause of the Build Back Better World, an initiative that is aimed to increase investment, job opportunities, and to allow through trade and investment to generate jobs that would also be a deterrent of farther migratory pressures in the hemisphere.

We want Colombia to be one of the reference models of B3W. We have projects that are advancing in clean energy, climate adaptation, infrastructure. So we consider that we want to be a reference for other countries in Latin America.

I also want to express my gratitude for all the support we've gotten from U.S. agencies in order to attend the needs of the 1.8 million Venezuelan migrants in our territory.

They have crossed the border with frozen bones. They have come in—they have come to our country without any access to health services or food. So we've been able to attend. And the support of USAID in the border zone is something that has made a very important contribution.

We also believe that the TPS status that we have granted to these 1.8 million citizens and that will receive their card by no longer than August this year, it's going to allow them to look for jobs, enter the Social Security system, and most importantly, Mr. President, they are going to be able to contribute to the Colombian economy, but also to improve their life being. So this is something that makes a strong sense to us.

But we also have to say that in the times we're facing, we have made a strong stand against the brutal, unjustified attack from Russia to Ukraine. This has been a very horrifying moment for the world. And we have to condemn with a very strong sentiment. You have done it. We have done it. And we have also said that through the multilateral system, we will also be pressing for any sanctions to be implemented because nothing justifies the bloodbath that we have been seeing continuously over the news in the last weeks.

We have also spoken to the NATO Secretary General. And I have been speaking with leaders in Poland, Romania, Slovakia, and other countries in Europe to offer Colombia's advice on migration management in their circumstances. So we'll be there. And we will also participate actively in giving that support.

We have also made a humanitarian contribution through NATO, as the only Latin American country that is a partner of NATO. And we believe that at this moment, we have to do all we can to attend their circumstance.

And last but not least, Mr. President, I think there are two very important subjects in which we have been working closely. And this climate action—Colombia approved the climate action bill by a unanimous decision in Congress.

President Biden. Impressive.

President Duque. And we have been also able to launch an energy transition program that has allowed us to pass from barely 28 megawatts of installed capacity in nonconventional renewables to 2,800 megawatts, which is 100 times of what we had when we assumed office.

And we are working with your administration in the protection of areas in our country—maritime areas and on-land areas. So we will not wait on to 2030 to meet the 30 by 30 criteria. And in this year, before the month of August, we'll have 30 percent of the Colombian territory declared a protected area.

We're having U.S. support in this. We're also restoring 1 million corals and protecting the mangroves in very important zones of our country. And this is also part of their bilateral agenda.

So, President Biden, to you and to the administration, but also to the American people, we feel proud that 200 years of this bilateral relationship, today, with your decision of declaring Colombia a strategic non-NATO partner, is taking the bilateral relationship to the highest peak ever.

Thank you so much.

President Biden. Well, thank you. Appreciate it.

NOTE: The President spoke at 2:31 p.m. in the Cabinet Room at the White House. In his remarks, he referred to President Vladimir Vladimirovich Putin of Russia. He also referred to H.R. 2471. President Duque referred to Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization.

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