

PRESS CONFERENCE

DEPUTY SECRETARY OF STATE JOHN D. NEGROPONTE

U.S. Embassy Guatemala
Friday, June 6, 2008
10:30 - 11:00 a.m.

INFORMATION OFFICER SCOTT SMITH: Good morning. Thank you for being with us this morning. It's a pleasure to have with us Ambassador Negroponte, the U.S. Deputy Secretary of State. Prior to serving as Deputy Secretary, Ambassador Negroponte served as the first Director of National Intelligence, and has also served as U.S. Ambassador to Iraq, Mexico, Honduras, and the Philippines. Ambassador Negroponte will give a statement and then we will take your questions. We have microphones placed at each side. Thank you.

DEPUTY SECRETARY NEGROPONTE: Thank you and good morning. We just spent 24 hours here in Guatemala, a country with whom we have very, very good relations. Guatemala is the most populous Central American country. We all know the importance of Guatemala in the region which is going through a period of economic integration that is very important and that has also created an opportunity for us and other countries to negotiate free trade agreements and as you know we already have a free trade agreement with Central America that has been in effect for two years and which has created enormous opportunities for the economic future of Guatemala and the other countries. Reciprocal opportunities, I should add. Now there is also a new government that was democratically elected, President Alvaro Colom visited Washington in April. I had the honor of attending. At the meeting that President Colom had with our President, President Bush, I can confirm for you that the two leaders established an excellent personal relationship and this I believe will very much help to develop the bilateral relationship in the future. To close, I'd like to say that we consider Guatemala to be a partner, we want to work with your authorities and with your institutions in all social, development, and economic areas and also in matters of security and the strengthening of the rule of law and with the idea, with an eye to strengthening relations between our two countries. Thank you very much and now if you have any questions

INFORMATION OFFICER: For reporters with question, please go to the microphones placed on the sides.

NOTICIERO TELEVISA: Good morning. Francisco Cuevas from Noticiero Televisa. In Mexico some sectors have opposed the Merida Initiative. That's the first question and the second, does the U.S. believe that Central American militaries should be involved in the fight against narco-trafficking?

DEPUTY SECRETARY NEGROPONTE: What was the second question?

NOTICIERO TELEVISA: If the U.S. believes that Central American militaries should be involved in the fight against narco-trafficking.

DEPUTY SECRETARY NEGROPONTE: Well, in the first place, on the Merida Initiative, this is a plan developed jointly with the countries affected, involved, that is to say with Mexico and Central America and we want the plan to be, to be implemented based on this collaboration. It's not something we're looking to impose. And as you know, the origin of the Merida Initiative was in the meeting between President Calderon and President Bush, more than a year ago now, in the city of Merida. There might be some commentary regarding the plan's details that are being debated right now in our Congress, but I believe that yes, fundamentally, a willingness exists on both sides, right? Collaboration in the sense that combating narco-trafficking and getting rid of these narco-criminals that are undermining institutions and the democratic, peaceful life of our citizens. As for the role of the military, I think that that depends on each country, one the sovereign decision of each country. In Mexico, for example, the military has a role in the fight against narco-trafficking and for this reason under the Merida Initiative the possibility of equipping the military for the fight against narco-trafficking in activities like surveillance does exist.

ASSOCIATED PRESS: Good morning. Juan Carlos Llorca, from AP. In your meetings with the presidents of the three countries you visited, how receptive or . . . well, how was the Merida Initiative received? When can we start seeing the first actions in these Central American countries?

DEPUTY SECRETARY NEGROPONTE: When will we see actions take place . . . ?

AP: Yes.

DEPUTY SECRETARY NEGROPONTE: Well in the first place, I think that as far as the meetings with the leaders, with those leaders, I think that there is a

disposition, a willingness, right?, to work with the U.S. in this fight and it's a feeling that we reciprocate completely. As for the question of when the programs will begin, let me say two things. First, Plan Merida is a . . . the idea is that these are problems that can't be solved overnight. This is going to take time, an investment of time, effort, resources from all of us, not just the U.S., but the Central American countries themselves. When will the resources begin to be seen . . . that's something that's in our Congress. That will depend on them, because they are debating it right now and hopefully there will be funds very soon, but that depends on when our Congress votes.

NOTICIERO GUATEVISION: Good morning. Mario Rosales from Noticiero Guatevision. In the past the U.S. government has cancelled the visas for some Guatemalan ex-military for potential connections with organized crime and narco-trafficking. In the context of Plan Merida, does the U.S. believe that the Guatemalan Government still needs to do some of its own housekeeping in the police and military?

DEPUTY SECRETARY NEGROPONTE: [in English, aside] I didn't understand the question entirely.

INTERPRETER: [in English] The United States has revoked the visas of several elements of the Guatemalan military, and do you think that in the future that it would be necessary to continue similar actions and clean up some of the elements that are in the military?

DEPUTY SECRETARY NEGROPONTE: [in English] I think what I would say to that is that this depends on circumstances. I cannot predict for you whether this might happen in the future, but revocation of visas with respect to certain types of activities is always a possibility, but I would be very reluctant to make a specific prediction in that regard. I frankly I don't know enough about the circumstances here to answer that question.

INTERPRETER: [translates above statement to Spanish]

PRENSA LIBRE (daily newspaper): Good morning. Eduardo Smith from *Prensa Libre*. Does the U.S. government believe that Guatemala is sufficiently committed to the fight against narco-trafficking and organized crime, or could they be doing more to support this fight? And second, sorry, what . . . in the context of the free trade agreement, of CAFTA, do you see us using the agreement to our advantage, and how could Guatemala get more out of it?

DEPUTY SECRETARY NEGROPONTE: Well, on the second question, look . . . it's still very early, it's just, just two years, although I know that the trade level since signing, since it took effect, trade between the two countries increased. But to give you an example, I was Ambassador in Mexico, right? When we negotiated the free trade agreement with Mexico, that was in 1992 and if you look now at what the results have been, trade has more than tripled between the two countries. There are billions and billions of dollars in trade between the two countries. Something like 300 billion, which is a huge accomplishment and I believe the same prospect exists here in Central America. There's no question, it's not just a matter of one or two years. It's what will happen in the medium and long term and this treaty creates a framework in which an improved economic relationship between the U.S. on one side and the Central American region on the other can be planned, systematically developed. And I believe that Guatemala with its natural resources, its hard-working people, and with its private sector can definitely benefit. You are in an excellent position to take advantage of the opportunities presented by the free trade agreement. As for the commitment, I think that both countries are committed to the fight against narco-trafficking. I've had various conversations here with authorities, with civil society, and yes they have commented on questions of impunity or problems with a weak state and I think we have to recognize that yes, this is a problem, but the important thing is that in the future and I believe in this case, there will be a commitment by both sides to try to strengthen the situation, strengthen the collaboration between us and, let's say, what, the idea of our discussion here with authorities, not just with the President, but also with others . . . the ministries that have responsibility for security.

RADIO SONORA: Good morning. From Sonora . . . what benefits would the countries of Plan Merida be receiving?

INTERPRETER: What benefits would the countries of Plan Merida be receiving?

DEPUTY SECRETARY NEGROPONTE: OK. I think that the most important benefit is collaboration between the participating countries, not just Mexico and Central America but also the U.S., because this is a transnational problem. This type of crime doesn't happen in one country but not in another. These are problems that recognize no borders, so, obviously, there needs to be joint effort, but also yes we plan to offer resources, training, various types of equipment, and these are questions that are being determined right now. But yes, we foresee

providing some resources, not just to Mexico but also to Central America and we have asked our Congress for \$550 million for the first year of the program.

EL PERIODICO (daily newspaper): Good morning.

DEPUTY SECRETARY NEGROPONTE: Good morning.

EL PERIODICO: Angel Sas from *El Periodico*. I have two questions. First is that some analysts have said that the amount of aid given to Mexico is counterproductive or damaging for the region, that is Guatemala, El Salvador, and Honduras, because narco-traffickers or narco-trafficking networks would come or transit through Guatemala or El Salvador. That's the first. The second is that some senators say that CICIG should be supported. That's what they said in the Senate. And, what do you think of that?

DEPUTY SECRETARY NEGROPONTE: CICIG?

EL PERIODICO: If it could be supported under Plan Merida.

DEPUTY SECRETARY NEGROPONTE: Yes. Well, we support CICIG outside of the Plan Merida framework. We've already given aid. I met with the commission president yesterday and to transmit a firm message of support and we are going to continue doing so . . . as for your first question, let me ask our Assistant Secretary for Western Hemisphere Affairs to come up, because he's very involved in the issue of developing Plan Merida and I'd like to ask him to answer your first question. Mr. Shannon – Tom Shannon.

ASSISTANT SECRETARY SHANNON: Thank you very much. As for the Central American countries under the Merida Initiative, it's important to remember, as Ambassador Negroponte said, that maybe the most important thing about the Merida Initiative is the collaboration and the community that the Merida Initiative will create among Mexico, the Central American countries, and the U.S., because the purpose of the Merida Initiative is to put together a strategy and a regional plan to confront the affliction of organized crime and narco-trafficking. And we understand that Central America right now is in a vulnerable place between Colombia and Mexico. So, the importance of the Merida Initiative is to help the Central American countries, to build a plan among the Central American countries to, to improve cooperation and security, but also to link that to what's happening in Mexico and Colombia. Providing funds and resources that act as catalysts for important changes in the institutions

and the cooperation structure in the region and to assure that there is political and economic solidarity and at the level of security institutions to face organized crime, so in this sense I believe that the Merida Initiative really recognizes and represents Central American vulnerability and . . . it identifies, and delivery political, economic, and training resources to confront this problem.

SIGLO VEINTIUNO (daily newspaper): Good morning. I just want to know if the U.S. government has already identified legislative changes that Guatemala would need to implement in order to participate in Plan Merida.

DEPUTY SECRETARY NEGROPONTE: Really this isn't our issue, but obviously we are ready to talk and discuss with the Guatemalan authorities exactly what are, what would be, what could be, the best way to face those problems, but as for a legislative agenda, I think that that is something better addressed by the Guatemalan authorities.

Thank you very much for the opportunity.