

Secretary of Commerce Carlos M. Gutierrez
Remarks to the Miami Herald Americas Conference
Coral Gables, Florida

Thank you. Good morning everyone. I am pleased to be at this conference, which is an important forum for discussing the opportunities and challenges of our Hemisphere.

I am proud to be a part of an Administration that has been very engaged with the region, and in particular with Latin America. Six of the 11 countries with which we've implemented free trade agreements have been with Latin American countries.

President Bush has regularly traveled to the region and has often hosted Latin leaders in Washington. Also this year, in July, the President and Mrs. Bush hosted the first-ever White House Conference on the Americas, recognizing the vast links between our society and those of our neighbors.

As you may know, earlier this month I traveled to Panama, Peru and Colombia with a bi-partisan Congressional delegation.

The United States has pending Free Trade Agreements with each of these countries. These three are some of the fastest growing countries in the world with the highest potential for U.S. exports.

This is important because our economy today is increasingly driven by exports.

- Year to date, our exports are up more than 11 percent.
- Second quarter, our GDP grew four percent, with exports a major driver of that growth.
- Exports last year were an all-time high record, \$1.4 trillion. And we're on track to beat that.

Since President Bush took office, our exports to Latin American FTA countries are up by nearly 60 percent, outpacing the growth in exports to the rest of Latin America and the rest of the world.

Congressional approval of the three pending FTAs with Peru, Colombia and Panama will open markets with about 75 million consumers and a GDP of almost \$246 billion.

Today, more than 90 percent of imports from these countries already enter the U.S. duty-free, while U.S. exporters pay hundreds of millions of dollars in tariffs.

Passage of these FTAs will give our farmers and workers the same preferences Congress has given their workers.

Having worked in North and Latin America since the 70s, I've seen the political and economic changes taking place as countries embrace open elections and market economies.

But this was a very enlightening trip. You couldn't help but be impressed by the transitions taking place in these three countries: the new skylines, the amount of construction, the foreign investment.

Passage of the FTA with Panama will open significant opportunities for U.S. companies to participate in the \$5.25 billion Panama Canal expansion project.

And Colombia is one of the most incredible turn-around stories I've ever seen. In Medellin, we saw a revitalized community with a modern mass transit system, flourishing businesses, and children playing safely on the streets.

Yet many in Congress believe Colombia is too difficult a vote politically. Even though President Alvaro Uribe and the Colombian people are our staunchest allies in the region:

- They are partners in the global war on terror and have courageously stood up to guerillas and narcotics traffickers.
- The combination of eradication and interdiction has taken 500 metric tons of cocaine off the market in 2006 alone, depriving terrorist groups of \$850 million in funds to buy arms and mount attacks.

- Between 2002 and 2006, violent crime and terrorism has dropped by nearly half, and kidnappings have been dropped 76 percent since 2002.
- Colombia's economy grew eight percent in the first quarter of 2007 and has grown 5.2 percent annually since 2002.
- Poverty in Colombia declined from 60 percent in 2000 to 45 percent in 2006 and the Colombians are making great strides in healthcare and education.

The U.S. has contributed nearly \$5 billion to Plan Colombia, an effort to promote the peace process, combat the narcotics industry, revive the economy and strengthen democracy.

It's true Colombia has had a history of violence. It's also true that a great, courageous, success story is being written by President Uribe. Our trip included a visit to the demobilized. 35,000 have laid down their arms and are being incorporated back into society. It was an emotional meeting.

In the past, Latin American countries being overrun by guerrilla movements and drug cartels have reacted with dictatorships, martial law and cancelled elections.

Remarkably, Colombia's turnaround has been accomplished while remaining true to democratic principles.

For decades Colombia has had to defend its partnership with the U.S. To deny Colombia an FTA would be one of the biggest foreign policy mistakes. It would confuse our friends and make our enemies very happy. It would be the biggest foreign policy mistake of our time in our region.

While the vast majority of our regional neighbors are moving forward on the paths of progress, there are those in Latin America who do not share our vision of equal opportunity or true social justice for everyone.

It is ironic that some voices denounce the labor standards of pending FTA countries, like Colombia, while simultaneously calling for the U.S. to engage with Cuba—the Hemisphere's greatest violator of workers rights.

I am often asked when the U.S. will change its policy toward Cuba. That's not the right question. This is not about U.S. policy—this is about Cuban policy—about the Cuban regime's treatment of its own people.

When the Castro regime has had resources, it has not benefited the Cuban people. It has been an international threat and a threat to its own citizens.

In Cuba, people remain repressed; the economy remains closed and doors remain tightly shut, shackled by a repressive Communist system. Cuba is the human rights travesty of the Hemisphere. ... there is no place in Latin America where workers and citizens have fewer rights than in Cuba.

We recognize the future of Cuba is in the hands of the citizens of Cuba. We hope that some day we can welcome Cuba into the community of democracies and into a hemisphere of freedom, hope and opportunity for all.

Thank you.