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TAGS: PREL, PGOV, PTER, MARR, MOPS, VZ, AR, BH, BR, CI, CS,
CU, ES, HO, MX, NU, PM, PA, PE, UY, CO
SUBJECT: CJCS ADMIRAL MULLEN'S JANUARY 17 MEETING WITH
PRESIDENT URIBE

Classified By: Ambassador William R. Brownfield
Reasons: 1.4 (b) and (d)

Summary

1. (S) President Uribe's overwhelming concern during a January 17 meeting with Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff (CJCS) Admiral Michael Mullen, was Hugo Chavez' aggressive remarks and proposal to grant belligerent status to the FARC. Uribe insisted the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia

(FARC) and National Liberation Army (ELN) must keep their terrorist designation, and the USG and GOC should work together to convince Latin American countries that Chavez' approach would harm Colombia and regional democracy. Uribe said Chavez has committed to bring down Uribe and his government by using the FARC as his militia inside Colombia. The GOC's current plan of action on hostages consists of locating them, securing areas near the hostage groups, and calling on the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) to negotiate their release. Uribe would authorize Colombian forces to cross into Venezuela to arrest FARC leaders and bring them to justice in Colombia. End Summary.

2. (U) Participants

UNITED STATES

CJCS Admiral Michael Mullen
Ambassador William Brownfield
CJCS/EA CAPT James Foggo
Defense Attach COL Mark Wilkins (notetaker)

COLOMBIA

President Alvaro Uribe
Defense Minister Juan Manuel Santos
Armed Forces Commander General Freddy Padilla
MFA U.S. and Canada Desk Officer Patricia Cortes

Uribe Obsessed By Chavez Blasts

3. (C) President Alvaro Uribe arrived late to the meeting, directly from a discussion with his cabinet on how to respond to Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez' latest inflammatory remarks, and the show of solidarity by the Venezuelan Congress on granting "belligerent" status to the FARC. It was clear that he was still focused on Chavez and the GOC response.

GOC Progress, USG Support

4. (C) Uribe thanked the United States for its continued support, stressing its decisiveness in helping Colombia pull back from the brink of becoming a failed state. While much work remains, Colombia has made great progress against terrorists and the GOC feels certain they can win this battle. Uribe attributed a great portion of the credit for Colombia's success to the permanent assistance of the USG and

its armed forces. Chairman Mullen reaffirmed the strength of the bilateral relationship and assured Uribe of continuing USG commitment to defeating our common adversaries. He admired Colombians' determination and leadership. The Colombian military had transformed itself remarkably and performed the highest calling possible -- returning Colombia to its citizens.

Chavez' Endorsement of FARC

5. (C) Turning to Venezuela, Uribe said his neighbor's actions cause Colombia great difficulty. The FARC and ELN must keep their terrorist designation, Uribe insisted, and there should be negative consequences for any country granting them belligerent status. It was important to counter and challenge Chavez' rhetoric, especially on this point. When France and Mexico granted that status to the Farabundo Marti Liberation Front (FMLN) rebels in El Salvador in 1981, Uribe commented, they fought an unelected and brutal dictatorship. By contrast, the FARC waged war on a duly elected democracy, they had no public support, and they financed themselves through narcotrafficking and extortion.

6. (S) Asked by the Chairman how much help Chavez gave the FARC, Uribe replied that Chavez has a five to seven year plan to advance his Bolivarian agenda in Colombia. He has created popular militias inside Venezuela (apart from the Armed Forces) to sustain his revolution. The GOC believes Chavez thinks he could use the FARC as his militia inside Colombia to combat its democratic government. Chavez remains committed to bring down both Uribe and his government, as the primary obstacles to his Bolivarian expansionist dreams. With no clear Colombian presidential successor, a well financed candidate favoring Chavez might find space in 2010. The best counter to Chavez, in Uribe's view, remains action -- including use of the military.

Regional Support

7. (S) Uribe urged the GOC and USG to work together to convince Latin American countries that Chavez' approach to the FARC was wrong and would harm Colombia and regional democracy. The USG, he said, ought to lead a public campaign against Venezuela and counter Chavez' progress through preferential oil offers. The U.S. and Mexico, supported by Honduras, Panama, Belize, and Costa Rica (especially Oscar Arias in the latter) were natural leaders to counter Chavez. Even Cuba, which felt Chavez had crossed into dangerous territory, has exercised a restraining influence. When the GOC asked the Cuban government their views on Chavez' call to roll back the FARC's terrorist designation, the Cubans stated that it was "a difficult proposal."

8. (S) Uribe saw mixed loyalties among other Latin American countries. Only Nicaragua had supported Chavez' FARC proposal. Argentina remains difficult, since Venezuela bought Argentine bonds and Chavez made campaign contributions to the new President. Paraguay, in the midst of an election cycle, is uncertain though the front-runner supports Chavez. Uruguay, a possible ally, is sitting on the fence. Brazil remains friendly with Colombia, but prefers neutrality lest it offend anyone. In Peru, President Alan Garcia concurs

with the United States and would follow its lead. Chile remains a good friend to Colombia and its cause.

Hostages and HVTs

9. (S) Uribe listed rescue of hostages held by the FARC as one of his main goals for 2008. He outlined a plan whereby the military would establish a "cordon sanitaire" around areas where hostages were held. Then the GOC would temporarily open the area to outside interlocutors such as the ICRC to offer an international medical mission and conduct negotiations. Under this umbrella, the GOC would focus on the 44 hostages the FARC had identified as "exchangeable." Chairman Mullen assured USG support for GOC's efforts, but he cautioned that the USG wanted the hostages returned alive. Uribe responded with his conviction that the FARC would not kill hostages at this stage. The best course of action, he advocated, remains to locate the hostages, secure the positions, and then call in the ICRC to negotiate their release.

10. (S) Uribe said the GOC also placed a priority on high value targets and that they had achieved great results in late 2007. Finally, he said he was prepared to authorize Colombian forces to cross into Venezuela, arrest FARC leaders, and bring them to justice in Colombia.

11. (U) CJCS Admiral Mullen cleared this cable.

Brownfield