

**Media Availability of
U.S. Trade Representative Robert B. Zoellick
and Colombian President Alvaro Uribe
March 23, 2004**

[portions are translated from Spanish]

Zoellick: I want to thank all of you for joining us today. I had the honor of attending the President's meeting with President Bush, in which they discussed our plans to initiate the negotiation of our free trade agreement with Colombia. And we will be having the first session in Colombia on May 18th and May 19th. As you know this follows on the letter that we sent to the Congress in November of last year, as part of our trade promotion authority procedures. And as the President and I, just had a chance to discuss, we've been also talking about Peru and Ecuador joining those negotiations. We've had some issues to resolve in terms of investment and workers' rights, but we've been making progress with both countries. And we look forward to continuing to try to resolve those issues, so that we hope they'll be able to join us at the table. But today we focused particularly on the importance of our economic relationship with Colombia.

I'm suppose to let the translation person [inaudible].

[resumption of statement] And I just want to thank President Uribe and Minister Botero and other members of their team personally. Because after the President's visit last year with President Bush, I went down to Colombia to talk about the preparations for this negotiation. And even though President Uribe has many important demands on his calendar, he took the time to walk through with me and other members of his cabinet, the key elements. And this has enabled us to use the recent months very productively and prepare so I hope that we could have a very quick negotiation.

Mr President?

President Uribe: [translation] Thank you very much, Mr. Zoellick, I want to thank you and I want to thank your team for this very constructive meeting we had today. As a result of which, I, I'm very happy to be here making this hopeful announcement regarding a date certain to begin negotiations towards a free trade agreement. This negotiation demonstrates to the region and to the entire world how necessary it is for us to integrate our economies and this effort must be one that we carry out in a spirit of democracy, the spirit of solidarity, in order to improve the lives of the people involved. In order to expand the opportunities for our peoples and also to revindicate the sectors that have been destroyed in the past. Therefore this is something that I look forward to with a great sense of optimism. We will be listening to the needs placed before us by our people, we'll be working with all the options available to us. And we will be building a consensus to further the needs and the rights of our people, and we hope that this will serve as an example not just to our region but to the entire world. Thank very much.

Zoellick: [Inaudible] ... would you be willing to take a few questions?

Reporter: [Inaudible] You mentioned you wanted the negotiations to move quickly, but I was wondering, it seems to me that before November nothing was going to be approved in Congress starting this election year, and in November well, you don't even know if you're going to be in power, so, why don't wait until the elections are over, and to launch, I mean what's the purpose of doing it now and start moving forward, rather than wait to see what's going to happen in November.

Zoellick: Well, we, President Bush fought very hard for something call Trade Promotion Authority. Which we achieved in 2002 at the same time we extended the Andean Trade Preference Act. That authority runs until the middle 2005 although it can be extended. So we would like to get this agreement done in time, that, by early in 2005, we could submit it under the trade promotion authority rules. And you may have noticed, even though we're in an election period, it hasn't slowed down our negotiating agenda in trade. In the past couple of months we've finished free trade agreement with 8 new countries. And we're beginning with other countries. And since Colombia is a very valued economic partner, where there is strong interest in our business and agriculture community, and where it's been a good partner for the United States in security and democracy. We think this an important time to move forward this agenda as well. One more?

Reporter: [translation] This is a question for President Uribe. Mr President, after this meeting what is the message that you would convey to the skeptics in Colombia regarding this agreement?

President Uribe: [translation] There are skeptics all over the world and that is why we need to work to build a foundation of consensus. The highest level possible of consensus. And we need to sharpen our senses to use our imaginations to the maximum, in order to seek out the best possible solutions within the framework of this negotiation. And the idea of seeking an equitable agreement and helping the sectors that are most excluded is something that is going to provide us with a very strong political and social groundwork.

Zoellick: If I could also try to address that from a U.S. perspective it might be interesting to your audience. I mentioned the Andean Trade Preference Act. As you may know this has created tens of thousands of new jobs in Colombia. Indeed, whenever I visit Colombia, I always have beautiful flowers from your flower cutters, because they've done such good business. But that act expires at the end of 2006. So we want to make sure the free trade agreement is negotiated, passed and in place, so that those Colombian people who've gotten jobs, will keep their jobs and new ones will [inaudible]. And then as Colombians have higher incomes they will buy more for the United States so that we can create some jobs here too.

Thank you all.

I don't want to disrupt the President's calendar. He has a very busy schedule.

President Uribe: I am a visitor. [laughter]

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