



INTERNATIONAL

A NEW DAWN FOR COLOMBIA

The release of Ingrid Betancourt: a success story
for President Uribe's Democratic Security Policy

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AFP PHOTO/Mauricio DUENAS

Álvaro Uribe, President of Colombia, welcomes Ingrid Betancourt after her release (Bogotá, July 2nd, 2008).

On July 2nd, we witnessed a new dawn for Colombia. We witnessed the release, thanks to a splendid and clean operation carried out by the Colombian Armed Forces, of fifteen of our fellow countrymen held kidnapped for years by the narcoterrorists of the FARC. We witnessed the release of Ingrid Betancourt and were able to congratulate our Armed Forces, our intelligence services and our Government on a rescue mission where not a single shot was fired. We witnessed a new dawn in which Colombia, like all the great democracies of the world, was able to defend its determination to overcome terror, regain its freedom and be very proud of it.

When I was appointed Minister for Defence during President Álvaro Uribe's first Government, he and I both met with President José María Aznar to discuss our Democratic Security Policy. We were designing our programmes to promote desertion among the guerrilla groups, well aware that there were many child soldiers among them; We were designing the programme for the payment of rewards for information on criminals; and also the programme for farmer fighters and for the return, within six months, of the forces of law and order to all of the towns in Colombia so that the mayors and elected officials could return to perform their tasks, as over 500 of them had been driven out of their cities by the guerrilla forces.

Those were times when Europe had suspended military co-operation with Colombia and had limited its solidarity to giving us a pat on the back. José María Aznar made the decision to go much further. He lifted the military embargo and provided us with military co-operation. Colombia owes a great deal to the determination of President Aznar.

Now we feel frustrated at having to beg cap in hand for the approval of a Free Trade Agreement at the United States Congress, an agreement some would deny us on the grounds that human rights are violated in our country. It is not the State but the vigilante groups, guerrilla fighters and drug trafficking organizations that have committed atrocities, such as the kidnapping of many citizens and the cruel death of so many others. The Democratic Security Policy, which I am proud to have designed under the supervision of President Uribe, has substantially improved the quality of the protection offered by the State for the lives and freedom of us all. I hope that the Congress and the Democrat benches of the United States reflect on this and understand that only by improving the economy of our country, our exports and by creating employment will we be able to continue strengthening the Rule of Law and democracy in Colombia.

Achieving the Free Trade Agreement will demand as much persistence as was required for the release of Ingrid Betancourt, which was made possible thanks to the leadership of President Uribe and the professionalism of our army and police forces. We shall persevere to attain it.

Economic freedom will enable Colombia, like the rest of the countries of Latin America, to achieve greater levels of prosperity. We need free trade and market freedom to be supported by the same degree of determination as in the developed world to eliminate the subsidies distorting world trade, as well as by our commitment to undertake the structural reforms necessary to become more competitive.

We know that we have to implement both micro- and macro-economic reforms, increase the productivity of our public and private sectors, urgently improve our infrastructures, and design better education policies in terms of coverage and quality for our children. We have to implement improvements which will enable, as well as all the countries of Latin America, to play a leading role in globalization.

And to achieve this as a democracy which maintains and respects freedoms and institutions.

Now everyone has seen the good work achieved by the Colombian Government in fighting narcoterrorists. It was not always seen in that light. Now we see the fruits of the Democratic Security Policy which the President and his Ministers have promoted with such leadership in recent years. It all started with the Colombia Plan, an initiative of President Andrés Pastrana to get the support and co-operation of the United States in the struggle against drug trafficking, and which strove for peace in Colombia and the strengthening of our military forces.

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The Colombia Plan sowed the seeds of the success we have now harvested. Back then, President Bill Clinton agreed to provide Colombia with co-operation in its fight against drug trafficking and to help it strengthen its armed forces. At that time, we were engaged in a peace negotiation that was impossible to bring off with a group that felt stronger than the State itself. For that was indeed the feeling among the FARC in 1998. For that reason, all peace efforts of the Colombian Government in those years led to more indolence, more terrorism and more aggressions against the Colombian people.

We had come through four very difficult years in the history of Colombia: 1994-1998. At that time, prior to the Presidency of Andrés Pastrana and with the Government of Ernesto Samper, Colombia was permanently brought into question at every international forum, as was the legitimacy of our Administration due to the penetration of drug organizations into Colombia's political classes.

Between 1994 and 1998, the FARC enjoyed their greatest boom. The number of open fronts grew, as did the number of terrorist attacks and the takeover of municipal control. And the actions against the civil population also increased. In those circumstances, the Colombian people begged for peace negotiations, which was to practically give in, and that was the mandate given to Andrés Pastrana. They were four sterile years for peace, but the Government proved that it was making its best efforts to achieve it in good faith. This showed that the Colombian State required international co-operation and the application of the principle of co-responsibility to these matters.

When Álvaro Uribe took over power in 2002, Colombians demanded a confrontation with narcoterrorism, in clear contrast with the demands for negotiation expressed earlier to Andrés Pastrana. And so President Uribe set up the Democratic Security Policy, the most visible success of which has been, thanks to the streng-

thening of the Rule of Law and Colombia's democratic institutions, this new dawn represented by the release of Ingrid Betancourt, the US contractors and eleven members of the armed forces.

What the world has just seen is the fruit borne by the Democratic Security Policy. When it started, we were well aware of the many challenges we faced. It was also clear that the main threat was the drug trafficking that fed the guerrilla terrorism. We were experiencing the great perplexity of the Colombian people before the huge number of murders occurring at that time. We lived through it and we suffered it in our country. There were 30,000 homicides per year, along with a large number of kidnaps: 3,200. On top of this, there was the absence of local Government in some towns due to security issues.

We understood that it was not enough to professionalize our military forces. It was essential to promote a significant increase in their number and we created an income tax to finance it. I must say that all Colombians were pleased to contribute with their taxes to that goal which led to a 60% increase in our security forces.

“Crime rates have considerably improved: homicides have fallen from 30,000 to 14,000 a year, although these figures need to improve further”

We understood that the main strategic goal of our Democratic Security Policy had to be the re-establishment of the State's presence throughout the territory. We turned the page on the era in which the armed forces remained in their barracks and decided that their mission was outside protecting the citizenry. The Colombian State had to recover its legitimacy and be able to show the citizens that it could guarantee and watch over their safety. That it could and would do so.

And so the process gradually began of returning the mayors, councillors and other political authorities to their respective municipalities escorted by our forces. Many people have criticized the Democratic Security Policy for being, in their words, pro-military. It is not true and it is unfair. President Uribe's government is devoted to ensuring that the presence of the State throughout the territory of Colombia will restore citizens' trust and help provide them with education, health, justice, infrastructures, productive possibilities...

This work has started to bear fruit, although much still remains to be done. After having returned police and security forces to all of the townships in the first six months, the crime rates have greatly improved: the number of homicides has fallen from 30,000 to 14,000 a year, although not all of them are due to guerrilla fighters or drug traffickers. Of course, the figures need to improve further. From

3,200 kidnappings a year, the figure has fallen to 400, many of them lasting only a few hours, as occurs nowadays in Mexico or Buenos Aires. But we can already see in these rates the decline in terrorist actions as a result of the Democratic Security Policy. These indicators show that the State's presence and the determination of the national Government are paying off.

“More security has meant more trust, a greater level of foreign investment, stronger economic growth and a higher level of domestic investment”

The actions of the security forces are not only aimed, as happened in the past, against guerrilla fighters. Nowadays, and this is another basic pillar of this policy, the action is aimed at the protection of citizens. This is a change of concept that is well worth pointing out. Now we have the public forces with the people around the clock, taking the initiative and acting with the mission of protecting citizens. This change of concept has led the citizens to support their public forces now. When the people backs its security forces and trusts its institutions, a virtuous trinity is formed in which it is possible to fight against and overcome all forces opposed to law and order.

The presence of the State and the protection of its people have generated the trust necessary to fight terror. Nowadays, many citizens are coming forward to provide the public forces with information that would never have been given in the past, whether out of a widespread impression that nothing would come of it, or fear of the guerrillas or, simply, because they did not feel any commitment or solidarity towards the efforts of the security forces. The problem lying at the basis of this is important: the concept of security was absent from the life of most Colombians. For many years, we Colombians had a sensation that anyone could be the next victim and that the State was not committed to protecting us.

It cannot yet be said that Colombia is totally safe from terrorism. But today we can say, and this is how we Colombians feel for the first time, that Colombia is a country that is winning the security battle. We are a country that can guarantee its citizens, and this grows each day, the opportunity to live in safety and freedom, in search of wellbeing.

Nowadays, the people of Colombia are convinced that this is a country in which we can live, and in which our children can grow and stay. We no longer have to live the tragedy we experienced ten years ago, when our young adults left the country due to a lack of opportunities and guarantees and we had no arguments to make them stay. Today we can offer them a better future in their own country, for that reason they want to stay and many of those who emigrated have returned. Maybe all of them will return home!

The determination shown by Colombia in confronting its fear, and of showing that through the strengthening of its institutions and the Rule of Law we can win, has obtained results that cannot be translated merely into greater security for its citizens, but are also reflected in greater economic growth. That is to say, increased security has entailed a greater confidence in our country.

The first to start trusting in Colombia again were the Colombians themselves. The same people who had to emigrate abroad are sending back their savings. But it is not only the Colombians' trust that has increased or been recovered: foreign direct investment has also regained confidence. Last year we have seen an unprecedented growth in foreign direct investment in Colombia to over 10,000 million dollars, when FDI amounted only to 1,600 million dollars four years ago.

Thus, more security has meant more confidence, and confidence has given rise to a higher level of foreign investment, and this foreign investment is now promoting greater economic growth and employment. This is a virtuous circle, because more confidence brings about more investment and more employment, which in turn bring about more confidence and security.

“We know that the threats to security are embodied in drug trafficking, terrorism and all the trans-national networks of organized crime”

Last year we had a growth of 7.2%, a rate unseen in the Colombian economy since the 60s. This growth has given rise to an increase in employment and we now have a rate of unemployment of 10.5% versus the 19% we had in the past. One of our main goals today is to continue to bring down the unemployment rate. We must be capable of bringing unemployment down to a single figure.

I have the utmost confidence that Colombia has a future of prosperity ahead of it. We have moved forward from a long night of insecurity, in which terrorism and gangs of outlaws nearly made us to give in to the possibility of dreaming, to a new dawn in which no Colombian person will be paralyzed by fear of these groups, but will be prepared instead to fight for his or her dreams, fortunately more and more feasible nowadays.

Today we have to be aware that the threats to world security are much more powerful than they ever were in the past. They are embodied in drug trafficking, terrorism, arms trade, and in all the trans-national networks of organized crime that have taken as much advantage of globalization as multinational companies. For that reason, the challenge facing democratic societies is even greater now. We understand that the only way to deal with these threats is through strategies and international co-operation, combined with national actions undertaken by more efficient Governments.

The first action that has to be taken at the national level is to have available a professional, efficient public force with the highest standards, not only in terms of operational and military capacity, but also in terms of respect for Human Rights. This is one of the most important elements in our Democratic Security Policy: when we designed it with President Uribe, we stressed to our armed forces that it was as important to ensure respect for Human Rights as to have them present in every corner of Colombia, as this was the only way we would be able to gain the confidence of the people.

“We cannot understand and are hurt by accusations that we do not respect Human Rights. Our security forces comply with them strictly”

We cannot understand and are hurt by accusations that we do not respect Human Rights. Our security forces comply with them strictly. Now the world has seen this; now the world has heard Ingrid Betancourt tell that the operation was carried out cleanly, without a single shot being fired, despite the fact that Army forces had pinned down the guerrilla fighters that had caused us so much suffering.

Perhaps Colombia has fallen short in its strategy of international information with regard to what we were doing. The truth is that for many years we have lived with a kind of complex because of everything that was happening to us.

“Colombia is a country that will achieve prosperity, progress and freedom for its citizens. We want the rest of Latin America to achieve the same”

If there is any country that today can feel relaxed about the result of facing up to guerrilla fighters, vigilante and drug-trafficking organizations, that country would be Colombia. Nevertheless, I feel that not all countries in Latin America are ready to cope with this phenomenon, and I don't think they are sufficiently alert. It is for this very reason that we consider international co-operation to be very important. It is a co-operation we in Colombia enjoyed with the Spanish Government under President Aznar. A co-operation for which we are grateful and that has been engraved on the history of Colombia.

During the first months of our Democratic Security Policy we devoted ourselves to establishing alliances by means of security and defence co-operation agreements with all the countries of Latin America. I must point out that we had an immediate response from Brazil, Peru, and Panama. But unfortunately we did not receive any response from Venezuela or Ecuador.

We know that in this struggle it is impossible to say that the danger is now over, I am sure that the determination of the Colombians will be ever stronger, because we feel tremendously proud of our President and of his determination not to give in to terrorists, nor to buckle before international bodies and other governments that have pressed him to give way.

Colombia is a country that will achieve prosperity, progress and freedom for its citizens. What we want for Colombia we also want it for the rest of Latin America. We see that the threat looming over some countries of the region is very large and, hopefully, the reaction of all of them will be just as powerful and conclusive as Colombia's. Only with a more efficient State that avoids the temptation of populist policies or totalitarianism, a State that guarantees security, efficiency and transparency, but also a State that invests in social care, education, health, equal opportunities and inclusion policies, will we be able to help Latin America make the most of the opportunities offered by globalization to achieve the well-being of its citizens, in the same way as the citizens of the developed world.

We are today witnessing with emotion this new dawn for Colombia symbolized by the freedom of Ingrid and the other 14 hostages. What must follow is the ongoing work in favour of democracy, of an efficient State, of the fight against corruption, to achieve economic growth and wellbeing, for our young generations and their dreams, for our elders, for a more intelligent inclusion of Colombia in the globalized world. All that will be possible if we have the security to live and be free.