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Chairman Menendez, Ranking Member Risch, and distinguished members of the committee, thank you for the opportunity to testify on USAID's work in Colombia and discuss our vision for the future.

Colombia remains one of the United States' closest and most steadfast partners in the hemisphere. Despite daunting challenges, the country's people and successive governments have demonstrated the will and the capacity to end a 52 year civil conflict and build a more peaceful, prosperous, and just society.

The achievement of the 2016 Peace Accord between the state and the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) rests squarely with Colombia. The United States is proud to have been the country's closest partner in advancing the transition from five decades of conflict to greater peace and security.

There are few parallels to what Colombia has achieved in the relatively short time span of about two decades. Once a nearly failed state, the country has come back from the brink to establish itself as a stable democracy, Latin America's fourth largest economy and a close U.S. partner and ally. From 2000 to 2019, the gross domestic product more than doubled; the percent of Colombians living in poverty was nearly cut in half (from 54 percent to 29 percent); and violence fell dramatically.

The historic 2016 Peace Accord brought important progress. It disarmed and demobilized 13,000 FARC combatants, with 11,000 still committed to the peace process; advanced justice and reparations for around 9 million victims; and spurred unprecedented levels of public investment in the country's far-flung and historically neglected rural areas. USAID has been Colombia's most valued partner in advancing implementation of the Accord.

The Accord is not perfect, and implementation is uneven. Overall, it has helped the country transition to a new, more hopeful chapter while creating new opportunities for development investment. Its survival itself is notable, given that 50 percent of similar peace accords across the globe collapse during the first five years. We note the important progress that Colombia has won through its choice to negotiate an exit from conflict, even if implementation remains a formidable challenge.

USAID's support of the Peace Process

USAID's support to peace implementation has been vital. Our assistance is closely aligned with the Accord's Rural Development, Transitional Justice, and Ethnic Inclusion chapters. With regard to the Rural Development Chapter, USAID has made implementation of Colombia's own Territorially-Focused Development Programs the centerpiece of our support under the firm belief that addressing the rural-urban divide is the best path for Colombia out of violent conflict.

USAID assistance for land titling, financial inclusion, expansion of the Colombian State, and rapid response community development projects directly supports the Rural Development Chapter and is bringing tangible benefits to conflict-affected communities throughout rural Colombia. USAID's more nimble and flexible programs help pave the way for, and mobilize, much larger Colombian government investments in the municipalities selected for peace resources.

Notably, we have increased our assistance to the transitional justice system agreed to in the accords. A truth and justice response seen as successful and legitimate will help Colombia move decisively forward to reconcile and come to terms with the violent past. USAID's assistance seeks to help Colombia reconcile and move beyond past atrocities and establish consequences for transgressions committed on all sides during the state's conflict with the FARC. Last year, the Special Jurisdiction for Peace (or JEP) issued 34 indictments for war crimes and crimes against humanity in two major cases. USAID assistance has helped accelerate JEP cases and better protect witnesses. USAID also has helped the Unit for the Search of Disappeared Persons and the Truth Commission reach victims all over the country.

With regard to the Ethnic Inclusion Chapter, the Accord recognizes that the full economic, political, and social participation of Afro-Colombians and Indigenous peoples is key to a lasting peace. USAID is profoundly committed to this goal. USAID recently launched the Agency's largest award wholly dedicated to ethnic inclusion. Moreover, and to advance Administrator Power's focus on aid localization, USAID is proud to have direct grants with four local Afro-Colombian and Indigenous organizations that advance self-determined development, COVID-19 recovery, peacebuilding, and environmental conservation. Hand-in-hand with those organizations, representing some of the country's most prominent ethnic leaders, we are advancing implementation of the Ethnic Inclusion Chapter, building the leadership skills of young people, and protecting five new indigenous community conservation areas – totaling 772 square miles of protected territories.

USAID's comprehensive support is a recognition of the strategic possibilities the Accord offers to address the root causes of violence while expanding equity, economic opportunities, and justice throughout Colombia's historically neglected rural areas.

While significant progress has been made, Colombia today faces severe and unanticipated shocks, including the COVID-19 pandemic, the migration crisis from Venezuela, and the continued rise in coca cultivation – which has fueled violence against human rights defenders, social leaders and environmental defenders. These shocks have widened the gap between Colombia's fortunate and struggling classes and exacerbated long-standing grievances, resulting in widespread national protests. These shocks threaten progress made in Colombia's transition from conflict to an inclusive peace and USAID is working to help Colombia address these issues head on.

COVID-19 Pandemic Response

The COVID-19 pandemic has made peace implementation and integrated rural development more difficult. Colombia implemented one of the longest, and most strict quarantines in the world. The effects were similarly devastating across Latin America—loss of livelihoods from a

paralyzed economy, learning losses among the youth and a marked increase in gender-based violence as victims were trapped with their aggressors. The COVID-19 pandemic also enabled illegal groups in Colombia's rural areas to assert territorial control and terrorize communities.

USAID adjusted fast to support Colombia's COVID-19 response across our health, humanitarian, livelihoods, peacebuilding, and governance programming. We've provided food assistance and bolstered health capacities in rural and underserved urban areas. As the pandemic hit ethnic communities particularly hard, we provided over 70,000 Afro-Colombian and Indigenous peoples from La Guajira, Chocó, Amazonas and elsewhere with life-saving food, water, and non-medical supplies. We helped schools shift to virtual learning, engaging thousands of children at risk of falling behind or being recruited by illegal armed groups. The United States is also helping Colombia with COVID vaccinations. To date, the United States has donated 6 million vaccines, with USAID providing complementary technical assistance in support of Colombia's efforts to turn the vaccines into vaccinations. We're now focused on the future, getting Colombia's youth back to school and supporting inclusive, and sustainable economic recovery, including income generation and job opportunities for vulnerable populations.

Addressing Coca Cultivation

Coca's rapid expansion across the peace geography also greatly complicates rural development. As the demobilized FARC stepped away from the battlefield, this created a void in the control of the lucrative narcotics trade. In vying for control of the enterprise, armed groups have increased violence and innocent civilians, particularly social leaders, are caught in the crossfire. While this was predicted when the Accord was being negotiated, the situation only underscores the need to continue efforts to bring democratic governance, institutional presence, security, and licit development to coca growing regions.

Last October, the White House announced the Biden-Harris Administration's implementation of a more integrated and holistic approach to counter-narcotics in Colombia. This bilateral strategy – which USAID works closely to implement with our State Department colleagues – aims to make eradication gains more sustainable by better integrating expanded state presence, licit economic opportunities, and strengthening the social fabric of communities weakened by decades of conflict. The strategy links counter-narcotics progress to peace, as there is close geographic overlap between drug crops and Peace Accord implementation. USAID works closely with Bureau of International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs (INL) and others across the interagency to assist Colombia in the pursuit of the goals of this strategy that better balances a range of complementary interventions including access to state services, institutional presence, rule of law to guarantee basic constitutional rights, income for licit producers, eradication of coca, and permanent territorial control.

An example of this integrated approach is our amplified focus on land formalization, including titling, as an important precondition to licit development. USAID is betting heavily on the power of land ownership as the best determinant of how that land is used into the future. Formal title to land opens access to credit and allows the titleholder the security to make long-term investments in their plot. It also creates iron-clad incentives to stay legal by giving the government the power to sanction the owner with confiscation. Land titling promises important coca reduction benefits, given estimates that recidivism rates for coca cultivation without a land title is 70 to 75 percent,

whereas it is 20 percent with a land title. USAID has piloted municipal-wide titling sweeps in areas emblematic of armed conflict, like Colombia's Montes de Maria area, which was victimized by successive waves of FARC and paramilitary abuses.

Having partnered with the Colombian government to deliver over 2,500 rural titles in just one municipality in this area - the first massive land titling initiative in Colombia's history - USAID's approach takes these processes to areas where our conflict, coca, and peace goals coincide. The Agency is intensively mapping and collecting household data to process land titles in the first of three priority municipalities that were agreed to during last October's High Level Dialogue with Colombia. USAID anticipates using this as a test case for success in other coca growing municipalities. We know that land is at the heart of Colombia's conflict and are convinced that it must be central to the solution.

Protecting Human Rights

Coca cultivation is closely linked to violence and human rights violations. As the FARC laid down its arms under the Peace Accord, criminal gangs have entered into violent competition to control territory and illegal economies. Social and environmental leaders - the voice of peaceful advocacy for the democratic rights of rural communities - have become even more vulnerable to violent attack.

What is clear is that if you are a Colombian environmental defender, your life may be directly at risk. If you organize to promote victims' rights or repossession of stolen land, you can expect to be a target. If you promote a vision of your territory that is less dependent on coca or illegal mining, you expose yourself to real danger. And if you are a child, vulnerable while out of school and with your family facing increased socio-economic hardship, you are at increased risk of forceful recruitment by illegal armed groups. In line with historic trends, violence disproportionately affects diverse ethnic communities.

In the face of the chilling rise in threats and murders of social leaders, USAID has deepened efforts to support human rights defenders and environmental leaders. We helped the National Protection Unit - a government entity USAID was instrumental in establishing - to tailor life-saving protection plans for women, Afro-Colombian, and indigenous leaders, resulting in more effective use of collective protection.

Increasing accountability for crimes committed against human rights defenders is a top priority and one that is shared across the United States Government. Through USAID's partnership with the U.N. Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, we helped the Attorney General secure 88 sentences in human rights defender homicide cases to date. We know there is more work to do, but are encouraged by these positive steps toward greater accountability. It is more important than ever that the United States stand beside these courageous partners.

Venezuelan Migrant Crisis

The crisis in Venezuela - the greatest migratory crisis in this hemisphere's history - has diverted focus and resources away from peace implementation. Colombia now hosts nearly two million

Venezuelan migrants and refugees, all seeking a better life. Colombia welcomed them with open arms, and USAID quickly adjusted to help Colombia meet this unforeseen challenge. The United States helped provide a humanitarian lifeline through food, medicine, and shelter.

Colombia has launched Temporary Protected Status (TPS) programs for Venezuelans and is just one example of Colombian generosity to the Venezuelan people. TPS is Colombian-led, but assistance from the United States has catalyzed its launch and implementation. Modest U.S. investments, in the form of additional staff and equipment, enabled Colombia to move decisively to register Venezuelans, thus allowing them to access basic services and seek employment.

Colombia's response to the crisis has contributed to hemispheric stability; positively improves the lives of millions of vulnerable migrants; and helps migrants contribute productively to Colombia. Colombia's example offers a promising migration management model for the region. USAID is maximizing limited resources by working with the Colombian government and the private sector to help with the socio and economic integration of migrants.

Mitigating Climate Change

Colombia's peace and climate change agendas are closely linked. Similarly to migration, Colombia has responded to its environmental challenges with innovation and leadership. The country's Paris Agreement commitments set an example through their ambitious targets of a 51 percent reduction over baseline by 2030, net zero deforestation by 2030, and carbon neutrality by 2050.

Moreover, President Duque has identified the natural environment as one of Colombia's most strategic assets. Protecting environmental assets, particularly tropical forests, carbon sinks, and the country's rich biodiversity in order to achieve climate change goals will require innovative development investments in many of the same municipalities where the Peace Accord is being implemented.

USAID's Mission in Colombia oversees the Agency's largest natural environment investment in the hemisphere – fitting for the second most biodiverse country in the world. Much of our environmental work, particularly that related to tropical forests and biodiversity conservation, as well as addressing illegal gold mining, is centered in conflict-affected areas. We undertake this work in close collaboration with Afro-Colombian and Indigenous communities, empowering them to balance development with conservation. For example, our work assisting Afro Colombian and Indigenous communities to conserve tropical forests and then sell carbon credits from the standing forests to firms seeking to offset their carbon footprints is generating an important income stream for badly needed social and economic investment in these communities.

Our investments in the environment reinforce our peace and security goals. The same organized criminal elements who profit from coca also seek to capitalize on illegal logging, deforestation, illegal mining, and other environmental crimes, all which have increased in recent years. USAID's environmental protection activities work in concert with INL's efforts to assist Colombian law enforcement to prosecute these crimes and place added pressure on these

organizations, while denying them safe havens in protected areas such as national parks and forest reserves.

Conclusion

USAID is proud to be a partner with Colombia on the path away from decades of conflict towards peace and prosperity. Our task now is to make that peace irreversible in the face of continuing challenges.

The Accord's implementation, while on pace with international norms, has been slower than many would like. Yet it remains a long-term, Colombian-led framework for stability, security, counternarcotics, and economic development.

The Colombian track record of self-improvement is undeniable. Much has been accomplished in a short amount of time. USAID has used our resources to support innovative government programs, mobilize Colombia's own human and financial capital, and support the resilience and bravery of Colombian civil society. The trust and progress built in this relationship will continue to provide a strong foundation for our future investments.

In closing, in the words of USAID partner Luis Fernando Arias, a leading voice of Colombia's indigenous movement and a champion of the Accord's Ethnic Inclusion Chapter: "We have to continue working for a country that is more humane, peaceful, equitable, and inclusive We are here because Colombia cannot have one more victim." Luis Fernando tragically died as a result of COVID-19 last year. We honor his memory and may his words be our call to action today.