

**Statement of Ambassador Brian A. Nichols  
Assistant Secretary of State for  
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Before the  
Senate Foreign Relations Committee:  
Reinvigorating U.S.-Colombia Relations  
February 16, 2022**

Chairman Menendez, Ranking Member Risch, distinguished members of the Committee, I find it fitting that we take the opportunity to discuss Colombia now, as 2022 marks the bicentennial of bilateral relations between our two countries. The United States and Colombia stood shoulder to shoulder through some of the toughest tests of the 19th, 20th and 21st centuries, and today, we are closer partners than ever.

We share a deep commitment to democratic governance, prosperity and opportunity, the rule of law, and respect for human rights. We share a determination to ensure Colombia has a lasting peace, counters terrorism and narcotics, expands state services and protection throughout its territory, protects the environment, and finds strength in its rich diversity. We join forces to uphold these values in our countries as well as others, and we do not refrain from calling out and holding accountable those who trespass upon the standards we hold dear. In the face of terrorist violence and a brutal dictatorship in neighboring Venezuela that provides shelter and encouragement to both terrorist and criminal groups and caused the exodus of millions, Colombia's resolve has not waned.

We continue to seek ways to improve security and prosperity for citizens in both our countries. And we continue to support comprehensive implementation of the historic 2016 Peace Accord with the former FARC, which will be critical to ensure Colombia's transition from 50 years of conflict to a just, inclusive, and durable peace.

Over the past year, the United States supported Colombia's impressive efforts to build back from the global pandemic. We donated more than \$117 million to response and recovery efforts -- including surge healthcare personnel, critical supplies, and equipment -- to curb the COVID-19 pandemic. The United States also donated six million safe, effective COVID-19 vaccine doses and helped distribute them in hard-to-reach areas.

Last week in Colombia, I witnessed the commitment of the Colombian government to further professionalize its security forces and increase state presence and resources in remote areas. During my visit, I underscored our shared commitment to human rights with civil society leaders and encouraged U.S. businesses in Colombia to create new economic opportunities.

For all that we have accomplished together, there remains more to do.

The COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted the precarious state of Colombia's most vulnerable populations. Colombia cannot achieve lasting peace without addressing the systematic inequities

that have contributed to persistent violence. Expanding efforts to improve respect for human rights and accountability for past offenses remains essential. I will strengthen our work with Colombia to ensure historically disadvantaged communities of Afro-descendant and Indigenous peoples benefit from the same opportunities as the broader population. I will continue prioritizing policies and programs that provide opportunities for women, minority ethnic communities, victims of violence, and other groups that remain disenfranchised in society today.

The vulnerable populations in Colombia include almost two million Venezuelans displaced by the poverty, kleptocracy and brutality of the Maduro regime next door. With its historic offer of ten-year temporary protection, Colombia generously welcomed Venezuelan refugees within its borders and provides short-term access to food, services, and medical attention to nearly six million Venezuelans living in border communities – all at a time when resources have been stretched even thinner due to the pandemic.

Colombia has also assumed an outsized leadership position in the hemisphere in addressing irregular migration, including by co-hosting a hemisphere-wide ministerial on migration with Secretary Blinken last October.

An acute priority is collaborating with Colombia to fend off the malign activities of state and non-state actors, who increasingly seek opportunities to erode the hemispheric consensus on the importance of the rule of law and democratic governance. Those actors helped Nicaragua, Venezuela, and Cuba turn away from this consensus – and enable the autocratic leaders of those countries to hold on to power by suppressing their own people.

Colombia's leaders recognize that protecting democracy from external threats is essential. With elections on the horizon, the United States provides funding and technical support to help Colombia counter malign actors seeking to sow confusion and mistrust in the institutions Colombia and the United States worked so tirelessly to strengthen. We also continue to support Colombia's security efforts to ensure every citizen can exercise their right to vote safely.

We will seek progress on our bilateral and regional goals throughout the end of the Duque administration, and we will engage with Colombia's next administration with the shared goal that governments must not only be elected democratically, but also govern democratically to improve the lives of all citizens. I am confident that this productive, democratic partnership will continue to deliver for Colombians and Americans for years to come.

Thank you for this opportunity and I look forward to your questions.