

Dick Lugar

U.S. Senator for Indiana

Date: 12/01/2010 • <http://lugar.senate.gov>
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Lugar Opening Statement for Hearing on Latin America in 2010

U.S. Senate Foreign Relations Committee Ranking Member Dick Lugar made the following statement at today's hearing.

I thank Senator Dodd for chairing this important hearing on Latin America. Given recent developments, today's hearing is especially timely.

Our foreign policy in Latin America continues to struggle with perceptions that the United States has neglected the region in the past. These perceptions often have been inaccurate or incomplete, but there is little doubt that U.S. engagement with Latin America over a period of decades has been crisis driven.

If we are going to achieve stronger regional cohesion and prosperity, we must establish a clear sense of our interests and develop a more comprehensive means of engaging with our neighbors. This engagement must go beyond managing perceptions in the region. We need to underscore that the United States is dedicated to working with our Western Hemisphere partners on economic development and growth, strong democratic institutions, the rule of law, energy security, environmental protection, human rights, and many other objectives.

An immediate step in this direction would be passage of the Colombia Free Trade Agreement, which would provide new markets and additional jobs for the United States and Colombia alike. Similarly, we need to conclude a U.S.- Brazil Tax Treaty, which would expand business opportunities in both countries and equalize the playing field for many American firms doing business in Brazil.

Our collaboration with Mexico has helped to create an institutional framework that did not previously exist to fight organized crime and drug trafficking. This framework is essential if progress against the cartels is to be sustained over time. But much more coordination may be required to help Mexico degrade the capacity and influence of the cartels, which has become a near existential national security objective for our neighbor.

The situation in Venezuela requires more attention to building a regional consensus on opposing that government's challenges to international norms. The erosion of democracy in Venezuela is now accompanied by rising crime and economic stagnation. Senior Venezuelan military officials have been implicated in narcotics activities, and the government increasingly makes common cause with Iran, Syria, Burma, and North Korea regarding international security and WMD issues.

Our hearing also coincides with elections in Haiti on Sunday. I and others urged President Preval to enact much needed reforms to ensure the credibility of these elections. He refused to do that. As a result, the elections have been fraught with numerous reports of irregularities and fraud.

Political uncertainty now threatens to exacerbate the human suffering in Haiti, where more than 200,000 people died as a result of the January earthquake and 1.3 million continue to live in tents. A cholera epidemic has killed more than 1,700 people in the past month.

The United States has an interest in helping to address the ongoing humanitarian problems in Haiti, and we will continue to do that through various means. But our willingness to direct funds through the Haitian government depends on the fair, transparent, and legal resolution of the current political crisis.

Today's hearing is an opportunity to discuss our relations with Latin America, but it is also Senator Dodd's last appearance as Chairman of the Subcommittee on Western Hemisphere Peace Corps, and Global Narcotics Affairs. He has served with distinction as Chairman or Ranking Member of this key subcommittee for more than twenty years. Even when others have lost focus, he has been a consistent and passionate advocate for strengthening U.S. ties with Latin American nations.

I have appreciated greatly the opportunity to work with my good friend over many years on issues pertaining to Latin America and broader national security questions. Recently, these collaborations have included a bipartisan resolution expressing concern regarding transgressions against freedom of expression in Venezuela and legislation urging multilateral banks and development institutions to cancel Haiti's debts. Although I know Senator Dodd will continue to play a role in Latin American affairs from some other vantage point, his departure from the Senate will be felt deeply by all people who are working to expand mutual respect, security, and prosperity in the Hemisphere.

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