

Statement of Ambassador Todd D. Robinson
Assistant Secretary of State for
International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs
Before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee:
Reinvigorating U.S.-Colombia Relations
February 16, 2022

Chairman Menendez, Ranking Member Risch, distinguished Members of the Committee, thank you for the opportunity to testify before you today regarding INL's efforts to advance the United States' priorities in Colombia. Together, with longstanding support from Congress, we have built one of the deepest bilateral partnerships in the Americas.

Colombia's security directly affects the security and welfare of our citizens. A stronger, more stable Colombia is not just a better partner but also provides regional leadership on our shared priorities, including countering transnational crime, enhancing regional security, and training security forces throughout the region.

Colombia has made significant progress over the last 20 years, transforming into a stable democracy and economy. It has become more secure and prosperous, with a dramatic drop in violent crime statistics and a more than tripling of Gross Domestic Product (GDP) and Gross National Income (GNI) per capita.

To sustain Colombia's progress, we must continue to support Colombia's institutions and their capacity to expand state presence into rural areas, invest in counternarcotics efforts, protect human rights, combat environmental crime, mitigate climate change, and manage the Venezuelan migrant crisis.

Despite COVID-19-related challenges, the Duque administration has dedicated significant resources and personnel to meeting ambitious counternarcotics targets. In 2021, the Colombian government captured alias Otoniel, the most significant blow to Clan del Golfo in many years; interdicted or assisted in the interdiction of 758 tons of cocaine and cocaine base, the most in Colombia's history; and manually eradicated 103,000 hectares of coca, the second most manual eradication in Colombia's history. While our combined efforts have helped slow years of explosive coca growth, the now historic levels of coca cultivation show a new approach was needed to reduce overall drug production in Colombia, particularly as transnational criminal organizations find new drug markets and improve production techniques. With the historic cultivation numbers

in mind, the U.S. and Colombian governments developed a new strategy to redesign our counternarcotics efforts.

Last October, we committed to a comprehensive, holistic, whole-of-government strategy to link state presence, security, development, rule of law, and environmental protection to reduce coca and cocaine production in Colombia significantly and sustainably. The new approach focuses on three pillars: integrated supply reduction; comprehensive rural development and security; and environmental protection.

The strategy will enable us to define broader measures of success for counternarcotics in rural communities. Eradication will remain crucial and is essential to create the space for long-term solutions, but we have also broadened our interventions to include a focus on environmental crimes as criminal organizations responsible for narco-trafficking are often responsible for environmental destruction such as deforestation, soil and water pollution, and illegal mining. By aggressively pursuing environmental crimes, we will both protect the environment and apply pressure on these criminal organizations.

Under the integrated supply reduction pillar, INL seeks to address the nature of the cocaine supply and counter the growing trend in coca cultivation and related illicit financial flows. INL will continue to help Colombia eradicate coca, interdict cocaine and precursor materials, and improve police and prosecutor's ability to disrupt the financial networks that sustain and support these groups. We are also supporting the police to improve their long-term training, deployment, and human rights practices to make them more effective.

Under the rural security, development, and justice pillar, the United States works with our Colombian partners to extend state presence to rural communities to provide greater security, expand economic opportunity, and improve justice and other social services, which are critical to people's needs and to advance the accords. Together with USAID, our efforts include protecting community leaders; making licit crops more profitable and competitive; and amplifying land formalization.

We have launched programming to reverse the negative impact of the narcotics trade on the environment by enhancing detection, supporting reforestation, and assisting Colombian military and police efforts to pursue the perpetrators of environmental crimes.

Our new strategy brings together U.S. and Colombian public stakeholders in an integrated, sequenced fashion to produce optimal, sustainable results in three targeted geographic areas to gauge their efficacy. INL, in particular, is collaborating closely with USAID. For example, in Cáceres, Antioquia, we sequenced programming to increase police presence, strengthen community-police relations, remove landmines, formalize land ownership, improve infrastructure, provide agriculture training, train prosecutors, enforce environmental crimes, and improve local government services.

To achieve this strategy, we recognize the Colombian people's confidence in their police and institutions must improve. We are, therefore, also supporting the Colombian-led plan to increase police accountability, transparency, and protection of human rights. We support the Colombian government's focus on transparency, accountability, its intent to fully investigate allegations of police misconduct, and its statements of zero tolerance for officials acting outside the law.

Mr. Chairman and Ranking Member, we have worked closely with the Duque administration to implement vital police reforms, achieve impressive counternarcotics results, strengthen rural security, and disrupt criminal networks. We cannot and should not underestimate the challenges we face in Colombia – armed groups are resilient, adaptive, and incredibly well-resourced – and improving rural security in Colombia, a highly urbanized country that is almost twice the size of Texas, is a significant challenge. We look forward to continuing to work with the Duque administration in these next few months, and to working with the next Colombian presidential administration. We believe our new whole-of-government strategy is sufficiently flexible that it can accommodate whoever is the eventual winner of Colombia's presidency. Strong and sustained bipartisan support from Congress is an integral component of our shared success with Colombia. Thank you, and I look forward to your questions.