

Remarks Following a Meeting With President Carlos Mauricio Funes Cartagena of El Salvador

March 8, 2010

President Obama. Hello, everybody. I want to welcome President Funes and the First Lady of El Salvador to the United States. *Bienvenido.* We are very grateful and honored by his visit. I've been following the President since his election 9 months ago and have been very favorably impressed by the steps that he's taking to try to break down political divisions within the country and move it forward with a spirit of progress and focusing on prosperity at every level of Salvadoran society.

Obviously, the friendship between our two countries in part is the result of the 2 million Salvadorans who are here in the United States working, sending remittances back to El Salvador. Those ties provide an outstanding foundation for continuing cooperation between our two countries.

That cooperation has to be based on mutual interest and mutual respect. We've discussed ways that we can continue to improve our trading relationship. Over half of El Salvador's exports go to the United States and over one-third of its imports come from the United States, so we already have strong economic ties there. But I very much applaud the President's vision that growth in El Salvador has to be balanced and reach all aspects of Salvadoran society, that it has to be socially inclusive. And we want to assist in any way we can in making sure that there's adequate credit and infrastructure and other tools that can bring about the long-term prosperity within El Salvador.

And there are some wonderful projects that we can do multilaterally. For example, I know the United States, Brazil, and El Salvador jointly are interested in pursuing additional measures that can expand biofuels and energy development that could be good for all three countries.

We also discussed security issues in the region. I think that there has been progress within Central America, but we still have concerns, obviously, about drug trafficking, about gangs. The security challenges, obviously, are connected to the economic challenges within the re-

gion, and we want to be supportive not only in addressing the symptoms that we see in terms of crime, but also the root causes, and I know that's something that the President cares deeply about as well.

And finally, I want to congratulate President Funes in the leadership that he's already shown both regionally and internationally. His pragmatic and wise approach to the situation in Honduras, I think, helped to contribute to a solution in that country that promises long-term stability and peace. The generosity of the Salvadoran people towards Haiti in the aftermath of the terrible earthquake there, I think, is another example of his vision for a region that supports each other.

And so my main goal today is communicating how interested the United States is in continuing to be an equal partner with El Salvador and other countries in the region, a relationship based on mutual interest and mutual respect. And I wish him all the best as he continues to pursue his goals for a more prosperous and secure El Salvador.

President Funes. Friends of the press, I am extremely surprised about this excellent summary. After 20 years of being a journalist, I thought that I could summarize our interview of more than an hour in a better way, but President Obama has surprised me in how he has summarized the meeting.

I would like to talk about two or three things. I have spoken to President Obama about this, and I want to commend him because he shares the same democratic values, and his new vision of how he is dealing with the hemisphere and particularly in Central America.

Traditionally, Central America has been seen as a migratory problem for the United States. But Central America, and in particularly El Salvador, needs to generate the opportunities of work in order to be able to keep people back in El Salvador. And as they have a better job generation and people have better health and education, people will be able to remain in the countries and have a better life.

We have spoken with President Obama about how to make a strategic alliance and face common problems that we have in the nation, such as drug traffic and organized crime. And the alliance that we wish to make is in order to combat poverty and to get people out of marginal situations and out of the exclusion. This has to be a regional effort, and we have to—and they have social policies that we need to build together.

The U.S. needs to be a strategic—or we hope it will be a strategic partner for our country. And in this way, the people will have better social well-being and we will be able to combat drug traffic, organized crime, because they will not find—as we have new policies, they will not find fertile grounds.

I'm not here to ask President Obama to do for us what we haven't been able to do for such a long time. We have a big challenge on our hands, and one of our challenges is to have better tax collection in order to have more resources for the use of our Government. This has been going on for many decades, but basically, what we're looking for is funding for the

poor and small and medium enterprises in order to be able to create a better economic situation in El Salvador.

We have to restrengthen the productive network, and we have to have a different vision. But we definitely cannot blame the United States for the situation that we are in. And instead, we are looking for the United States to become a strategic partner, as President Obama so well said, not a bigger partner or a lesser partner, but an equal partner and an efficient partner.

And as President Obama's administration, we hope that there will be a good alliance and it will be a better world for us and for all—and a better administration.

President Obama. Muchas gracias. Thank you very much.

NOTE: The President spoke at 3:56 p.m. in the Oval Office at the White House. In his remarks, he referred to Vanda Pignato, wife of President Funes. President Funes spoke in Spanish, and his remarks were translated by an interpreter.

Remarks at an International Women's Day Reception March 8, 2010

Thank you, everybody. Please have a seat. Let me begin by just thanking some of the people who are participating here today. Michelle mentioned my outstanding Cabinet members, the extraordinary Members of Congress, and people who are in our senior White House team.

I also want to thank Ms. Kerry Washington for emceeding today. Give Kerry a big round of applause. Where is she? There she is. Ms. Katharine McPhee, who's going to be performing a song in the program—where's Katharine? She's around. She's practicing, getting her—she's here; I just saw her. Secretary Madeleine Albright is here today. And Ms. Mozhdah Jamalzadah is also going to be here performing a song in the program, so we want to thank her. Give her a big round of applause.

And there—then there's this lady here. [Laughter] FLOTUS, that's what we call her—FLOTUS. [Laughter] She is—I'm bi-

ased, I acknowledge, but I think she's a pretty good First Lady. Don't you think? She's pretty good. And I'm very sincere when I look at you adoringly. [Laughter] Yes.

Now, the story of America over the past 200 years—past 233 years is one of laws becoming more just, of a people becoming more equal, of a Union being perfected. It's a story of captives being set free and a movement to fulfill the promise of that freedom. It's a story of waves of weary travelers reconsecrating America as a nation of immigrants. It's a story of our gay and lesbian brothers and sisters making the most of that most American of demands, to be treated the same as everybody else. And it's a story of women, from those on the *Mayflower* to the one I'm blessed to call my wife, who looked across the dinner table and thought, I'm smarter than that guy. [Laughter]

The story of America's women, like the story of America itself, has had its peaks and val-