

Submitted Testimony by

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U.S. Congress**

“Protests in Colombia”

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Chairman McGovern, Chairman Smith, distinguished members of the Commission, it is an honor and privilege to appear before you today to discuss the recent street protests in Colombia and their implications for U.S. policy.

The U.S.-Colombian strategic partnership has been one of the most successful U.S. foreign policy initiatives since the end of the Cold War. A country that was bordering on failed-state status in the late 1990s is today a more productive, secure, and stable democracy.

Over the past two decades, the country has become safer for its citizens and enjoyed consistent economic growth, benefiting from the U.S.-Colombia Free Trade Agreement signed in 2011. In 2018, Colombia became NATO’s first partner in Latin America and, in 2020, the third Latin American country to join the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development.

Colombia has also become an outstanding partner in the war on transnational crime, using the skills developed over the past decades to help other countries confront the scourge of international criminal networks.

In February 2021, setting a standard for the entire region and amid its own devastating pandemic challenges, Colombian President Iván Duque announced that Colombia would grant temporary protected legal status to nearly two million Venezuelans fleeing their own disastrous situation next door.

But as the last few weeks have demonstrated, the narrative of Colombia as a success story cannot breed complacency about the serious challenges the country continues to face.

In recent years — and, dramatically, over the past several weeks — Colombians have been taking to the streets to demand better economic opportunities and better public goods and government services, specifically better education and health care systems.

This is indicative of a changing political landscape, as the country transitions from the distortions brought about by the national war footing necessary to combat the narco-terrorist mafias to a new governing paradigm in which the bread-and-butter concerns of everyday citizens take precedence.

While the proximate cause of the latest street protests in Colombia was anger over a tax bill, it was only a spark — clearly exacerbated by the frustrations and anxieties of the lockdown — that once again reignited deep-seated discontent over systemic inequalities and poor government services.

(It bears mentioning that the COVID-19 lockdown, while serving to quell previous street protests, has only worsened conditions in Colombia and soured public attitudes even more. Colombia's economy has shrunk by almost 7 percent and the poverty rate has increased to more than 42 percent. With more than 60 percent of Colombian workers operating in the informal economy, they were disadvantaged even more.)

Of particular note is youth participation in the protests. What we are witnessing are new generations of Colombians who are coming of age in a post-conflict environment. They have already pocketed the FARC peace agreement signed in 2016 and now want to take advantage of the new space to begin a wholly different discussion about the country's future — *their future*.

Colombia is a country emerging from 60 years internal armed conflict. Many Colombians are thinking, “We paid the price, we defeated the FARC, its time to enjoy the peace dividend.”

There is also an ongoing process of freeing the protests from the stigma of the internal conflict. The FARC and its sympathizers so distorted Colombian politics that street protests — elsewhere seen as freedom of expression, fundamental to any form of democratic government — were only seen as threats to internal order either funded or organized by the criminal mafias with the intention of creating instability.

The protests have been traumatic. Road blockades have impeded commerce, costing some \$3.2 billion to an economy already deeply affected by the pandemic.

300,000 jobs have been lost and 40,000 businesses closed, according to a local business group.

Worst of all are the reported deaths of civilians at the hands of the police during the protests in addition to the injured.

According to media reports, more than 60 people have died in clashes with security forces, with at least three officers facing murder charges.

The violence has sparked international outcry and calls for an independent investigation into the deaths.

As a result, President Duque said he would ask Congress to approve measures to modernize the police, with the creation of a new human rights directorate and increased officer training. A new complaints system would also be set up, along with disciplinary standards for officers.

He added that the government was also working on a law to establish a criteria for the legitimate use of force by police.

In recent weeks, a delegation from the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights visited Colombia to review the situation and complaints against the excessive use of force by the police.

These developments should serve as a reminder that Colombia has credible, independent institutions to hold any transgressors to account. Colombia is not Venezuela. It is not Cuba. It is not Nicaragua.

Unlike those authoritarian regimes, in Colombia you can expect accountability and justice for any violations of human rights of peaceful protesters. Already, the government has announced proposed reforms and investigations — and I would like to submit for the record a Colombian government document detailing some of those announcements.

Another factor adding to the complexity of events on the ground in Colombia is that, while recognizing the legitimacy of peoples' grievances, such protests present irresistible opportunities, as noted, for meddling by criminal gangs, narco-guerrillas, and regional bad actors such as Venezuela and Cuba.

The aforementioned have long histories of subversion and creating disorder and we should not to be aloof to their historically destructive roles.

In conclusion, overall frustration with the status quo and ruling economic and political elites is certainly not something particular to Colombia. Not only has it defined Latin American politics for the past decade, but is evident across the globe — and even here in the United States.

Colombia's electoral calendar adds another layer of complexity to the current situation. The next presidential election is scheduled for May 2022, less than a year away.

The next president will inherit an extremely difficult situation, but will nonetheless be expected to lead a campaign for change and reform in Colombia. On the other hand, the current environment could also produce a more radical candidate that could even threaten democratic institutions and threaten the gains Colombia has made in the past two decades.

As Latin America's fourth largest economy and the largest recipient of U.S. assistance, what happens in Colombia matters to the United States. Under both Republican and Democratic administrations, Washington has provided more than \$10 billion in aid to Colombia since 2000 to combat drugs and drug-related violence. Colombia has also become a key ally in the fight against transnational organized crime throughout the region.

With so much blood and treasure invested in Colombia by the United States over the past 20 years, we have a significant stake in what happens in this strategic ally.

In our partnership with the Colombia people, we have confronted narco-terrorists, organized criminal networks, violence, and regional subversion. The current troubles are one more challenge in the journey to real and lasting peace.

I think the Biden administration's approach in recent weeks has been correct: Solidarity, support, and concern.

The close ties developed between our governments over the years have resulted in a level of trust, credibility, and influence that provides opportunities to promote real change in Colombia, or, as the case may be, to urge the correction of mistakes.

I am confident that the Biden administration is using those intimate ties to register its concerns and its intolerance of some of the scenes we have witnessed in recent weeks of police and security forces' responses to the protests.

I would urge Congress to adopt the same approach. Many Members have developed their own close ties to Colombian officials over the years, and they need to know through quiet diplomacy that widespread accusations of police brutality are incompatible with the standards and expectations of our bilateral relationship.

The situation does not call for threats or ultimatums — or disengagement.

Our decades-long relationship is proof that persistent, unwavering engagement works and can produce outcomes beneficial for both the United States and Colombian peoples.

Americans have every right to be concerned if they feel U.S. assistance to a country is resulting — directly or indirectly — in violations of the rights of that country's citizens.

The American people should rest assured that Colombia is a democracy, a government of checks-and-balances, of independent and credible institutions, that is capable of holding itself accountable.

The Colombian government will continue to require strong support and encouragement from the U.S. to ensure the building of a better Colombia continues apace. The Colombian people need to know the United States will not abandon them as they too seek a better future for their country.