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# U.S.-COLOMBIA RELATIONS: A CONVERSATION WITH U.S. AMBASSADOR TO COLOMBIA KEVIN WHITAKER

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**Introduction:**

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P R O C E E D I N G S

MR. JONES: Good morning, everybody. This is Latin America week at Brookings. We had an event this morning on Mexico. We're delighted to have this event now, and tomorrow in partnership with the Atlantic Council and a number of other partners we're hosting an event, we're hosting Susan Rice to discuss President Obama's upcoming trip to Cuba. There is an awful lot going on in U.S.-Latin America relations and in Latin America itself. And we're delighted to be part of that.

It's a pleasure today to welcome Ambassador Kevin Whitaker to Brookings.

AMBASSADOR WHITAKER: Thank you.

MR. JONES: I was saying to him just in the green room that I'm feeling slightly bad for asking him to leave a relatively well-governed country to come to the fragile state of D.C. (laughter), but that's the way it goes. Diplomacy is a contact sport and it's good to have you here to talk about your work.

Kevin Whitaker was confirmed by the Senate in April of 2014 as ambassador to Colombia. Before that he had been the deputy assistant secretary of state for South America and the Bureau of Western Hemisphere Affairs. Unlike a number of ambassadors in high profile places he is a career civil servant. He served in the UK, Jamaica, Honduras, Nicaragua, and Venezuela. As deputy chief of mission he had been in the Office of Cuban Affairs, he's been deputy executive secretary and director of the Office of Andean Affairs, so hugely knowledgeable about the region and the issues and U.S.-Colombia and U.S.-Latin America relations. And in 2005 he was awarded the Secretary's Award for Public Affairs and Public Diplomacy.

What I think is really notable is that his tenure -- I'm not going to posit causality, though you can take it -- his tenure has coincided with really important advances in the peace process in Colombia. This is an impending piece, a long fought piece, but nevertheless real progress in the past period. And I think it illustrates the positive dimensions of U.S. engagement in internal conflict. We spend a lot of time talking about oh, we failed in Iraq and we failed here, et cetera, but actually there is a huge track record of successes in other parts of the world and Colombia is going to become one of the more important. It also I think illustrates, and I suspect Kevin will talk about this, the interaction between American power on the one hand, American diplomacy on the one hand, and a whole host of other actors

that are involved in the peace process. And we tend to obsess in Washington about the role we play, but of course there are lots of forces that work towards a peace process and it would be keen to hear about that.

President Santos has indicated that once Colombia signs the peace agreement they're going to be read to start contributing peace keeping forces, et cetera. It's a theme we've been developing here that Latin America, as it stabilizes, as it has stabilized over the last couple of decades, is increasingly contributing in a positive way to international order and international stability. I think the transition of Colombia from a large major enduring civil war and source of other forms of violence, to potentially a contributor to international order is a really striking development on the international stage.

So we're going to be extremely interested to hear what you have to say about the situation in Colombia and U.S.-Colombia relations and the peace process, and I suspect you'll have a very engaged audience. And thank you all for making it here despite Metro's best efforts to keep you away.

Following Ambassador Whitaker's remarks Harold Trinkunas, who is a Senior Fellow and directs our Latin America work, is going to moderate the conversation, but we'll very quickly involve all of you.

So thank you very much for being here. Over to you.

AMBASSADOR WHITAKER: Many thanks. (Applause) I just wanted to make three points just at the start here. And I realize we have a lot of people in the room who are very knowledgeable about Colombia and so I won't bore you with the basics. So three quick points.

First off, the post accord -- and there will be an accord -- the post accord is going to be fabulously expensive. And Colombia is confronting it at a time when it's under rather significant budget pressures. When I got to Colombia the dollar value of the Colombian budget was about $94 billion. And that was 18 months ago, 19 months ago. The dollar value of the Colombian budget now is about $64 billion. And that's merely because of the drop in the value of the peso. There's a lot of debate about how much the accord will cost or how much accord implementation will cost. Suffice it to say it will be tens of billions of dollars. And that money has to come from somewhere.

Secondly, there are end game challenges. This ride to the finish is not going to be like

landing at National Airport. There's going to be turbulence -- there already has been turbulence. And there are three things in particular that I'll mention and the broader implications that they have in my view. First off, on DDR, where the FARC will go to, what conditions they will go to these sites, and when they will go there, when they will actually give up their arms. And the challenge that's embedded in that is that the FARC is strategically defeated. The FARC does not have the capacity to overthrow the government of Colombia. When Pastrana was president -- 16 years ago, let's put it that way -- 16 years ago a majority of Colombians believed for some time that a military overthrow of the government was possible. And that's no longer the case. So it's strategically defeated but it feels like its views need to be taken into account. And so now when you have the Congress making decisions about where these concentration zones will be and the conditions under which they'll take place, the FARC objects dramatically to that.

Secondly, transitional justice. This is a huge issue. It's very difficult to manage. And the problem here, the embedded strategic problem it seems to me is this is the first significant conflict which is being resolved after the passage of the Treaty of Rome. And so the amnesty provisions which characterize end of conflict throughout the region previously no longer exist. So that can't be done.

Finally, President Santos has agreed to some sort of public consultation. It's meant to be a plebiscite. There's a lot of details that's associated with that. And the challenge here is that ending the war is a positive thing, and we all recognize that. And for a lot of Colombians it doesn't affect their day to day life. And you see this playing out in terms of public opinion, do people think a peace process is a good idea -- yes. Are they willing to finance it or agree to lessen conditions of detention for FARC members who violated law -- the answer to that question is consistently no. You get very high percentages of Colombians saying no. So there's three challenges embedded.

The final point that I will make is that -- any of these we can play out, but I'll just touch on briefly the accord implementation will be hard. There is a remarkable readiness for peace on the part of the institutions of government. Rafael Pardo has his Ministry of Post Conflict. They're looking at post conflict issues in a rigorous and significant and serious way. They are coordinating with the international community as they should be doing now. The Colombian Reintegration Agency, which is the agency which is charged with dealing with demobilizing combatants, is a state of the art institution which has the capacity now to handle the anticipated flow of former combatants. So they're ready. And I think we

should be ready as well. And President Obama's decision to request additional funds in FY '17 I think was a very important expression of our commitment in that regard. And I hope that we can be there for them. I think it's important that we be there for them going forward in this post accord period. It's great that the President has agreed that the Executive will ask for that. It is our responsibility to make the case to Congress as to the merits here, and we'll attempt to do so.

So just to begin with a few introductory comments.

MR. TRINKUNAS: Thank you, Mr. Ambassador. That was a great overview of where we stand today and I think I'd like to pivot off of some of your comments. To follow up a little bit on this issue of the post accord environment, I mean historically Colombia has actually been fairly good about negotiating agreements during this last 50 or 60 years, but there's just over and over again there has been an issue at the implementation stage. I mean accords have been reached, even leading to the reform of the constitution as you recall back in the whole processing in late '80s, early '90s. And it was good to hear that your assessment of the implementation side of things, which is one of the traditional weaknesses, was good. What about the issue of spoilers both sort of within the process and the people that are still outside the process, like the ELN for example and other organizations involved?

AMBASSADOR WHITAKER: In terms of spoilers I think you put your finger on the most significant one, which is the ELN. Obviously it would be far superior to conclude an agreement with ELN more or less at the same time on the same terms as the FARC. I think the government is continuing to push on that rock. The chances that that will happen in the same timeframe as the FARC I think is very small.

And so the import of that is if folks who are now in the FARC for any reason, for ideological reasons, for criminal reasons, because ELN is as involved in criminal activities as the FARC, if for any reason they seek to continue their activities there is a natural outlet for them. So that is a potential weakness.

I don't know if I would call it a spoiler, but I think that making sure that the Colombian people are fully on board with this and are willing to understand the nature of the challenge that confronts as a financial challenge, it's a kind of a cycle social challenge. There needs to be a knitting together of society. And of course that's the easiest thing in the world to say and it's something that's very hard to do

as a practical matter and it will take years to do. That to me seems to be one of the more significant challenges that they face.

MR. TRINKUNAS: No, absolutely. I think that makes a lot of sense. And one of the other things just to pick up on one of your early points about the role of the United States and Colombia played in partnership in trying to address this issue. Obviously the U.S. has played an important role, but Colombia has always put up, you know, a larger part of the resources to implement things like Plan Colombia and the other parts of the strategy. The Colombian government, to try to bring this conflict to a conclusion -- obviously I thought it was a very striking figure you gave, you know, of reduction in dollar value by one-third of the Colombian budget as they go into the post peace accord environment.

What role do you see for the U.S. in terms of assistance? I mean the U.S. has played a significant role in the past, how do you see that shifting in the future going forward?

AMBASSADOR WHITAKER: We've done a fair amount of thinking about this. Just knowing that we have some folks here that are very knowledgeable I'm going to go into a little bit more detail quickly than I might do otherwise. The first thing is as you say -- Plan Colombia, our contribution to Plan Colombia is probably about four or five percent of the total value. And that four or five percent amounts to $10 billion. So it's not an inconsiderable amount of money, but it's only four or five percent of the total. The vast majority of the financial resources for Plan Colombia came from Colombians. We are now running at about $300 million a year in aid, which is generous and we're grateful for that. What we're looking for is a plus up in four areas where we believe that our abilities, our background, our knowledge in Colombia, permits us the chance to make a significant difference.

So first on the USAID side, USAID is already working on reintegration of former combatants on victims, on land reform, on land restitution. All of those are critical to the post conflict. We need to continue to be involved on counter narcotics front. The new narcotics numbers came out, they were not good. And this just underlines the importance of us continuing to be involved on this front and we hope to do so.

The third area that I think we need to be involved in is continued support on military financing. You know, I travel a lot around Colombia and I go to places where American ambassadors have never been or haven't been for many decades because of the changed security environment. And

one of the things I always ask to folks when I go to them, I say look, hasn't been an American ambassador here probably ever, I don't know if there will ever be one again, what's the one thing you want me to learn? What's the one thing you want me to take away? And a remarkable percentage of the time they will say roads, we need roads. We need roads to get our products to market, when the kid gets sick you can take him to the health clinic. As a practical matter, in the conflicted municipalities, I don't know that private industry is going to want to be involved there. And to me it seems logical that the Colombian military will be asked to pick up that burden. They have substantial engineering capacities. We can help them in that area. We can help them with planning, we can help them through the Corps of Engineers, we can help them think through the nature of the challenge.

And the final area, which is obviously very important, is demining. Colombia is the second most mined country in the world after Afghanistan. The Colombians estimate it will cost $350 million to demine, to make Colombia mine impact free. That's a lot of money. We have already pledged to seek about $20 million, which is a very generous contribution if we're able to make that happen. And it's just a fraction of what's required. So it's for that reason that President Obama announced a global demining fund for Colombia which we're working with the Norwegians and we hope that can be successful.

MR. TRINKUNAS: I want to pick up on one or two of your points here and ask you about the kind of narcotics area. I mean obviously we have a long standing relationship with the Colombians on this issue. As you said the latest numbers aren't great. But there has also been a shift in emphasis under in the Santos administration, a new approach, strategy in a sense for how to deal with the issue of illicit drugs in Colombia. How is U.S. thinking adapting to that, how are you engaging that new approach as Santos sort of pivots towards more of a public health approach? I mean the top line item is the decision to kind of end aerial fumigation and et cetera, et cetera.

AMBASSADOR WHITAKER: There is a lot there. I think that the Colombians want to focus very much on -- as they say they don't want to go after the weakest link, they don't want to go after the cocoa farmers or the people who are transporting cocaine. And not only do we now agree with that, we've always agreed with that. The approach that we take through DEA is to go after networks, and we have a counter network strategy. We have successfully, with the Colombians -- and this is really

Colombian achievements -- but the Medellin Cartel, the Cali Cartel, the Norte del Valle Cartel, one after another have been knocked down. The bakrim, the (speaking foreign language), criminal bands who are now some of the main players in the business, the average time in office if you will of a bakrim head is less than 14 months because of the counter network effort that we're making. And so we'll continue to do that. I think we agree on the point about going after networks.

Another component that has to be there is eradication. The elimination of aerial eradication was important, but I think it's also important to note two things. One is this was not a discretionary decision by the Colombian government. They were forced by a court ruling and believed in order to comply with the court ruling they needed to do away with it. And so we have to respect that, and we have to respect the courts in that regard. Secondly, at the time eradication was ended in October of '15, 60 percent of existing cocoa was in areas we couldn't spray anyway, border regions, indigenous reserves, national parks. There's a reason for that obviously, that the cocoa was migrating to areas that we couldn't spray, but the fact is those were areas we couldn't spray. So what they need to do now is engage more on the manual eradication side. The government is absolutely committed to ensuring that manual eradication is consensual and voluntary. That as a practical matter is -- I understand the logic of it, I support the logic of it, and as a practical matter it is extraordinarily difficult to do because it involves as a practical matter is going into little comarcas and talking to the cocoa farmers and negotiating deals with them on a one off basis. If there were a way to do this at a more global level, because talking to one campensino at a time when there are 100,000 cocoa growing families is a major activity. If there were a way to do it at a higher level that would be superior.

The final piece is interdiction. And, you know, we need to interdict on shore and we need to interdict offshore. Having said that, when we interdict, when the Colombians interdict offshore on the high seas all of the damage associated with the trade has already occurred. The environmental devastation, the money has gone already. I'm not saying it's a bad thing to interdict on the high seas, but you're affecting the Mexican cartels when you do that, which is a good thing, but the damage has already been done in Colombia and so the interdiction needs to take place internally as well.

I think we have what we can work with here, but as you say we're dealing with a dramatically changed situation.

MR. TRINKUNAS: And to what extent has the Colombian government really started to think about if they're going to move towards a policy of consensual manual eradication, the alternative development, alternative livelihoods piece. Because that's something that, with the exception of one experiment that worked quite well but was shut down, they really don't have a great track record on and to what extent is that factored into the post peace accords? I know there's a discussion of rural development.

AMBASSADOR WHITAKER: I mean this is a critical component here. One of the reasons that we know that alternative development is hard is because we as the U.S. government have failed catastrophically at it. So we have that experience under our belt. But you need at least three things to make it work right. One is you need security, because without security folks will be pressured to or will continue to grow cocoa. Secondly, you need another product and markets for that product, and third, you need infrastructure. The challenge of course is in the conflict municipalities, the 200 or so municipalities where you have cocoa or cocoa transport routes or FARC or some combination of the above. In many of those municipalities you have none of the three, not security, not infrastructure, not markets. And so it's really a matter of sort of starting from the ground up on this. With our experience we know what works and what doesn't, and we're committed to working with them on it. Let me give you an example. We've had a terrific experience working with Cacao. I was just up in Carmen de Bolivar in Montes de Maria, first American Ambassador to visit there in forever, and we have a cacao program that we've been working on there for seven years. There are real products, they're exporting to Europe; it's a great story. And when you plant a cacao bush or whatever it is, tree, from that second until you get the first product is two years, and that two years has to be managed somehow. There need to be opportunities and income that's associated with something. So one of the things the government has talked about is stipends for those families. That's a model that could potentially work.

MR. TRINKUNAS: I just want to touch on two more quick things before we go to the audience for -- we want to have your participation in this conversation with Ambassador Whitaker. One issue that we were talking about before we walked into the room was, you know, in comparison to some of other U.S. efforts to support the end of conflicts in other parts of the world, the role of Congress has really been critical here. We also know that the U.S. doesn't have a terrific track record of staying

engaged in post conflict. Is there something there that you can work with that you think will sustain the level of U.S. engagement in Colombia even after the peace accord is reached?

AMBASSADOR WHITAKER: I'm really grateful for that question. So mention the past and go into the future. You know, there have been a series of articles in the Post and the Times; POLITICO had one about how we're the gang that can't shoot straight, we can't help a government in need. We failed in Syria and we failed in Libya, we failed in Africa. I make no comments on any of that because it's not my area. But the fact is we can help a government in need and we've done it right here in Colombia. And I think it's really important to sort of think about in a rigorous way why we succeeded. And of course thing one is Colombia is not like those places and I freely admit that. Colombia is a unitary state, it has a high quality military which is responsive to civilian leadership, it doesn't have big racial divisions, although there are issues of course, and I think it's important to note that, it doesn't have religious divisions. You know, the neighborhood is for the most part reasonably stable. So it doesn't have a lot of the problems that some of the other countries may have, but there are things that we did right. And I think it's really important to capture that and be aware of that and seek to replicate it. Thing one, in that regard, is Plan Colombia was always viewed as a long-term project. The first Plan Colombia was two years. And the nature of these developments is if you pull off the band aid after six weeks you're not going to like what you see. They take time to mature and to work.

The second part of this, why we were successful, is we brought in Congress from the very beginning. They insisted on being involved. So this was not an executive imposition and a policy, this was very much done in a shared manner. I've worked on Colombia since 2008 and so I'm a veteran of a lot of these encounters, and it's hard work and it's difficult and we have disagreements. But at the end of the day what we have now is we have a Congress that feels like this success is their success, and they're absolutely right. Without their engagement, without their involvement, we wouldn't be anywhere near the success we've had. And so that's another key takeaway.

The third part is we have deep depth on Colombia. I mentioned I've been working on Colombia since 2008. And before that I was in Venezuela, so I was in the neighborhood. Our recently departed -- left post I should say, DEA Regional Director Jay Bergman was there for nine years. My political counselor now, John McNamara, who some of you may know, he was former Special Forces, so

he served in the Special Forces in Colombia in the late 1990s. He came back and was a junior officer and worked in INL and now he is the political counselor. That gives you a depth of knowledge and an understanding of the total situation, which is it can't be replicated, it can't be bought. So in going forward I think we need to play on our contacts with Congress. I think we need to engage with Congress. I'm going up after this, and in the coming days going up and trying to explain what our vision is to Congress so that they continue to feel a part of this. And I'm sure that my plan, which is incredibly brilliant from my perspective, is going to run into some heavy weather up there. (Laughter) But as Mike Tyson said, everybody's got a plan until you get punched in the face. So I'll work it that way.

MR. TRINKUNAS: Well, then, actually I'll reserve my other question on Colombia and it's contributions to international security, though I do want to come back to that maybe towards the end because I know he's got a ton of people who want to ask questions and a very experienced audience.

I'll take groups of three I think. If I can take one all the way to the right, in the back row, and then here in the front I think the gentleman with the red tie. So over here.

MR. EARLE: Ambassador Whitaker, Walter Earl from National Defense University. My question regards the post conflict and the armed forces. Colombia has a very large armed forces establishment, it's relatively expensive. Presumably it needs to downsize if the conflict is really over. How do you see that transition? Will the armed forces be ready to downsize? Will there be a shift toward the police? One would think intuitively that people would recognize the need to reduce budget costs, but are the political forces aligned to support a transformation?

Thank you.

MR. TRINKUNAS: Thank you. And a great example. Please ask short, to the point questions and identify yourself and provide an institutional affiliation. Let's go to the young woman in the back and then maybe back here to the front row.

MS. BURSE: Hi, my name is Moya Burse, I work with Peace Brigades International. And I wanted to ask, you know, you mentioned that the security situation has improved in many ways, and that's certainly true. I mean homicide rates have gone down as one example. But one indicator that has not reduced and in fact has increased is the number of killings of human rights defenders, civil society leaders, land rights activists, and the like. In fact in 2015 at least 63 of them were killed. And so I'm

wondering if you can talk a bit about what you know of the discussions at the negotiating table in terms of protection and the role of civil society leaders in building a more robust democracy and peace building, and also what the U.S. government is doing to address those concerns.

Thank you.

MR. TRINKUNAS: Thank you. And another quick question here, and then we'll come back to Ambassador Whitaker.

SPEAKER: Hi, Mr. Ambassador.

AMBASSADOR WHITAKER: Good morning.

SPEAKER: To my right I have the member of Congress from Colombia, (inaudible), and to my left I've got (inaudible), civil rights leader activist in Colombia. And I think he wants to ask a question for you.

SPEAKER: Gracias. Buenos dias. (Speaking in foreign language).

MR. TRINKUNAS: Just because we don't have translation available, just to briefly sum up the question, and hopefully I won't do the interpretation too much violence. But it's a question about the role of Afro Colombians and indigenous Colombians in the peace process and how are they represented and how are their rights considered within the overall political process that's going forward in the country today, including a couple of cases represented here today of impediments to the rights of elected officials from those regions of the country.

Hopefully that was a fair --

SPEAKER: Fair, fair.

MR. TRINKUNAS: Okay.

AMBASSADOR WHITAKER: Thank you. And so let me just take in order. Actually there is a widespread belief that the armed forces cannot downsize in the short run and that security concerns need to remain at the forefront. Certainly over time there needs to be a transition to a greater internal security focus. And there has been talk about whether the police would get bigger or whether the police would shift to another ministry, which seemed to be a hot rumor for a while and then sort of didn't take flight. But actually, you know, it was an interesting comment when General Majilla, who you all must certainly know, took over he announced the formation of a doctrinal review for the armies to look at, what

the doctrine should be, and to institute a regular doctrinal review so that the army would always be looking at its roles and missions. In one of the panels -- and he had a public roll out of this -- one of the panels included Senator Claudia Lopez, who is about as far left as you can get in Colombia, and she's a green party and, you know, she's on the political left. Her first comment on her panel was anybody who thinks that the armed forces can be downsized in the climate of post accord is dreaming. We need to maintain a strong armed forces to ensure that there are proper security conditions in place going forward. So I think there is actually a pretty clear eyed view on the part of many Colombians of the need not to declare peace dividend and walk away from it. Of course the countervailing point is the one that you mentioned, which is money is really tight now and so I know that the defense ministry has approached, as every ministry has been, about cutting its budget. But that's less about peace dividend and more about sort of the overall situation.

On human rights defenders, I appreciate the point. And of course ensuring that human rights defenders and civil society leaders and labor leaders are properly protected and that when their instance occur, god forbid when there are deaths, that these need to be quickly investigated and results need to be achieved. That is not the situation which has generally been the case in Colombia. As you may know we've spent a fair amount of time and energy trying to improve their capacities in this regard, including through the fiscalia, by supporting the development of a labor rights unit and a human rights unit, also a contextual analysis unit within the fiscalia. I think these are important steps and they haven't achieved the results in some that we would seek here. There is more that needs to be done.

The FARC and the government at the table have a sub-commission on protection issues. And the way that I conceive of this, and I'm probably oversimplifying, but I think in part this is about avoiding Union Patriotica kind of situation where the Union Patriotica came out into the legal domain 30 years ago and many thousands of them were murdered. Obviously if you're a member of the FARC or you're a guy like Evan Marcus who actually was an elected member of the Union Patriotica, that is foremost in your mind.

I think it's also true and it's also fair to note that that was 30 years ago. And the political dynamic, the military dynamic, almost any factor involved there is different and distinct. So conceiving of it in the same way that it will happen the same way, I think that's -- I don't agree with that analysis. I think

that analysis loses something. But there is a real -- I repeat, there is a real issue there, that's why the government is involved in this sub-commission in Havana to talk about protection issues.

I better do this in English. So I'm going to do it in English.

SPEAKER: I'll translate in Spanish.

AMBASSADOR WHITAKER: Okay. Look, the issue you raised is an important one and I actually made the decision to raise this with President Santos the last time that I met with him, expressing my concern that the interests of Afro Colombians and indigenous, if not taken into account could represent at some level an obstacle. And it's an obstacle that can be avoided. Now part of the government's response to this, not in my conversation with Santos, but separately, part of the government's response was that Afro Colombians were included in the victim circles which travelled to Havana. And I understand that. And there is a logic to that. But from our perspective, from my perspective, from the American government's perspective, more needs to be done. I gather that they intend to do this. There is meant to be an effort to have a more rigorous consistent engagement with the community and I think that's the right thing to do.

You know, the broader question that you ask about, you know, Afro Colombian political protagonism you know, I'm as frustrated as you are. Afro Colombians represent 30 percent of the population and the Colombian institutions should look like Colombia, including with respect to race. That is our aspiration as a nation, for the United States, but also for Colombia. We'll continue to work with you to ensure that we keep that as a goal.

Thank you.

MR. TRINKUNAS: Thank you. And I think we have one, two, three already. Okay, so we'll start up here and then we'll work our way back.

SPEAKER: Thank you. Good to see you and thank so much for your insights. It's really great to see you here as well. You opened your remarks by saying a little bit about the approval process for the peace negotiations. And President Uribe and other people have criticized President Santos for his willingness; he has staked his political legacy on the outcome of these negotiations. They criticize the approval process, saying he may go too far and he's changing this. You're in a very objective position. Could you talk a little bit about this situation and how you view this moving forward?

Thank you.

MR. TRINKUNAS: Thank you. I think here in the tan jacket and then I think there was one in the back row as well.

MR. VALDERRAMA: Thank you, Mr. Ambassador. Rodrigo Valderrama, Plantation International. With regard to basically changes after the interdiction, after the peace process, and the cocoa farmers, since I'm involved in that business too, is there going to be any price support other than what you mentioned afterwards to stabilize that market, and will the Corps of Engineers possibly help in constructing the roads to those areas? And will the cooperatives be involved or will there be support for cooperatives?

MR. TRINKUNAS: I think all the way in the back there was right here on the aisle.

MS. BOUVIER: Hi, welcome back to Washington, Ambassador. I'm Ginny Bouvier from the U.S. Institute of Peace. And I have two questions that are somewhat related, but not necessarily so.

The first regards the business sector and the attitudes among the business sector, both the U.S. business sector in Colombia and the Colombian business sector, toward the peace process and toward kind of the future challenges in Colombia.

And the second question is a more general question going back to your concern about bringing the Colombian people along. And it has to do with the role of culture and cultural workers and cultural heroes within Colombian culture. Is the embassy thinking in any way about ways to support this move toward a culture of peace that will be needed in the transitional process?

Thanks.

MR. TRINKUNAS: Great questions, Ginny. And turning back to you.

AMBASSADOR WHITAKER: So on the plebiscite, the plebiscite -- President Santos had agreed from the very beginning that there needed to be some check with the Colombian people, there needed to be a Colombian popular approval of it. What they settled on at the end of the day is a plebiscite with a comparatively low voter participation level. I think 13 percent of the voters need to turn out in order for it to be valid. And this is different from the plebiscite which is defined in the constitution. They've arrived at this in a legal and constitutional manner, so there's no question about that from anybody's perspective. The question arises whether that's sufficient in terms of its participation level to

ensure that the Colombian people will actually feel consulted. My view is we'll see, but my view is that the issue is of such weight and moment and gravity that actually turnout will be a lot higher than that and people will speak their minds.

Uribe's concern is related, but it's slightly different. His approach is that a matter of this gravity cannot be fully addressed merely by a plebiscite. There needs to be something more profound, like a constitutional assembly, a constitutional convention to address this, which probably coincidentally is the position of the FARC. You know, the government has made the decision to go through the plebiscite route and I think they're committed to it. I don't think that's going to change. Interestingly, the Fiscal General came out recently and said he didn't think that a plebiscite was even necessary, that the government could just decide and sign this agreement. So it's always hard to tell with Montealegre, who's a great partner of ours, who he's actually speaking for. He may have been speaking for himself in that regard.

On the cocoa, cacao business I have not heard anything said about price supports, although clearly that's a mechanism that has been used elsewhere. For our part, what we've been able to do and where we provided support is we provide technical assistance to the farmers as they get into the business. And down in Tumaco what we've done, in actually an Afro Colombian area, is the Casa Luker and the other purchasers were driven out by the FARC. They were extorted by the FARC and killed by the FARC so they left. So we set up our own purchasing service in order to ensure that market existed down in that part of the country. And so that's the kind of thing that I could see us being involved in.

Another thing that we're doing on this front is we've developed an association with the land grant universities here in the United States, about nine of them are involved now, in order to provide technical, agricultural -- like an agricultural extension service support to Colombian farmers. One of the institutions that's involved is Penn State and Penn State has a state of the art -- as you probably know better than I do -- has a state of the art cacao investigation effort. And so Penn State is going to be working very closely with us as we move forward on this.

And then finally on the infrastructure, I actually can't imagine, although I think it would be great, but I can't imagine U.S. forces building roads in Colombia. What I'm more thinking of is the Corps of Engineers bringing in their planning capacity. They have an enormous ability to sort of think about big

projects and how to execute them and the mechanisms that you have to go through to think it through logically. And if you're dealing with a national size issue, that's the way you want to go about it.

Business and the peace process. Here's what I'd say to you on this, is that U.S. business is looking for opportunities. There is a theory that's being advanced by the Colombian government, especially the DNP, Simon Garivia's outfit, that peace processes cause a secular increase in business opportunities and a durable bump in GNP. I hope he's right, that would be great. And so U.S. businesses are looking for opportunities. U.S. businesses are also frankly concerned about some barriers to trade which have developed over time on scrappage for those Cognoscenti here. You know, scrappage, ethanol, the pharma issue. I mean these are all issues that -- and alcohol in general, liquor -- these are all issues which are of deep concern to our industry and we've raised them at various levels. My point here is clearing out those trade issues creates an even better environment for U.S. business or any international business to come in and work. Colombian business understand that there's going to be interest in their engagement in this doing social outreach and corporate social responsibility, hiring people. They also know, because the government has told them, that there's going to be a financial implication to this as well, a tax implication. I don't know of any person or business that likes to pay more taxes, except for Oliver Wendell Holmes who said, I like paying my taxes because it's the price of living in a civilized society. He's been dead for 100 years. (Laughter)

MR. TRINKUNAS: I think we have time for maybe a couple of more questions and including I'll the moderator's privilege to pose one more to you.

AMBASSADOR WHITAKER: Of course.

MR. TRINKUNAS: Which is coming back to this issue of sort of the post peace, I think one of the things that we haven't talked about yet is sort of Colombia's role in the region and in the world. Colombia for very obvious reasons has looked inward a good deal to try to address its own problems. Now as it sort of emerges from that conflict and looks abroad -- I mean there's discussions of Colombia's contributions to security in Central America, there was discussion at the General Assembly about peacekeeping. What kind of conversation are Colombians having about that, the Colombians that focus on those issues of where Colombia stands in the world?

And in the interest of time let's just pile on a couple of more questions two more, and then

we'll give you the last work.

AMBASSADOR WHITAKER: Okay.

MR. TRINKUNAS: Okay. I think -- I'm sorry, somebody has been very patient from the Congressional Research Service (laughter) and then we'll come here.

SPEAKER: Yes, Congressional Research Service, June Bidel. I may have this wrong, but I understood last week that the CD, the Democratic Center Party, Uribe's party, dropped their objection to the concentration zones and that's how that legislation passed the Congress. Is that true and why did that happen? Or how did that happen?

SPEAKER: Hi, how are you? I am (inaudible). I am a George Washington student and also I'm from Colombia. And my question is with the growing fear of having the FARC conduct politics with guns and the government really not having a good answer for that. I was wondering what your thoughts are on that and what can be done to prevent this from happening if the process goes through.

MR. TRINKUNAS: Thank you.

AMBASSADOR WHITAKER: So Colombia and the region Colombia is sharing its capacity with the region, I think is -- and more broadly I think is a really important question. Actually through Bill Brownfield's INL we have worked we have worked -- we have 283 discreet activities in which the Colombian armed forces is providing -- and the fiscalia -- is providing support in Central America and Mexico. That's just in this coming year. So, you know, there is a real giving back that is taking place. The reason that we're all here is there's a Chief of Missions conference going on, so I talked to my colleagues from Central America. It's greatly appreciated by the security forces in Central America. You know, I actually think that it can go beyond that. And I'll mention a couple of ways. You noted that there was discussion at the UN. Actually what Colombia agreed to do was provide, once there's peace, provide two battalions of peace keepers. I think that's a great activity for the Colombians to be involved in. I also think that -- and this is -- actually on my way up here -- I was actually at spring training, but after that I went to SOCOM and talked to General Votel and his team, and I actually believe that one of the highest parts of the Colombian military as a whole is their SOF, is their Special Forces. And we have some people who are real experts here, so I will be prepared to be corrected, but as high speed as they are I figure if they don't continue to exercise themselves then that capacity will fall off and you will lose people

and you will lose capacity. It seems to me using that Colombia SOF capability more broadly in the world is a great way that Colombia can give back to the world. I have had many people, including General Votel -- I'll take his name in vain here -- that they are peers of some of the best Special Forces in the world, and so let's use that, let's find that opportunity for them to continue to give back, and I know there is capacity to do that.

My understanding as well is the Centro Democratico dropped its -- or they decided to vote for the bill on the creation of these DTs, these dispositivos interanos, which is the concentration zones. I think one thing that's important to note is given the number of seats that they have they could have voted against and it would have passed anyway. But you raise a legitimate question, why they decided to vote for it. This is one of those things that I don't know the answer to, so I'm not going to guess. I just don't know, but it's a reasonable question.

Look, when the FARC appeared in La Wahita armed it created this notion of (speaking foreign language), which is actually a very old story, it goes back 30 and 40 and 50 years in Colombia, which is why you had such a sharp reaction to it. I agree with Minister of Interior Cristo who called it una torpeza infinita, just infinitely clumsy and not very smart on their part. I hope they've learned a lesson from that because, look, at the end of the day what this is about and why this is so positive and good, it's about eliminating the use of violence and arms from the political arena forever. And so by taking actions like this they are sending a signal that they don't understand that. And they need to understand that because it's really important that this succeed. And that they have a chance to sell their product in the marketplace of ideas, making arguments, and trying to convince people to vote for their proposition. So that's the answer at the end of the day.

MR. TRINKUNAS: Well, Mr. Ambassador, thank you for a fascinating conversation on Colombia and on U.S. relations with a very important partner. And I really appreciate you joining us today. Please join me in thanking Ambassador Whitaker. (Applause)

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