

Opening Statement
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Subcommittee on the Western Hemisphere
Committee on Foreign Affairs
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Venezuela: Looking Ahead

To begin, I would like to thank the Chairman for holding today's hearing addressing an important dynamic within our hemisphere. On November 17th, 2005, we met in this subcommittee hearing room, with Tom Shannon appearing before us for the first time as the newly sworn-in Assistant Secretary of State for the Bureau of Western Hemisphere Affairs, and we discussed Democracy in Venezuela.

The debate almost three years ago appears very similar to today's discussion. We highlighted the fact that the United States and Venezuela had traditionally enjoyed close relations, but that the relationship with Venezuela's President was becoming more strained as democratic institutions eroded, power was consolidated and rhetoric aligning Venezuela's leadership with prominent communist leaders flourished.

Today, as we discuss U.S. - Venezuela relations looking forward, we are facing a very similar situation- now with 272 (originally 400) politicians barred from running for state and municipal elections this coming November, two specific supporters of the Lebanese terrorist group, Hezbollah, working in Venezuela to facilitate and support the terrorist organization, and concerns over the treatment of individuals and groups that disagree with the central government's opinions.

Not unlike the past, President Hugo Chavez has recently made promising statements, such as his call for terrorist FARC guerillas to lay down their arms and turn over all hostages, and statements implying openness to renewing drug-fighting collaboration between the United States and Venezuela- a relationship which has been suspended since 2005. I am waiting to see President Chavez follow through with his diplomatic assurances. President Chavez must release the hold on seven pending visas for our DEA agents that have been awaiting their visas for up to 1 full year, and he must stop supporting and harboring terrorists, before his gestures of cooperation can be taken seriously.

With inflation spiraling out of control, crime rates soaring, food prices unstable, and upcoming state and municipal elections in November, Venezuela currently has a lot on its plate. The flow of drugs through Venezuela has increased fivefold between the years 2004 and 2007. Profits from oil production are through the roof, yet Venezuela is seeing a decline in its economic stature. There is no better time for change for President Chavez, for Venezuelans and for the entire Hemisphere.

What we here today, and indeed the people of Venezuela, are waiting for as we look toward the future is for President Chavez to follow through on his statements and promises. Venezuelans have taken to the streets to demand fair access to goods and services and open democratic processes. President Chavez has made statements that he will use oil revenues to increase the economic status of his people, yet Venezuela's economic performance continues to decline. Also, the President has said that Venezuela does not and will not support terrorist activities, and we, like the Venezuelan people, hope to see President Chavez make good on these statements by closing off safe havens to FARC leaders who are seeking refuge in Venezuela.

Freedom from fear of repression, knowledge that terrorists are not harbored within your borders, and access to basic survival needs such as food and shelter should be things that all democratic societies provide. Now is the time for President Chavez to step up to the plate and collaborate on these issues to ensure these basic human rights are guaranteed within his country, to all Venezuelans.

I look forward to hearing from our distinguished panelists on where Venezuela is headed as a country and also in the broader context of the Hemisphere, as well as the potential that President Chavez may decide to play within the rules of democratic governance and follow through on his diplomatic promises.