

“We will keep working the following three years with all the enthusiasm for this pearl of our home land and for the whole home land”.

President Álvaro Uribe Vélez



INTRODUCTION

The celebration of Independence Day last July 20th was unusual for Colombians, and especially unusual for the inhabitants and tourists on San Andres Island that day.

Traditionally, the commemoration of that holiday has its epicenter in Bogotá, where members of the public security forces parade through its streets.

On July 20, 2007 San Andrés had a surprise. President Álvaro Uribe Vélez arrived at that Colombian island situated in the Caribbean Sea, accompanied by his wife Lina Moreno, high-level officials and diplomats, and members of the public security forces. Their purpose was to commemorate Independence Day on the Island.

Close to 800 members of the Armed Forces and the Police paraded through its streets, with the War Heroes Block, the Historic Block, cadets from the training schools, and some 2,500 students from the schools on the island.



During his speech, President Uribe called the celebration of July 20th in that setting «exciting,» and told the islanders, «We are going to continue working with great enthusiasm during these three years we have left on behalf of this pearl of the nation and of the entire nation.»

Also in attendance was the Presidential Advisor for San Andrés, Providencia, and Santa Catalina, Juan Guillermo Ángel, who indicated that this is the government that has most contributed to social development in this Colombian Department.

Later, in his speech to inaugurate the regular session of the Congress of the Republic, in Bogotá, President Uribe touched on issues such as the goals of his administration, reforms to state institutions, resource transfers, social policy, trade agreements, and the possibility of a humanitarian accord.

Two days later, the head of state met in New York with Colombians residing in the United States, to celebrate that important date from that location also.

So we share with you this historic celebration of Independence Day, on July 20, 2007.



"LET'S KEEP WORKING FOR THIS PEARL, WHICH IS OUR COUNTRY"

Álvaro Uribe Vélez,
Island of San Andres, 20 of July 2007



"Over these last five years, we have worked hard and with all of our love on projects that are important, primarily because of the love that drives them. We will continue to work over the next three years, these last three years, with all our enthusiasm, for this pearl which is our country, and for all of our country."

With this statement, Colombian President Alvaro Uribe Velez highlighted the significance of the 20th of July celebration at the archipelago, where for the first time ever, the great military parade was held. Up to this date, this parade had been held in Bogota every year to commemorate Colombia's Independence Day.





Just minutes before commencing the Armed Forces Military parade, the Colombian head of state greeted the people of San Andres and the tourists who were visiting the Caribbean island, sharing with them his excitement at the celebration.

Uribe reassured the residents of the archipelago of the importance of the various projects that the Colombian government has promoted on the islands over the last five years, while assuring them that during the remaining three years of his administration he will continue to work hard on their behalf.





However, the President declared that more important than all the work on their behalf is the love that the national government and the rest of Colombia feel for the islands of San Andres, Providencia and Santa Catalina.

"I am very moved to be celebrating this 20th of July with my fellow

Colombians here in San Andres. We have worked hard these last five years with you. But the love that drives us is more important than the work itself. And we will continue working these next three years with the same intensity, in order to accomplish even more", said the President in closing.







SPEECH BY THE HONORABLE PRESIDENT ALVARO URIBE AT THE CONGRESSIONAL INAUGURATION CEREMONY

July 20th, 2007 (Bogotá D.C. - Cundinamarca)

Honorable Senators and Representatives:

On June 18th the criminal group FARC murdered 11 legislative deputies from the Valle del Cauca department. They then prepared a communiqué on the 23rd and made it public on the 28th. As of today, July 20th, these criminals have not yet returned the bodies. When the Colombian government learned of this incident, we requested help from the International Red Cross and the Organization of American States, OAS. Moreover, we have asked for an international forensic committee to work with the Prosecutor's office in order to determine how the crime was committed. However, these criminals engage in extortion with life and death, they refuse to return the bodies, because they know very well that the longer they take, the harder it will be to perform a reliable forensic analysis. These terrorists are nothing but criminals and liars, and our dead continue to be held hostage.

The Colombian government has worked for a humanitarian accord, the only reservations being that we will not agree to a demilitarized zone and we will not release jailed rebels who will likely return to committing murders and kidnappings. In spite of this crime, we have complied with the release of 150 jailed rebels and Rodrigo Granda, a decision that was made with the guarantee that these men will not backslide

into terrorism and as a show of good faith towards establishing the required conditions for the release of the hostages.

We say no to a demilitarized zone, because the country was demilitarized for decades and that resulted in the terrorists taking over the country. To demilitarize means to circumvent Democratic Security and to forfeit the population to the terrorists, who will interpret such a decision as a weakness of the Democratic State they seek to destroy. Terrorism's devious and twisted attempts at creating a demilitarized zone are very hard to surmount, as is still evidenced in Caquetá.

In order to avoid further confusion, let's state the facts: Ralito was not just a «cleared area», it was a demilitarized and disarmed zone, a zone of transition to justice, with the presence of law enforcement forces as many times as was necessary.

Before we demand a demilitarized zone as a solution to this problem and from the comfort of our large cities or the safety of a foreign country, we have to learn first-hand about the aftermath of the demilitarized zone on the people of Caquetá and discern the fear of such a possibility in the people of Pradera and Florida.

A humanitarian accord has to consider the victims of the crime of kidnapping, and not those who would profit from a demilitarized zone. A humanitarian accord has to result in the liberation of the hostages, yet it must not discourage our law enforcement forces. Our Armed Forces have never sought to overthrow the government, but they have been discouraged many times, and during those times, budgets, helicopters, aircraft or any other kind of support are all useless.

One of our most important tasks is to uplift the will and spirit to fight among our Armed Forces.

Another one of our fundamental tasks is to inspire our people to remain strong, so that we can derive our strength from them.

A humanitarian accord cannot affect the motivation of our Armed Forces, nor can it impact the strength of our population, because these are pillars on which the hope of an ultimate victory over terrorism rests.



The Government's objectives

The government has three main objectives: Democratic Security, increasing investors' confidence and promoting social policies. These three are transitively linked: democratic security stimulates investment, and investment with social responsibility opens the way to overcoming poverty and building equality. While security and investment make social policy sustainable, the latter legitimizes the other two.

We have gained something of great value from the Colombian people: before, the prevailing political discourse made it seem like Democratic Security and social policies were mutually exclusive; but today, the people are demanding more security and more social investment, more police forces, more education, more healthcare.

Hardships and tribulations will not hinder Democratic Security. During the next three years we will not neglect it for even a second. We will utilize the anticipated contributions from the wealthier sectors of our population, which our Congress approved in recent tax reform legislation, with the utmost care.

We hope that Democratic Security will ultimately become a national principle, well-grounded and built into the nation's conscience.

Investors' confidence

Let's talk more about investors' confidence and less about economic growth. The economy may grow one day because of the discovery of a new oil well or the increase in price of a basic product and the next day it may not grow at all.

Investors' confidence is the only thing that will make possible a high, sustainable growth in the long run.

We go after investors' confidence with our models of State and Society, our determination to achieve national security, our system of taxation, our new duty-free zones, our contracts to reach stability in the country's game rules and fiscal health, all of which are elements linked to an outstanding agenda approved by the nation's Congress.

Of great importance to investors' confidence is the country's long-term vision and competitive strategy. Our Four-year Development Plan is ruled by Vision for Colombia: Second Centennial 2019. The agenda for competitiveness is in line with the Plan and the long-term vision, and it has been built upon principles of democratic agreement.

We reformed the State, but we did not take it apart, as has been the case in previous decades in Latin America. Nor do we accept statism per se as is the prevailing trend. Our Communitarian State endeavors to obtain efficiency and transparency, while providing guarantees for private investments and demanding social responsibility.

Social responsibility must be expressed in three areas: first, transparency in the relationship between investment and the State, in the areas of contracts, concessions, dispute resolutions and taxation; secondly, the shared aims between the investor and the communities, arrangements which can be shattered if for example, the health and wellbeing of a mining community are affected for some reason, or if the tourism industry is damaged because of contamination coming from a port; and thirdly, la-

bor relations which must not be ruled by savage capitalism or by hatred among the social classes, but instead should be governed by Christian principles and brotherhood.

A society which operates on the values of democracy and the rule of law generates confidence. Constructive debates which look for options to overcome disagreements also generate confidence. On the other hand, a destructive spirit, personal quarrels or the unscrupulous lust for power which is manifested in unchecked social climbing can generate distrust and misery.

Fortunately for everyone, this Congress had the insight to take a risk with taxation reform as a tool to attract investors.

We have not sponsored reductions in the tax rates so that the wealthy can avail themselves of more wealth. Instead, the Congress and the government have launched investment incentive programs. He who makes an effort to grow is rewarded, he who stalls is not.

Specific incentives for biofuels, late-yield crops, tourism and ecotourism, housing programs, the general 40% deduction for new investments and the 15% tariff on free-trade employment zones not necessarily linked to exports are all part of the regulatory scenario to attract investments and have been approved by Congress.

Five years ago we did not produce as much as a liter of fuel ethanol, but today we distill 1,200,000 liters every day, plus 50,000 liters of biofuel. There is a lot of enthusiasm and many projects are underway which will certainly contribute to quality jobs as well as to the fight against global warming and the reinvention of agriculture.

We have 43 million hectares of pastures and savannah. With this asset we can become a world leader in biofuel production, without affecting our own food production and without even touching a square millimeter of forest.

We've established goals so that by the year 2012 all the engines manufactured or imported into the country will use biofuels. Before that

we will increase the mandatory mixtures so that by that deadline they will have to be 20% of fuel ethanol for gas and biodiesel for diesel fuel.

There are five thousand new hotel rooms under construction. We used to have 530,000 international visitors per year: this year we expect to have 1,300,000.

We are in the pursuit of a vigorous social capitalism; very different from outdated State capitalism or the discredited monopoly-based capitalism. We support a lot of big companies, as well as millions of mid-size and small companies, as can be deduced from the credit orientation, the Agro Ingreso Seguro Agrarian Legislation, the customs regulations to protect small entrepreneurs and the Bank of Opportunities.

Recently, the Global Entrepreneurship Monitor Organization ranked Colombia second place in the world for entrepreneurial activity. Sustaining a high rate of investment should result in more jobs with benefits and social security, more successful entrepreneurial activities and will put us on the road to overcoming poverty and inequality.

An open economy that seeks to provide worthy employment must not try to find employment solutions by building roads with laborers wielding picks and shovels.

How can we even think about being competitive if we offer poverty-level salaries and jobs without benefits? We have to be competitive by offering added value and promotions on the technological scale, with the effort of our labor force and company owners who instead of choosing to exist as mere investors, aspire to the merit of entrepreneurs and hard-working people.

Therefore, we believe that the best employment incentives are incentives for investment with social responsibility. These incentives were introduced in Congress and they need time to develop and grow.

Consequently, we are not in favor of doing away with employer payroll contributions destined for the National Training Service (SENA), compensation funds or the Colombian Institute for Family Welfare. On



the contrary, the unification of payroll withholdings and statements and social security payments, and the process of doing it all electronically are starting to show exciting results in controlling tax evasion.

These institutions just keep getting better, doing a better job, but if it was up to the national budget, they would wither in time.

Investor's confidence with social responsibility is a storehouse of resources to help us achieve our social policies goals.

When there is no investment confidence, social policy is reduced to more demagoguery and more poverty. With investment confidence, social policy can increase the prosperity. Over the last five years, investment as a percentage of GDP has gone from 12% to 15%, to 22%, to 26% and in the first quarter of this year, it went to 27%. Just private investment has jumped from 6.5% to 19% of the GDP. Investments have been increasing between 20% and 31% per year.

In matters of trust, Colombia the happening place for national and international capital. Let's sustain this trend and we'll see better social results.

The country's fiscal health and stability are pre-requisites to maintaining this trend of confidence in Colombia. More efficiency in collecting revenue, being wise with public spending and administrative reform are all key pieces in achieving stability.

We've increased the tax-payer base from less than 400,000 to over 1,400,000. We anticipate that the taxpayer's relationship with the government will shortly be Internet-based, thus being simpler, quicker, more transparent and less expensive. 90% of the revenue collected already comes from web-based transactions. Collection efforts have outperformed economic growth.

Year after year, we have tried to be wise with our public spending. The new budget cut for the remainder of this year is one trillion 100 billion pesos.

The lack of infrastructure is an obstacle to our economic growth. We have overcome almost every lawsuit related to concessions and contracts of different natures. We are awaiting the outcome of the Cundinamarca court ruling on the transaction with international consortium COMSA, which was a bidder on the Bogota-Rio Magdalena highway. We are also aware of the need to service the Pacific railroad, whose railway has been mostly rebuilt.

Plan 2,500, whose goal is to pave 3,125 kilometers of highway, in spite of delays, difficulties and material price increases, has already completed 1,300 kilometers. There are 227 sections in 167 contracts; problems exist with 17 of the contracts. It's a mixture of roadways that will improve access to municipal seats and productive zones.

Whenever I meet with entrepreneurs, they ask me to give priority to foreign trade roadways instead of municipal access roadways. When I meet with local mayors, they clamor for more municipal roadways. Both requests are correct: this is the expression of a country that still lacks a lot of infrastructure.

Our decision is to comply with Plan 2,500, to satisfy Congress' demand for municipal roadways with the yearly budget allocation for each

municipality, to provide lines of credit for the various departments so that they can improve departmental roadways and to channel all the national effort into foreign trade roadway expansion. With regards to this goal, we are at the point of allocating two-way road segments and preparing others. Recent agreements on port concessions will bring plenty of new investments. Buenaventura alone, with the Port Authority and the Agua Dulce and Consorcio Industrial ports will increase its capacity from 11 million to 43 million tons per year.

We trust that the second line of the Atlantic Railway will begin construction shortly.

We have awarded the contract for the El Dorado airport, which counting passengers alone should increase the capacity from 8 to 16 million passengers per year.

Part of our transparency process is to have public contract bidding for all government contracts. This process was recently strengthened by the new contract legislation 1150 of 2007, approved just last Monday. This law will prevent corruption and avoid circumventing the bidding process through cooperatives or educational institutions, an improper use which used to discredit the whole process. It also generalizes objective selection even in small amounts. It also makes access to public bidding a more democratic process by forbidding monetary charges for terms and conditions for contracting. It also definitely incorporates instances of citizen involvement like discussions of the draft documents and adjudication public hearings. Public participation and opinions in addition to providing fiscal, administrative, legal and political controls, becomes an effective means of ensuring transparency and public confidence.

I understand your distress, respected Congressmen, when it comes to the highways and roadways in every region of our country. We know, moreover, that this infrastructure has a high rate of return, but we ask for your understanding, because fiscal oversight forces the government to concentrate all efforts on the foreign trade roadways.

The greatest legacy this government can expect for the country's fiscal stability is investors' confidence and administrative reform.

We have reformed 390 public entities and we hope to continue with this line of work right up until the last day of our administration.

We have done away with 38 thousand positions.

The savings due to losses avoided amount to one point of the GDP.

We started with TELECOM, which is now up to date in its retirement benefits payments, has a positive promissory equity value and a capacity for investments that it did not previously have. With this company and other telecommunications operators, the push is on to close the gap in Internet and broadband availability, just like before with the mobile telecommunications industry, which went from 4 million users to almost 30 million.

We recently concluded the first democratization phase of ISAGEN. There was a demand for company shares five times higher than what was made available for sale. Currently the possibility of selling the company is under review, a suggestion put forth by the Commission for Public Spending in order to prepay the debt. It is probably prudent to wait on the result of public offerings for energy companies, public and private, to build new power generating plants, with the guarantee of government payments for availability.

We have had successful experiences with labor union contracts and worker participation. I should highlight Paz del Rio, previously a big headache, now a big hope. New investors are proceeding with the task of increasing in a very short time the production of iron and steel from 360 thousand tons per year to over one million tons per year.

Current and retired workers from Paz del Rio have invested part of the income derived from the sale of their shares in ISAGEN. We expect them to make another major investment in ECOPETROL.

We see the capitalization of ECOPETROL with high expectations. This Congress approved in open defiance of old ideological dogmas that encouraged it with words and discouraged it with actions. We are certain that the company has a bright future. It has already started delving in biofuels.



We disagree with the idea of selling the government's share of ISA. We have looked for partners but we have not dismantled strategic government companies. In addition to this condition, government participation opens the door to the international arena, where ISA already has financial resources equal to those in Colombia. In similar cases, national and international analysts have said that for mixed entities like PETROBRAS in Brazil, government participation has contributed very positively in achieving optimal international placement.

We want an efficient social solution, not a bureaucratic government problem for our Social Security and its hospitals. We trust that a partnership with family compensation funds will bring about this social solution. The first reforms implemented in Cartagena and Santa Marta hospitals, which have been handed over to a religious community that specializes in healthcare and the Bucaramanga Cardiovascular Foundation, respectively, have resulted in great benefits for the patients. We are determined to reform every hospital in the Social Security agency.

This experience with good associates, private or non-profit in government companies, has been successful in administrative efficiency and becomes a barrier to petty politics.

The Transferences Legislative Act has been fundamental in guaranteeing decentralization without affecting the country's fiscal health. Fortunately Congress chose responsibility in the medium and long term over critical immediate policy. The increase in resources for the different regions must guarantee full services in basic education and healthcare, as well as progress in basic sanitation services.

Colombia should be proud of its level of decentralization. While in other Latin-American countries the regions utilize 30% of the total government expenses, in our country the departments and municipalities spend 51% of the government's expense. This percentage does not include extraordinary contributions which generally are funded through the national budget, such as payments for massive transportation systems, housing, education, healthcare and drinking water, which are handled by the regional and local authorities.

During our administration, many departments and municipalities, with some exceptions, have achieved budget surpluses, a decrease in budget debt and a considerable increase in resources. In constant pesos, these departments have increased their incomes by 13%, the municipalities by 34% and Bogota by 40%.

The Transferences Legislative Act gives sustainability to the decentralization norms of the 1991 Constitution.

The excesses of the 1863 Constitution precipitated its repeal. The Constitution of 1886 existed for about 100 years, thanks to timely amendments. The adjustments made to the 1991 Constitution consolidate its existence.

As for the re-evaluation, which is hitting the employment sector hard, the economic team and the Central Bank have made decisions that are being closely watched to determine results.

This year, the national budget has to provide no less than half a trillion to the affected sectors, with demands such as keeping labor and tax-related employment contributions up to date. This is a corporate support aimed at protecting employment. And we are looking into other possibilities.

The government shares the Central Bank's concern about the warning signs of inflation. However, an adjustment in interest rates must not reach levels that would hinder growth with cautious levels of budget debt, as has happened in the past.

We must achieve a stable and competitive exchange rate, while preserving an affordable interest rate in the long run.

Besides the additional cut in public spending, we have made a commitment to finish the year with the same total debt we had in January. Freezing absolute debt means reducing relative debt on the same points of growth as the economy.

We decreased the consolidated fiscal deficit from 4.2% of the GDP in August of 2002 to the current almost 1% of the GDP.

The national government's central deficit has decreased from 7.5% of the GDP, which includes transfers to the Social Security Institute for pension plan payments to a figure between 3.5% and 4% of the GDP, which should be the case this year.

We used to owe 50 of every 100 pesos produced. Now that figure is down to 28 pesos.

To go into debt we had to pay 700 points above the US bonds, now we pay 100 points.

Our investments level has improved, but we have to make an additional effort in order to get it back completely.

Social Policies

Investors' confidence and economic growth are means to reach the ultimate end, which is to overcome poverty and build equality.

We have made progress in the efforts to provide full coverage of basic education and healthcare services. The adjustments to Law 100 will make this dream possible in the Subsidized Healthcare System.

Departmental plans to provide drinking water and basic sanitation services are an organized, general tool for all municipalities, which include national transfers, payments and supplements for this much needed budget.

At the end of August, we will reach 1,500,000 Families in Action. These are poor, displaced, stratus-1 families that receive a subsidy for their children's education and food.

We enthusiastically support the Bank of Opportunities, which in addition to government participation, has secured partnerships with the private, commercial and charity sectors. During our first term we reached the goal of 1,800,000 credits for micro-entrepreneurs. We are working diligently to reach the new goal of 5,000,000 credits for that many poor Colombian families.

Between August 2006 and May 2007, we have issued 1,106,000 microcredits of the 5,000,000 goal for the four-year term, totaling 3.4 trillion pesos. During this same period, 290,000 poor Colombians received credit for the first time. Many of them were indebted with usury.

Being forced to depend on usury discriminates and excludes the poor and quenches their entrepreneurial spirit. Providing credits for these people is a major objective of the Bank of Opportunities.

In August of 2002, the portfolio for micro-entrepreneurs was worth 732 billion, in July of 2006 it was 3.4 trillion and in May of 2007 it was 5.14 trillion.

In July of 2002, the portfolio for micro-entrepreneurs represented 1.5% of the country's financial portfolio; in May of 2007 it reached 5.2%. This is obviously social democracy evolving.

We are pushing ahead with the revolution at the National Learning Service Institute (SENA) and the Colombian Institute for Family Welfare. The SENA has quadrupled the number of students and increased the number of educational hours threefold, and thanks to new computer systems, it will reach a steady figure of 1,200,000 on-line students. The Colombian Institute for Family Welfare had 6,121,000 users as of August 2002. That figure is now 10,230,000, and we expect it to increase, along with more responsibility in the application of the new childhood protection legislation.



Growth in social housing will receive reinforcements in Cali and Buenaventura with the drug-trafficking monies recently found in stashes.

We worry about the availability of land for social housing in large cities in the coming years. The government is encouraging the mayors to utilize tax incentives to promote urban renewal programs, to demolish run-down sectors, to take back public spaces and to build high-rise housing projects. This solution is better and less costly than to continue expanding the urban perimeter indefinitely, to negatively affect lands like the Bogota savannah and to pay the costs of extending and operating public services and transportation. We will issue a decree to reward high-rise housing solutions that renovate urban planning.

We conceived and launched the JUNTOS program, a network to help families overcome extreme poverty that is trying to provide 1,500,000 critically impoverished families the tools to turn their situation around. Let's give the most impoverished families comprehensive government support, instead of the innocuous dispersion of giving someone credit at the Bank of Opportunities, someone else a housing subsidy: let's include the people in families in action and let's help the others through the Institute of Family Welfare.

We are committed to a social structural policy which exceeds mere welfarism and opens the way for social mobility, which is the essence of democracy.

By progressively including broad sectors of our population, which have historically been alienated, our social policy is becoming a crucial factor in reactivating the economy. Families in action and food assistance programs by the Family Welfare Institute are adding millions of consumers. Microcredit programs produce favorable results simultaneously in demand and supply, as well as employment and stability in household income.

We have tried, together with the Disaster Aid and Prevention agency, which is part of the Ministry of the Interior, to provide timely and efficient help in areas of the country that have been affected by floods and other natural disasters. The costs require enormous budgetary efforts in first aid, medical attention, food, shelter, rent subsidies, housing repairs, and assistance to farmers and peasants. And I should also mention the infrastructure projects along the foothills of the Nevado del Huila, la Mojana, the Bajo Magdalena and the Sinú. There is progress but there is still much work to be done, nevertheless we are moving ahead.

Trade agreements. The obstacle with the United States

We are totally committed to promoting trade agreements and to dismantling the double taxation system between countries in order to provide workers more quality employment opportunities, including social security, and to give entrepreneurs and business people access to more sources of income and more consumers.

We signed the Andean Community-Mercosur agreement, as well as another one with Chile, we are now negotiating with Peru to bring down investment barriers, over the next few weeks we'll be signing agreements with Guatemala, El Salvador and Honduras, and we started the process between the Andean Community and the European Community.

We are also negotiating reciprocal investment protection agreements with China and India.

Never before, in over 50 years of relations between the two countries, had a Canadian Prime Minister come to Colombia on an official visit. And along with Peru we have started negotiations with that country.

The agreement we signed with the United States, which this Congress approved, has had one amendment which is an improvement, and we will respectfully ask you, Honorable Congressmen, to ratify it.

Some in the United States Congress have alleged that the paramilitary situation unsafe conditions for trade union leaders are reasons enough to stall the process of ratifying the agreement.

We respond with facts. This is the government that has fought against the paramilitary organization and this government can tell the world that Colombia has abandoned the attitude of tolerance towards groups that take justice into their own hands, even if their purpose was to fight against the guerrilla organizations. Five years ago, it was hard to imagine that today the majority of the paramilitary leaders would be behind bars and that 32,000 fighters from the self-defense groups and 10,000 guerrilla rebels have been demobilized and disarmed. This was a difficult task to accomplish and it took a lot of faith in the institutions.

Then we have the allegations of parapolitics. Most of the events investigated were committed prior to this administration. The Democratic Security Policy and the Justice and Peace Law have given back the Colombian people the courage and the confidence to turn to the justice system. Both the government and the Congress have given their support to the justice system.

Thirty per cent of our country was directly in the hands of either the guerrillas or the paramilitary. The change is evident. We have not won yet, but we are winning.

Colombia has overcome paramilitarism. If this is understood as the organization of illegal armed groups that fights the guerrillas, today there is no paramilitarism, because the fight against the guerrillas is now, in practice, the exclusive task of our democratic institution. If paramilitarism is understood as criminal collusion of individuals in law enforcement with these illegal groups, today there is no paramilitarism, because this mix, which was never institutional, is starting to show definite signs that it no longer exists.

Recidivist members of the paramilitary organization, approximately three thousand of them, and those who did not submit to the Law of Justice and

Peace, are engaged in drug-trafficking, either in partnership or in competition with the guerrilla groups, and are relentlessly pursued by our armed forces.

We have taken back something that we never should have lost in the first place: the government's monopoly on the use of force to combat guerrilla terrorism and also the institutional determination to eliminate paramilitarism.

While the Law of Justice and Peace does stand in stark contrast against previous legislation on this matter, by incorporating effective penalties rather than amnesties or pardons, truth instead of forgetfulness, repair and protection instead of abandoning the victims, it is also a precedent for others that will be implemented in the future during negotiations with the guerrillas.

Qualified opinion and justice must dispense equal treatment to both guerrillas and paramilitary groups. Their crimes do not admit differentiated treatment, under the law or in peace negotiations. We can no longer tolerate a benign attitude when dealing with the guerrillas, as has been the prevailing attitude of the past, and a vindictive anger when dealing with the paramilitary.

It is not enough to prosecute politicians and law enforcement members for collusion with the paramilitary and eventually for conspiracy or omissions with the guerrillas: the justice system, judges of history and politics, must set their sight on the lack of will by the State to flight these terrorist threats. This absence of the State in providing security caused the population and institutions of the different regions to feel completely abandoned and at the mercy of crime and criminals.

The US Congress alleges the murders of trade union members, lack of protection and impunity.

Prior to our administration, there were years when 256 people were murdered, all of them trade union members and teachers.

Before we were elected, in item 27 of the Democratic Manifest we proposed effective protection for trade union members and businessmen as a specific expression of the democratic nature of our security program. We have worked on this task.



During 2005, there was a downward trend, with just 25 cases of these types of murders. During 2006, the trend aggravated, increasing to 60 cases, a result of the confrontation between the FARC and the ELN in addition to the traditional confrontation between guerrillas and paramilitary groups.

During 2007, 6 trade union members and 12 teachers were assassinated. We are doing a detailed follow-up of each case with the justice system and we are offering a reward for information. With regards to the trade union members, the investigations so far have revealed that there is no relation between the crimes and their union activities.

We have launched a mighty effort against impunity in general: the accusatory penal system, the oral hearing system, code reform, the recently approved justice laws, the new powers to strengthen the prosecutor's office, coordination with the International Labor Organization. Over the last few months, 48 sentences have been imposed and 89 people have been sentenced, 44 of them are in jail for crimes against trade union members. We have not spared expenses in matters of protection. This year, individual protection for 6,000 people, of whom 1,500 are trade union members, is costing us around 76 billion pesos.

Except for any decision to the contrary by the justice system, which I will support as am I required to do, and based on observations of a long period of Colombian life, I can state that it was not the businessmen who murdered the workers, nor was it the workers who killed the businessmen,. The Marxist guerrillas from four and five decades ago, which grew up basking in the indulgence and reverence of the political sector, introduced a combination of various kinds of fighting; they murdered and penetrated sectors of the trade unions, they kidnapped and infiltrated political groups. Then the paramilitary groups arrived on the scene and matched their level of atrocities. They would murder trade union members, accusing them of collaborating with the guerrillas, and the guerrillas would in turn do the same, accusing their victims of being accomplices of the paramilitary groups. And then the most recent event: the confrontation between the FARC and the ELN has caused the death of many people affiliated with social organizations.

Reconciliation is easier when you build upon a foundation of truth and not on rumors that divide, confuse and lead to impunity for the real perpetrators.

We are working for the day when we can tell the world that Colombia is no longer a place where trade union members and businessmen are kidnapped and murdered. We have improved without yet reaching the ultimate goal.

Before the international community we admit how much there is still left to do and to achieve. We ask the international community to acknowledge how much we have achieved.

We ask the international community as a whole to value our unconditional fight against terrorism without cutting back on liberties; on the contrary, we uplift our liberties for how effective they are. Before, up to 15 journalists were murdered in one year. This year: none. And thanks to the Democratic Security Policy, journalists are now less persecuted by terrorist threats. We have critics who come here from all walks of life, without visas and without filters. We only ask them to report the truth.

First the Free Trade Agreement with the US was attacked because it was detrimental to our people and beneficial to imperialism. When the

Colombian people rejected this attack, the anti-imperialist group went to the United States to ask them to reject the agreement with Colombia because of its paramilitary government.

With patience and honesty, we will continue to educate, to report the truth of the achievements and the hardships. Only one interest must prevail: the welfare of the Colombian people.

We must inform the Colombian people that as part of the effort to do away with impunity, we just issued Law 1141 of 2007, aimed at stiffening the penalties for crimes that affect the daily lives of common people, especially crimes of physical and psychological violence which affect families as well as child abuse. We increased the penalties, we punish recidivists severely, and we no longer allow prisoner releases, which demoralized the police and left the victims unprotected.

Plan Colombia

In addition to trade negotiations, we are engaged in talks with the United States about the new phase of Plan Colombia in the fight against illicit drugs. We believe that less money should be budgeted for fumigations, which should just be a minor resource, and much more support should be allocated to manual eradication efforts, which was introduced at a large scale by our administration and basically funded with our own resources. Manual eradication produces excellent results. We advocate for the Forester Families Program, which has so far been dependent on national funding. This program has had remarkable success, as noted by the United Nations. The efforts against illegal drugs are evident in the weakening of the narco-economy. It is evident throughout the country that honest money is financing the recovery of the construction sector and new factories and hotels. In the countryside there is a positive perception of a growing restraint on the acquisition of real estate properties by drug traffickers.

We insist on penalizing the personal dose, which is a way for children to get involved in criminal activities. The relaxed attitude toward drug consumption is incomprehensible, in view of the increased number of extraditions, the eradication and property forfeitures and the suffering of the Colombian people because of the terrorism at home, all because of the illegal drug traffic.

Nicaragua

We had to appear before the International Court of Justice in the Hague to respond to the lawsuit brought by Nicaragua with regards to San Andres. According to the 1948 Bogota Pact and the court's withdrawal of jurisdiction and competence carried out by the previous administration, we entered our plea of objections. The defense of the nation's sovereignty has been historical, peaceful and uninterrupted, and supervised by a prestigious group of jurists. This group has been coordinated by former chancellors and ambassadors Julio Londoño Paredes and Guillermo Fernandez de Soto. The Advisory Committee on Foreign Relations has been informed in detail of every step taken in this matter. The Chancellor's office has notified all the representatives of the various institutions involved.

One vote at a time

We are determined to make the October elections an event worthy of our country. Thanks to the Democratic Security Policy, the 2003 elections and referendums marked the beginning of the principle of non-interference with the democratic process by illegal armed groups. During 2006, progress was strong, except for some actions by the FARC in certain departments. Our campaign One vote at a Time seeks to uplift the country's democratic spirit, of the candidates and the voters alike, to reject and denounce criminal extortion; to finance campaigns with austerity and with resources of transparent origins; and to keep public procurement from being looted by electoral corruption.

Acknowledgments

I would like to thank the Congress for the magnificent agenda approved during the first year of the new term. And each one of you, Honorable Congressmen, and to the Board of Directors headed by the Senate President, Doctor Dilian Francisca Toro Torres and the President of the House of Representatives, Doctor Alfredo Ape Cuello Baute, the recognition for your great effort and positive results.

Allow me to attach to this report the decree issued by the government and a copy of the words that I read in the Primada Cathedral during the funeral

services for former President Alfonso Lopez Michelsen, to whom I pay tribute for being a pro-democracy fighter.

Honorable Congressmen and fellow Colombians:

We have confronted these difficulties at the right time, making the institution that is the Congress of the Republic to operate, to produce results, without accepting invitations by constituents, repeals by the branch, or new elections which would have caused more agitation and less confidence.

The legislative agenda that was approved has resulted in more confidence in our country. We Colombians owe the Congress this recognition. Confidence generates continued progress. Leaps of faith often cause us to stall.

We are all expecting another great legislative agenda.

Our hostages continue to suffer a fate worse than death.

We know who they are and we know who the criminals are.

The determination of the people and the government is the only way to victory.

Honorable senators and representatives, all fellow Colombians:

We knew not terror when the day was still uncertain. Let's not hesitate or give into weakness now that daybreak is near.

I hereby declare the Congress of the Republic in session for the 2007-2008 period.



SPEECH BY PRESIDENT URIBE AT THE COLOMBIAN INDEPENDENCE DAY CELEBRATION IN NEW YORK.

New York, July 22

The following is a speech made by President Alvaro Uribe Velez at the Colombian Independence Day Celebration in Queens, New York.



My fellow Colombians: What did the Mayor of New York City say? He said that Colombians are a very dynamic community. That is a very important statement. This morning in New Jersey as I greeted a lot of Colombian people, and then later, when I arrived here and greeted some of you that are here now before me, I was considering this: many of these people had to leave their country because of the violence. Many had to leave because of the lack of job opportunities, lack of credit, lack of a dynamic economy. And instead of being resentful, instead of being bitter, they are here today celebrating the 20th of July, full of patriotism, happy and spontaneous, believing in the future of Colombia.

Some say that Colombia is a very rich country. That it is mineral rich, but it hasn't been mined properly. That its future is in biofuels. That it is a country with a storehouse of natural resources in its jungles, and that these are excellent resources for the future of medicine. All of that is true. It's a country with a strong presence in the Caribbean and a strong presence in the Pacific. But Colombia's greatest riches are its people: hard-working, spontaneous, happy people.

My fellow Colombians: here comes the bad news. But Colombia is not drug trafficking, Colombia is not the guerrillas, Colombia is not paramilitarism. Colombia is not corruption. Colombia is the 43 million people

living at home and abroad, in countries like the United States, which have nobly and kindly sheltered so many people from Colombia who work from sunup to sundown with integrity, honesty and dedication.

I congratulate you for coming out here on Sunday, your day of rest after a hard week, to make this park vibrate with your patriotism. That is what makes our country great, our beloved Colombia!

We have been working to consolidate security, investors' confidence and social policies. These go hand in hand. Without security, there is no investment. Without investment with social responsibility, there are no resources to provide social services, build equity and overcome poverty in Colombia.

We have improved, but there is still a long way to go. We have our ambassadors and our Congress. Here with me today are Mr. Benedetti, Senator Velez and Representative Sandra Ceballos. But the most important asset we have is the three million Colombians living in the United States, they are our ambassadors.

Spread the word in the United States that we have not overcome all our problems, but that we are on the right track. Seventeen thousand people are murdered every year in Colombia. We want to bring those numbers down, but it used to be 35 thousand. This year, not one town has been destroyed in Colombia. The year prior to my administration, terrorist groups destroyed 84 towns in Colombia.

Our freedom was threatened by terrorism. There were years in which 15 journalists were murdered. This year, not one journalist has been killed. And everyone feels freer all around Colombia, thanks to the Democratic Security Policy.

There were years in which more than three thousand people were kidnapped in Colombia. So far this year, 107 people have been kidnapped. We would like to have no more kidnappings, not one. We are winning the war against kidnappings, but we have not been able to defeat it yet.

My fellow Colombians: with dedication, with God's help, who rewards perseverance, with a labor of love for Colombia everyday, we will make it.

And we have been building investors' confidence. This is a country where entrepreneurship can prosper, with freedoms, but also with social responsibility.

Tell the American people that Colombia does not want capitalism with huge state corporations that are bureaucratic, inefficient and corrupt. Colombia does not care about capitalism with private monopolies. That Colombia wants social capitalism with full entrepreneurship, with big and medium size companies, and with many flourishing small companies as well.

Just recently, Colombia was ranked second in the world at its level of earnings for entrepreneurial activity by an international entrepreneurship certification group. This certification matches the generous message sent to us by Mayor Bloomberg, in which he acknowledges the dynamic nature of the Colombian people.

And let's talk about investments with social responsibility. What is social responsibility? There must be transparency in the relationship between investors and the State: transparency in awarding contracts, in awarding concessions, transparency in the process of dispute resolution.

What is social responsibility? Solidarity between investors and the community. We cannot have a company mining carbon recklessly in the Cesar region and the community getting sick because the air is contaminated with carbon particles due to the mining. To achieve social responsibility, we are working throughout the entire country.

What is social responsibility? Social responsibility is good relationships between employers and employees. We do not want savage-capitalism-style labor relations. We do not want labor relations where hatred among the classes prevails. We want labor relations that abide by the principles of Christian brotherhood. *That* is social responsibility, to forge a country from a cheerful democratic debate, without exclusions or hatred, always seeking solutions.

My fellow Colombians: Four years ago in our country the level of investment was at 500 – 700 million dollars. From January to June of this

year, investment was 4 billion 151 million dollars. For every 100 pesos produced, we invested 12. Now we invest 27 pesos for every 100. All of this, together with social responsibility, has to help us create better job opportunities with social security, and more possibilities for entrepreneurship.

My fellow Colombians: let me talk about social policy. Poverty is still very high. We have managed to reduce it from 60 to 45 percent; but even 45 percent is still very high. We are committed to make every effort so that when we celebrate the bicentennial of our independence three years from today, on July 20th, 2010, the level of poverty will be below 35 percent.

I have faith that with our perseverance and with God's help, on July 20th 2010, we will be able to proclaim that we are providing basic education services for 100 percent of the school age population, that we have achieved complete healthcare coverage for underprivileged Colombians through our subsidized system, that we have achieved 34 percent university enrollment.

We are moving ahead with Families in Action. In August we will have 1.5 million impoverished families receiving a subsidy for their children's food and education: one and one half million families.

This week I visited the Putumayo region. There are 20 thousand Families in Action there. When Representative Meeks returns to Colombia, he will find that all along the Ecuador/Colombia border on the Pacific coast, our impoverished compatriots there will all be covered by the Families in Action program, which provides subsidies to guarantee access to education and nourishment for their children.

And we have created a system called Bank of Opportunities. The large majority of our poor compatriots are without financial credit. They have to go to pawn shops, or resort to usury and loan sharking services.

During the first term of our administration, the Bank of Opportunities provided 800 thousand credits. And we are committed to have the Bank of Opportunities provide 5 million credits to five million impoverished families during our second term.

Go ahead and say that we have a lot more to accomplish, but that we are working with love for Colombia, that we are working for national security, for investors' confidence with social responsibility and for social policies, my dear fellow Colombians.

We need the trade agreement. We have a great ally in Representative Meeks. Because we do need it. As we create more quality jobs, as we export more of our products to the American market, there will be less illicit drugs, less terrorism, more peace, more national security, more wellbeing for the people of Colombia.

This is a two-way agreement. It is an equitable agreement. We must not forget that we buy more from the United States than what we sell them. That the United States is our great provider of capital goods. That we only produce 90 thousand tons of wheat per year, and we need one and a half million, and what we do not produce we must buy from the United States.

This is a two-way agreement. And it is of great importance when you consider that Colombia needs alternatives to drugs, we need the option of sending our products to these markets.

Two objections are raised as to why the free trade agreement has not been approved by the American Congress. We hope to obtain this approval when we make our case by stating the facts. Paramilitarism and the murder of trade union leaders are the two allegations.

Let's talk about paramilitarism. When this administration came into power, one third of Colombia was directly controlled by either the guerrillas or the paramilitary groups. And the rest of the country was pressured indirectly by the presence of both groups.

We have demobilized 43 thousand troops: 33 thousand paramilitaries and 10 thousand guerrillas. Such an event was unheard of. Do you know how many terrorists there were in Northern Ireland? I asked how many there were when they signed the Good Friday accord in 1998. They told me it was 118. Colombia had 60 thousand terrorists.

Do you know how many terrorist-related murders there were in Ireland between 1923 and 1998? Three thousand 200. Just in Medellín and its suburbs, (my city) in 1998 there were almost 5 thousand murders.

The tragedy that has engulfed our country is too great. But we are making it right. We have the vigor to do it. Our people have the courage necessary to fix it. And that is what the world needs to know.

This is the government that has dismantled the paramilitary machine and weakened the guerrillas. That is why I can face the Colombian people and the international community. When I came in, the guerrillas and paramilitary groups dominated the country, and today the guerrillas are hiding in the jungles and the paramilitary leaders are in jail.

Our peace process has evolved with disarmament and demobilization. In previous peace processes, the criminals went from the hills to the Congress. Now they have to make a required stop in jail. They have to confess their crimes. They have to hand over their wealth to make reparations to the victims.

This process, strewn with difficulties, can be watched by the world. Our country is open.

Other Latin American countries faced with terrorism threats shut off their freedoms. In Colombia we strengthened them.

Other Latin American countries faced with terrorism threats eliminated the opposition. In Colombia we protect it.

Other Latin American countries faced with terrorism threats censored the press. In Colombia freedom of the press thrives without any complaints.

Other Latin American countries faced with terrorism threats did not allow inspections by NGOs. Colombia is full of NGOs. Many NGOs have made Colombia something of a test case. They have no obstacles when they want to criticize or to visit Colombia, because we have just one argument we can raise in our defense: what we've accomplished over the past five years of our administration, it was done believing in Colombia, with honesty and acknowledging how much more we need to do.

And look: two days ago, when I declared the Congress in session, I said: we will no longer speak of paramilitarism. Why? Because the name «paramilitary» emerged when Colombia, after many years of suffering the plight of the guerrillas, saw private groups organizing as a reaction to the guerrillas. These were private, illegal, criminal groups that came together with the pretext of fighting the guerrillas. The atrocities they committed competed with the atrocities committed by the guerrillas.

Today, there are no private groups fighting the guerrillas in Colombia. Today the only forces fighting against the guerrillas are the Colombian government's institutional forces. Tell your American friends that we have taken back something we should have never lost: the government's monopoly to use force in fighting criminal groups.

Today the Law Enforcement Forces are more efficient and transparent. No longer do you hear allegations of collusion between some members of the Law Enforcement Forces and paramilitary groups or criminal elements.

The country's Law Enforcement Forces: soldiers and police officers. While you and I are here at this park, merrily celebrating Independence Day, they are in the jungles and in the cities and in the rivers of Colombia, fighting against criminals and drug traffickers. These brave soldiers and police officers deserve the acclaim of the people and of the democratic world.

Because of their heroism, they ensure that our country will take back that which the American people, the founders of this Great Northern Democracy, as our unforgettable ex-president Alberto Lleras labeled them, called «law and order».

Why did I say that we would no longer speak of paramilitarism? Because the great majority of paramilitaries have demobilized and are abiding by the process. Three thousand of them did backslide. But these backsliders, plus those who did not submit to the law are severely persecuted by our government's forces. They are no longer fighting the guerrillas. That is not tolerated in Colombia anymore. They are now engaged in drug trafficking and other criminal activities.

When people tell you that the FTA cannot be approved because of paramilitarism, you can ask them: why is it that when Colombia was

overrun by guerrillas and paramilitary groups six years ago, this subject never came up, and now, when we are dismantling the paramilitary machine, these allegations are being raised? The Colombian people, its Armed Forces, the Colombian Justice system and Government are the ones that have brought down paramilitarism.

And let me talk about two other topics: trade union leaders and kidnap victims. I had a glimpse of a poster demanding immediate freedom for Alan Jara, a Colombian kidnapped by the FARC terrorist guerrilla group.

On the issue of trade union leaders: five years ago, before this administration, there were years in which 256 trade union leaders were murdered in Colombia. Prior to my election, I presented the electorate before the May 2002 elections with a document entitled Democratic Manifesto, which had 100 points. Point 27 was a commitment that I made if I was elected, to protect trade union leaders from murder and businessmen from kidnapping.

Protecting all the people of Colombia, as a genuine expression of a democratic security project: we presented it to the people in 2002, we reiterated it in 2006 and we are now putting all of our God-given energies into complying with it.

We made a commitment to protect trade union leaders. They are still being murdered, but look at what's happened: they killed 256 in one year. In 2005 it went down to 25. Last year was worse, with 60 murders. This year there have been six, and justice investigations have revealed that the reasons for the murders had nothing to do with trade union issues.

We are also investigating the murders of 12 teachers. Between trade union members and teachers there are one million 200 thousand in a country of 43 million people where 35 thousand people were being killed every year.

We do not lie. We acknowledge our shortcomings, but we ask that what we have done be recognized.

Tell them this, my esteemed fellow Colombians: today six thousand Colombians are receiving individual protection from the Law Enforcement Forces. Of these, fifteen hundred are trade union leaders.

Tell them this, my esteemed fellow Colombians: we are winning the fight against impunity. It was impossible before to fight against impunity in a country where there was no concern for security, where 35 thousand people were killed every year.

We have reformed the Constitution, we have included the Accusatory Penal System and oral hearings, we have passed recent legislation against impunity, and we have strengthened and will continue to strengthen the Prosecutor's office.

Forty eight sentences have been handed down, convicting 78 people of crimes against trade union leaders.

And we also have to answer this question: who killed the workers? Except for any decision to the contrary by the justice system, which I will be the first to support, and based on observations of a long period of Colombian life, I can state that it was not the businessmen who murdered the workers, nor was it the workers who killed the businessmen.

What happened? Colombia had to live with the guerrillas for thirty years. The State did not protect its people. We lived in panic and fear, unprotected and condemned by the terrorists.

These Marxists guerrillas furthered hatred among social classes, combined different fighting styles, kidnapped and penetrated the trade union movement, murdered and penetrated political sectors and trade union sectors. And the State did very little about it. The paramilitary groups came in and competed with the guerrillas' levels of atrocities, doing the same.

And so, who is killing the trade union people? The paramilitaries kill trade union members, accusing them of collaborating with the guerrillas, and the guerrillas kill trade union members, accusing them of collaborating with the paramilitaries.

And what has happened? Now the two guerrilla groups are facing off in places like Arauca, fighting and killing each other. And now the ELN will kill trade union members, claiming that they are friendly towards the

FARC, and the ELN will kill other trade union members, claiming that they are friendly towards the ELN.

But our soldiers and police are moving in to defeat these criminals, wiping them off the face of Colombia, so that the Colombian workers and businessmen can live in peace. That is our goal.

My fellow Colombians: just as we are committed to the protection of trade union members, we cannot tolerate businessmen who support the paramilitary groups or trade union members who support the guerrillas.

It hurt me to find out that a few days ago in Quito there was a summit with participation by communist parties from around the continent (which is not the point, because we are a free country), and there was a statement issued in support of the FARC. And at that summit, there were trade union leaders from Colombia.

We must not allow that: either you engage in trade unions or in guerrillas, but this cursed mix does a lot of damage to our country.

Just as we cannot tolerate businessmen killing their workers and businessmen partnering with the paramilitary groups, we also cannot allow the trade unions to partner with the guerrillas.

But by working and accusing when necessary, by complying faithfully with the Constitution, we will overcome this tragedy. We have been overcoming it.

And to finish, let me talk about the hostages: On June 18th the FARC murdered 11 legislative deputies from the Valle del Cauca department. This terrorist group then prepared a communiqué on the 23rd and made it public on the 28th. As of today, July 22nd, they have not yet returned the bodies.

Why have they refused to return the bodies? Because these criminals from the FARC know that the longer they keep the bodies, the harder it will be for the forensic examination to determine how the crime was committed. These criminals murdered the deputies. And now, by delaying the delivery of the bodies, they lie; they consummate the lie and distort the crime.

They kidnapped the families with this kidnapping, they tortured the families with this kidnapping, they tortured the families with this murder and our dead are still being held hostage.

We have asked the International Red Cross and the Organization of American States, OAS, to mediate in the return of the bodies.

And to leave no doubt as to our good faith, we have asked for an international forensic committee to work with the Prosecutor's office in order to determine how the crime was committed, as soon as these criminals return the bodies. This forensic committee shall be the one to tell the world how this horrendous crime was committed.

What's next? Putting an end to kidnappings. A Colombian was just telling me: «Mr. President, fight for the humanitarian accord». Of course I will. Not too long ago I released 150 FARC rebels from jail. And at the request of French President Nicolas Sarkozy, I released Rodrigo Granda. And how did the FARC repay us? By murdering our deputies.

Do you know what will happen now? The process of releasing these 150 guerrilla rebels is underway, because legal formalities take time. And someone told me: «Mr. President, don't release them all, that's why they killed the deputies. Don't let them all out, they killed your deputies!».

And I replied: «I will keep my word. The 150 will go free, because we want to make as many humanitarian gestures as we can so that they will release our hostages».

What I will not consent to is a demilitarized zone. What I will not accept, my dear compatriots, is for the FARC to demand that Tom, Dick and Harry be released from jail and moved to the hills so that they can join Colombia's murderers once again: Marulanda, Briceño (a/k/a Mono Jojoy) and company, to go back to kidnapping and murdering.

The difference is that the 150 rebels that we released have come out of jail with the commitment to join the reintegration process, with the commitment to never backslide into criminal activities, murders and kidnappings.

And what the FARC wants is for us to release the ones they point out, so that they can have more people to carry out kidnappings, more people to murder the Colombian people with. And we will not allow that, my esteemed Colombians.

And the FARC is asking for a demilitarized zone, they want the areas of Pradera and Florida in the Valle del Cauca region to be cleared.

I like that, that all of you say: «No to the demilitarized area!» That is solidarity with our fellow Colombians in Florida and Pradera. Just imagine all of us here, in a safe country, enjoying the freedom and genteel hospitality of the United States, here in this park: how could we say otherwise? What if we said yes to the demilitarized zone, what could the people of Florida and Pradera say? «How could those people in New York be so insensitive? Sure, they are not suffering at the hands of the guerrillas! They are not harmed by terrorism, so they ask us to allow a demilitarized area here, and then the guerrillas will move in and run us over in Florida and Pradera!».

I congratulate you, because your cry of «No to the demilitarized area!» shows solidarity among all Colombians. I congratulate you, because your cry of «No to the demilitarized area!» shows that the Colombians living in New York understand the suffering of the Colombians who live in Pradera and Florida.

The entire country was demilitarized for 40 years. Because it was demilitarized for 40 years, the guerrillas and paramilitary groups took over. Now that we are taking it back, there indeed is demilitarization, or clearing, in Colombia: we are clearing it completely of all terrorists.

Believe in Colombia. Our good friend Representative Gregory Meeks visited San Andres recently.

We had a beautiful 20th of July celebration in San Andres.

How moving it was to see the native officers of our Law Enforcement Forces parading in San Andres.

How awesome to see the children of San Andres do their dances and sing the National Anthem!

And we will keep working for San Andres, now our focus will be to address the problem of housing and to generate sources of income for the middle classes in the island.

And with God's help, we will celebrate the next 20th of July in Leticia. Very soon, we will begin construction of a waterfront promenade along the Amazon River, a structure that will become an expression of the country's soul and allow the city to turn to the river and attract international tourism.

Next year, as part of the preparation for the 2010 Independence Day celebration, we will have 20th of July celebrations in every Colombian city, like this one here today, on July 22nd in New York. You are giving us a great example.

This morning in New Jersey, another Colombian approached me and asked: «Mr. President, tell us three things that we can do for Colombia».

And I said: «First thing: love Colombia; second thing: love Colombia more; third thing: love Colombia more and more and more, love her intensely».

Thank you very much, compatriots. You've give us a great example of patriotism.

To you, Councilman and to Mayor Bloomberg, our gratitude.

Representative Meeks, to the government of the United States, to the American Congress, our gratitude for allowing this large group of Colombians to live in this country of freedoms.

And I hope that the new generations of Colombians, thanks to your sacrifice and everyone's hard work, can live happily in on the soil of our beloved homeland.

All of our hard work is worth it if we can help the upcoming generations of Colombians to live happy and free in that great territory that extends from La Guajira to Amazonia, from the Pacific to the Orinoco.

Long live Colombia!

And our immense gratitude to the United States for its hospitality.

Thank you very much.

