

THE WHITE HOUSE
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PRESS BRIEFING BY
AMBASSADOR JOHN VERONEAU, DEPUTY U.S. TRADE REPRESENTATIVE,
DAN FISK, DIRECTOR OF WESTERN HEMISPHERE AFFAIRS
FOR THE NATIONAL SECURITY COUNCIL, AND
CHRIS PADILLA, UNDER SECRETARY OF COMMERCE FOR
INTERNATIONAL TRADE

James S. Brady Press Briefing Room

2:38 P.M. EDT

MR. FRATTO: Hey, everyone. Thanks for coming to this background briefing -- actually, we're doing this on the record; off camera, but it's actually on-the-record briefing -- with three of our best minds on trade, and especially trade in this particular region.

With us we're going to have John Veroneau, Deputy U.S. Trade Representative lead us off, and then Chris Padilla, who is Under Secretary for International Trade at the Commerce Department, and then Dan Fisk is Director for Western Hemisphere Affairs here at the National Security Council. So we can expand the scope, talking about where we are with the Colombia trade deal. You obviously have the comments from the President in his remarks at the U.S. Hispanic Chamber of Commerce today. Talk a little bit about where we are and about some of the economic benefits that we see which we think are really strong in favor of U.S. businesses and service providers and ranchers and the agriculture community.

And then we'll ask Dan Fisk to talk a little bit about something that you haven't heard us discuss a lot with respect to trade deals before, but is particularly critical in this one, and that is the national security concerns and the hemispheric relations that we and the President, in particular, are very concerned about.

And they'll be able to stick around and answer some questions and hopefully try to be done by a little after -- well, we'll see how it's going, see how their schedule is going. Okay, thank you. John.

AMBASSADOR VERONEAU: The President's remarks today speak for themselves, but I want to just give a little bit of background of the process and what's been occurring for the past year. As the President said in his remarks, there's been a dialogue underway and an effort underway to engage the congressional leadership in identifying a path forward for the Colombia FTA.

The issue that was raised first and foremost last spring regarded labor and environment provisions and the desire to make those stronger and more enforceable, and of course we did that and that agreement was announced on May 10. And I think to the credit of all parties we were able to work through those issues as a result of the good faith negotiation to address issues that Congress raised with us.

With regard to Colombia, what was made clear at the time of May 10 was that the provisions that we agreed to go to our trade partners to renegotiate these trade agreements -- the labor and environment provisions and some others -- we agreed that we would go to Colombia, as we did with Peru and Panama and Korea, to make those changes, and our trading partners agreed to make those changes knowing that making those changes would greatly enhance the ability to move those agreements through the Congress.

With regard to Colombia, the message was the agreement, itself, is fine once these changes were made with regard to labor, environment and the others. But there were still concerns about violence and impunity that members of Congress wanted to see addressed. And as Speaker Pelosi said, she wanted to see tangible evidence of progress in those areas. And that's what we have sought to provide since May 10. She made that statement in late June, actually; so since June we've tried to help her, other members of Congress and other stakeholders understand what's happened in Colombia in the past seven years, in particular, in terms of reducing violence, improving human rights and improving matters with regard to impunity.

There was a report that the Center for Strategic and International Studies released this past fall that in one volume I think catalogs quite well the progress that has been made in all those areas. And I think there is -- there are many observers who have looked at the situation in Colombia that have reached the same conclusion that CSIS and we have reached, which is it's a remarkable story of progress. And Dan Fisk perhaps will speak in greater detail to that.

But my point is we heard the concerns that were raised last summer and we have addressed those. And we have been for these past months trying to engage the leadership in collaborating on a path forward for the Colombia agreement. There have been many, many meetings with the leadership and members of Congress. We have taken dozens of members to Colombia so they could see for themselves. And as Barry McCaffrey put it best -- he was as some of you may know, President Clinton's drug czar -- he returned to Colombia last fall and as he said in an op-ed published in The Washington Post, he said it is night and day from what he saw in the late '90s in terms of what's happened in that country.

So we've been at the table waiting to engage with congressional leadership to find a path forward on Colombia. And we will -- we have left and will continue to leave no stone unturned in terms of trying to find a way forward that is bipartisan. What the President made clear today is that there will be a vote on this agreement -- that is, this year, this Congress. And that is a critical message I think for Congress to hear, and for our friends in Latin America to hear. This is too important not to have a vote on.

Why don't I stop there, and turn it, Chris, to you.

UNDER SECRETARY PADILLA: I want to talk about the economics of this agreement. It's not widely known the United States already has a free trade agreement with Colombia. We already have free trade with that country, but it's one-way free trade. For 16 years, since Congress first passed the Andean Trade Preferences Act, almost all Colombian products have entered the United States completely duty-free, paid no tariffs at all on entry into our country.

What this agreement is about is mainly opening their market to our U.S.-made products. If you remember only three numbers about the Colombia free trade agreement, remember these: 92, 16 and 365. Ninety-two percent of all Colombian imports to the United States come into our market today duty-free; they pay nothing. It's been that way for 16 years, since Congress first passed the Andean Trade Preferences Act.

And 365 is the number of members of Congress, from both sides of the aisle, who voted the last time this was up for a recorded vote, to renew that program. And the program was just renewed again a few weeks ago by a voice vote on the suspension calendar in the House of Representatives. So we've already thrown open our market. This is about opening Colombia's market to our products.

And to illustrate that, I brought with me a grocery bag of some typical products that you might find in the store, to make this point. Now, I like Colombian coffee. I drank some Colombian coffee this morning for breakfast. We drink a lot of Colombian coffee in the United States. This coffee comes into the United States, and has for 16 years, duty-free. It pays nothing on entering the U.S. market. But this bottle of soda, made in the United States and exported to Colombia, pays a 20 percent tariff when it enters that country: Zero percent coming into the U.S.; 20 percent of the U.S.-made product going into Colombia. I'm going to line these up over here.

If you bought flowers for your spouse or a loved one on Valentine's Day, there is a very good chance they came from Colombia. Many of our cut flowers in the United States are imported from Colombia, and they come in duty-free, and have for many years. But this fertilizer, made in the United States and exported to Colombia to help grow these very same flowers, pays a 15 percent tariff.

Plenty of other examples. We get a lot of baby carrots from Colombia, particularly during the winter months. These come in and onto your dinner table; pay nothing. But the full-size version of this Caterpillar tractor, made in East Peoria, Illinois, with U.S. parts and components made by U.S. labor employees, labor union employees, pays a 10 percent tariff if it's sold to a farmer to grow these carrots in Colombia.

We have an apple grown in Pennsylvania, pays 15 percent when it goes into Colombia. A banana grown in Colombia pays zero when you eat it on your breakfast table. Even the paper bag containing my examples -- if we were to export the paper bag to a Colombian grocery store, it pays a heavy tariff.

Now, what I say to groups around the country, and I've been traveling around the country -- I'm outside the Beltway at least once a week and have been since last December -- we've done, by the way, collectively as an administration, more than 380 events in more than 35 states around the country since last September talking about this agreement. And what I say to folks is, growing up in the Midwest, my grandmother used to like to clip coupons out of the Sunday paper. And she said, throwing away coupons is like throwing away free money.

The good news is, we have a coupon in our bag that would eliminate all the taxes and tariffs on the U.S.-made products going into Colombia, in most cases immediately. And the coupon, I tell folks, is called the Colombia free trade agreement, and it deserves a vote in the Congress of the United States.

So, ladies and gentlemen, the economic case for this agreement is clear. It is very strong. It's an agreement about fairness. This is an agreement that opens an important and growing market in South America to our products, when our market is already wide open to imports. And so we believe that on the economics this agreement makes great sense. Thank you.

MR. FISK: Thank you all. I'm pleased to be able to discuss with you the importance for national security in approving the Colombia free trade agreement. Let me start by actually looking backwards for a moment, and taking you back less than 10 years ago when Colombians were asked about their view of the future of their own country.

And if you go back to that time period -- again, less than 10 years ago -- two-thirds of Colombians believed that it was possible that they would lose their democracy, that they would lose it to some armed element -- at that time, more likely, Marxist guerillas, the Revolutionary Armed Forces or the National Liberation army of the ELN or the FARC. And there was a lot of talk about Colombia being either a failed state, or worse, a narco state. This was not just a view shared by Colombians. It was a view shared by many in the United States, both in the U.S. government and in the academic and political commentary or policy commentary community. It's also shared by many in the international community. And, frankly, if you look at the figures for the time, in terms of the violence -- murders, kidnappings, bombings -- there was a reason for pessimistic assessment.

The good news today is that through determined Colombian leadership and strong bipartisan support from the United States, Colombia has experienced impressive progress. For the first time, legitimate state authority exists in all of Colombia's municipalities, its 1,099 municipalities. Violent crime is down significantly -- again, whether it's murders; again, less than 10 years ago, more than 25,000 Colombians were killed a year; or kidnappings -- again, go back less than 10 years ago, roughly 3,200 Colombians were kidnapped. That's eight a day.

Today, violent crime of all sorts is down significantly. Colombia saw the emergence of a paramilitary movement that, like the FARC and the ELN, got involved in the drug trade. The paramilitaries have been demobilized. Roughly 30,000 paramilitary fighters have been demobilized at this point. And there is an aggressive effort to rid the Colombian political system of their influence, and to hold people accountable for what happened over the last 10 years.

Human rights observance, on every level and every indicator, has been strengthened. And there are now more -- there are larger and more effective programs in place to protect the citizens, especially citizens who may feel themselves particularly vulnerable to some kind of act against them for their political views. And there has also been a corresponding reduction in poverty, and improvements in providing social services.

This is the good news, but there is a side to this reality that this news and the situation in Colombia today is not irreversible. The free trade agreement, in our view, is critical to helping Colombia address the continuing threats it faces. First and foremost is the threat of the Revolutionary Armed Forces, the FARC. It continues -- the FARC continues its assault on Colombian democracy, and its assault against the Colombian people.

It holds currently upwards of 700 hostages, including three Americans. It monopolizes the illegal drug trade in Colombia. It violates the territorial integrity and sovereignty of Colombia's neighbors, and equally threatens the citizens of those neighboring countries. For example, we know that the FARC has kidnapped Venezuelan citizens and may currently hold 100 or more Venezuelans hostage.

The FARC's involvement in the drug trade is also a threat to the region and to us. It's not just a matter that is internal to Colombia.

As the President noted in his speech today, added to this, added to the FARC threat, is the FARC's relationship with Venezuelan officials. It's our view that the most effective and the best thing we can do to help Colombia consolidate the progress that is made -- whether it's in reducing violence, increasing social services, reducing poverty, restoring the public's confidence in its institutions and in the country itself, and protecting the region and ourselves -- is to approve, have Congress approve the Colombia free trade agreement.

In fact, if there's one argument, I think, that is paramount in this is that we know that the main recruitment ground for terrorists, for guerillas or drug traffickers is poverty. The best way to get out of poverty is to create more and more opportunities for Colombians. That's what President Uribe and the Colombian government is trying to do. That's what the Colombia free trade agreement will do. That is the best way to address what we see as a threat to the region, and put Colombia's future on -- or keep Colombia's future and our own national security on the right track.

I'll end there. Thank you all.

Q I'm just wondering -- I imagine the Colombians are on board with this, what's been announced today, and they're fully informed. When were the Colombians told? When did discussions take place? Was it when Uribe called Bush last week? Was this kind of time line, this commitment to have a vote this year? Can you just work kind of the bilateral aspect of what happened today?

AMBASSADOR VERONEAU: Well, I don't think there's any surprise of what happened today. I mean, there's been a regular dialogue, obviously, between the administration and the government of Colombia, as well as with our Congress. So I don't think today's announcement is a surprise to anybody -- the President's commitment to have a vote. And President Uribe and his government understands that, and has understood that for a long time.

Q Two questions. What has happened with the House Democratic leadership? Are they just not talking to you? Are they refusing to do this? Are they saying, let's do it later? What has caused you to take this action? And secondly, how concerned are you that you're going to anger them and cause them maybe to whip against it and maybe subvert your own cause here?

AMBASSADOR VERONEAU: Well, this agreement, for all the reasons that Chris and Dan focused on -- the economic case is compelling, and the foreign policy case is equally compelling. We believe when it's time to vote on this agreement, it will pass. What the message that the President was conveying today was to assure -- designed to assure that members of Congress understand that there will be a vote. This is too important not to vote on. And we have not yet had a negotiation that we would like to have with the congressional leadership that lays out a path forward to facilitate that vote. We still hope to do that. But the President's message today was clear: This agreement is too important not to vote on.

Q And you think that even if this does anger the Democrats, by forcing their hand that you could still get the votes to pass it?

AMBASSADOR VERONEAU: We believe this agreement is too important not to pass, and I'm not sure what the basis of anger would be. We have done everything that we have been asked to do. We were asked to change the agreement by creating enforceable and stronger labor and environment provisions, and we were asked to demonstrate that there's been tangible progress in the areas of violence and impunity. We've done that. So I'm not sure what the basis of anger would be at this point.

UNDER SECRETARY PADILLA: Can I add one point to that, Keith? I participated on one of the congressional delegations that Secretary Gutierrez led to Colombia. Secretary Gutierrez has taken four congressional delegations. There have been other Cabinet members who have led delegations -- Republicans and Democrats. And what impressed me the most was how much those trips served to open minds, on both sides of the aisle. And that's why we're confident that if this agreement is allowed to be debated and voted on the merits, where members can vote what they think makes sense for America and what makes sense for our foreign policy relationship with Colombia, we believe it will get a good strong bipartisan vote.

Q The numbers, how significant is the agreement to the U.S. for the products going into the U.S.? If you could give a figure. And then the other question is, have you noticed any change in Congress after the recent tensions between Colombia, Venezuela, Ecuador? Has anybody changed their position after Venezuela mobilized troops, and after the White House has been portraying Colombia as in risk by its neighbors?

UNDER SECRETARY PADILLA: On the numbers, Colombia is a significant export market already. It's a top 30 export market for us. We exported more to Colombia last year than we did to Thailand or to Russia, about the same as we did to Saudi Arabia. It is the largest Spanish-speaking market in South America. We see tremendous potential for even further growth, particularly in areas like industrial machinery, chemicals, consumer products, autos and auto parts, just to name a few.

AMBASSADOR VERONEAU: And I would just add that the Colombia market is four times the size of the Peru market, which Congress just overwhelmingly approved.

With regard to members of Congress, you'll have to ask them if their thinking has evolved over the past week or two. but I think it would -- I think the events of recent weeks have just demonstrated what we have been saying, which is, it's a difficult region that -- and President Uribe and his government have been operating in a difficult environment, with the FARC being a very dangerous force in that country.

Q I have two quick questions, please. Sorry for the focus on process, but I'm a bit confused. The President today called for a vote this year, but where does this stand? Has Congress agreed to hold a vote, or is that still a matter of debate?

AMBASSADOR VERONEAU: Well, under Trade Promotion Authority, what used to be known as Fast Track, which has been in place for many Presidents and many Congresses, there's a quid pro quo. And the obligation of the administration is to consult with the Congress in the course of negotiating, which obviously we have done. And I don't think anyone is disputing that fact, including making changes to the agreement after it was initially agreed to with Colombia.

Congress's part of that quid pro quo is when the President sends it up, there's a vote on it. So that is -- our expectation is, since we have done everything we have been asked to do, it is Congress's turn to do what it is supposed to do under TPA.

Q So it's just a matter of when. The timing is uncertain, but it will happen.

AMBASSADOR VERONEAU: I think the President's speech today speaks for itself, that there will be a vote on this agreement.

Q And given all of the negotiations you've described on the different fronts, what's your understanding of where the hang-up is? Where are we right now?

AMBASSADOR VERONEAU: We are not sure what more -- we have not been asked to do more by the leadership. We have done what we were asked to do -- namely, change the agreement and provide credible evidence of progress with regard to violence and impunity. We have done that, so there is no "ask" before us that we have not fulfilled.

Q Let me ask several questions in response to Ben's. Clearly, there's a reason for today's push. Is the -- have you not gotten an indication from the relevant committee chairs that this will be acted on when the President sends the agreement? Is that why you're talking to us?

AMBASSADOR VERONEAU: One of the messages today is that under TPA, under the process, in order to assure a vote we are very close to the point where that agreement -- the agreement needs to be sent. We continue to work with, or try to work with, the congressional leadership to agree on a path forward, but the message today --

Q But you don't have that yet.

AMBASSADOR VERONEAU: We do not have that yet.

Q So the relevant committee chairs have not given you any assurance that there will be a vote on this legislation that you are now prepared to send to them?

AMBASSADOR VERONEAU: There is no agreement -- there is no bipartisan agreement right now on a path forward.

Q Okay, that's one. Two, what is the problem with the drug trade, and how does that weigh into this?

MR. SPICER: Wendell, hold on one second. John, I'm sorry, can you just explain real quickly the process of the 45 so that -- because that answers, I think, Wendell's question. It's -- the 45 in both the committees --

AMBASSADOR VERONEAU: Yes. Under Trade Promotion Authority procedures, once an agreement goes up, the Ways and Means Committee has 45 days in which to act upon it. And then the House floor has 15 days to act upon it. That gets you to 60 days.

Q And somehow you get to 90.

AMBASSADOR VERONEAU: And then the finance committee then has 15 days to act upon it. And then the Senate floor has 15 more.

Q But somewhere in this process, you have not been assured that they will deal with it. Where's the hang-up? Who's the hang-up, should I ask?

AMBASSADOR VERONEAU: Well, we have not been able to reach a process agreement of a way forward, and we are now getting to the point where, absent that process agreement, the President has a decision to make, and today he indicated his views on that matter.

Q Is it more than one committee chair? Is it just one? Is it the leadership of the House and the Senate, just one side? Where's the problem?

AMBASSADOR VERONEAU: We don't have an agreement with either House or Senate leadership.

Q Okay. And how much does the drug trade weigh into that; the fact that there has been, as I understand it, no substantial reduction in cocaine -- I wouldn't call it exports, but -- in the movement of cocaine to this country from Colombia?

UNDER SECRETARY PADILLA: I might address that. Cocaine production, actually, is down significantly since Plan Colombia, which is important to remember. President Clinton, together with then-Speaker Hastert reached a bipartisan agreement to invest billions and billions of dollars of U.S. taxpayers funds in Plan Colombia to provide them with helicopters, with training, with economic assistance. The duty-free access for their products was part of this overall plan.

And it's worked, and cocaine production is down. In fact, when I was in Medellín with members of Congress and the Secretary of Commerce, we met with former paramilitaries who came in from the jungle, lay down their weapons, and now have jobs growing flowers or sewing t-shirts in the factories around Medellín.

So it's our strong view that if we want to continue that progress, if we want to build on Plan Colombia, the next logical step is to have a two-way trade agreement. The reason why it's important -- people say, well, why does Colombia want a trade agreement if they already have free access? The reason is this: Investors want certainty. I've spoken to companies as recently as this week who have said, we're pulling out of Colombia and we're putting our factories in Peru or in the Central American countries that have already established trade agreements that have passed the Congress. If we wait -- people say, well, why can't you just wait? The reason we can't wait is that every day we wait, it causes investor uncertainty and the loss of jobs in Colombia. All of that is part of a package of reducing the drug trade, reducing violence, fighting the FARC. And I think, as the President said today, it is now time to move forward.

Q That's not quite the question I'm asking. As I understand the availability of cocaine in this country has not been diminished because of any production reductions in Colombia that there may be. So what I'm trying to ask is, is the reluctance you're getting on Capitol Hill due in part to that problem? No?

UNDER SECRETARY PADILLA: No.

AMBASSADOR VERONEAU: That has not been an issue. The issues that were raised last summer by Speaker Pelosi was focused on violence and impunity.

Q What do you mean by "impunity"?

AMBASSADOR VERONEAU: Impunity -- by that I mean the lack of prosecutions of crimes in that country, which has been an issue in Colombia.

Q This rolling out of militias that were more active in the past.

AMBASSADOR VERONEAU: Yes, there's a long history of this. But I think, again, it's an area where there's been a lot of progress.

Can I just add one element to this level playing field? Canada and the European Union are also negotiating trade agreements with Colombia, and I think the Canada-Colombia agreement is very close to being finalized.

So the story that Chris told about the unlevel playing field is going to, in a way, get even more unlevel, because tractors that are produced in Canada, and other products that are made in Canada, that we compete with, are now going to be -- or soon will be going into Colombia duty-free. So it's not simply, we have an unlevel playing field; we're going to be at a disadvantage to our competitors in Canada, who will have access to the Colombian market duty-free.

Q Can I ask just one more? Do you think this is just caught in politics? Do you think a free trade agreement is simply something the Democratic-led Congress does not want to vote on in a presidential election year?

AMBASSADOR VERONEAU: Well, they voted on the Peru agreement just a couple of months ago, but -- Chairman Rangel made a statement last week or the week before that you should look at, because he spoke to the question of politics versus facts.

Q Thank you.

Q You talk about wanting to engage with Democratic leadership to negotiate a bipartisan path forward. What would be on this path? I mean, in exchange for voting on the Colombia agreement, what would you give them? I mean, are you going to agree to -- like, for example -- I don't know if it's sufficient, but they have a lot of interest in a revamped trade adjustment assistance program.

I know Bush -- President Bush says repeatedly that he supports a rebound program and working on legislation to modernize that, but they have very specific demands, like they want to include service workers; they want to extend it to countries that don't have -- to workers who lose their jobs as a result of trade; countries that don't have FTAs; they want to expand the health care tax credit. They want other things -- I don't remember them all, but they have a certain list of demands. And I don't know if meeting those demands are sufficient to get them on board for the Colombia agreement. But what is it that would be on this bipartisan path that would give them some incentive to vote for an agreement that they clearly do not want to vote for?

UNDER SECRETARY PADILLA: We don't know. (Laughter.) We're asking, and we don't know. The reason you asked why we're here today? We have engaged for months -- Ambassador Veroneau has participated in meetings. I've had meetings with very senior meetings of the Congress and said very clearly, here are the reasons for the agreement. And what we've heard is, we understand Colombia is an ally, so on and so forth. And then we say, well, what do we need to do to get this agreement the vote that it deserves? And we don't have an answer for you.

And so I think the President's message today was clear: We are running out of time, and this agreement is too important simply to put it aside or put it in a drawer? And I can't be any clearer than that. It's the dilemma that we're facing.

AMBASSADOR VERONEAU: And the two things that we've been asked to do -- namely, change the agreement, and in particular, the labor and environment provisions -- we did; and the second thing we were asked was to show credible evidence of improvements in these areas -- we've done that, as well.

UNDER SECRETARY PADILLA: I might add that the President of Colombia has extended an open invitation to any member of Congress to come and visit his country, to meet with him and his entire cabinet, and see for themselves the progress. More than 30 members of Congress from both sides of the aisle have taken up that invitation. None of the leadership has taken up that invitation. I believe it still stands.

Q Chris, over the next break, in the next two weeks, are you going to be taking any more members to Colombia -- or the Commerce Department --

UNDER SECRETARY PADILLA: I am not -- the Commerce Department doesn't have any plans. I'm not aware of any other agencies, but as I said --

MR. SPICER: The USTR leaves April 4. We have plenty of numbers now.

UNDER SECRETARY PADILLA: Oh. Didn't want to announce my co-agency's trip. But President Uribe -- I sat in this remarkable meeting with President Uribe. He comes in on a Saturday with his, literally, entire cabinet. He sits across the table from the members of Congress, and he says, ask me anything you want to know; let's discuss anything; I'll take you anywhere, show you anything.

Members on the trips that I've been on meet with unions who are in favor of the FTA in Colombia, and represent more than 75,000 workers in Colombia, mostly in the flower-growing and the carrot-growing industries who would benefit from this agreement. They also meet with unions in Colombia who are opposed to the agreement. So it's not just a guided tour.

And as I say, I'm glad to hear USTR is going, and President Uribe has extended an open invitation. A large number of members have taken it, and I think those who have gone have had their minds opened to what's happening in this remarkable country. But none of the leadership has gone.

Q One of you said a few minutes ago that the President has a decision to make. By that do you mean, send it up and take your chances, or put it in a drawer. Is that what you meant?

AMBASSADOR VERONEAU: No. I meant, what he made -- what the President made clear today is that this agreement -- there will be a vote on this agreement.

Q How does he assure that? I mean, that depends on the leaders, doesn't it?

AMBASSADOR VERONEAU: Well, there's -- what the President can do is send the agreement up. Twelve Presidents and probably three dozen Congresses have operated under this contract of Fast Track or TPA, so we would expect that contract would continue to be honored, because we have done our part, which is to consult with the Congress in the course of those negotiations.

Q So what was meant by the President has a decision to make? What decision is it?

AMBASSADOR VERONEAU: A decision of when -- when to send it. As I said earlier, we will leave no stone unturned in an effort to get a common understanding of a way forward. But at some point, absent that common understanding, the President has a decision to make of when to send it.

Q Okay. And given you have 90 legislative days, you're going to send it up within the next, what, month or two?

AMBASSADOR VERONEAU: Well, as the President said in his remarks, time is running very short.

Q But is there any dates you have in mind? What recommendations would you have?

AMBASSADOR VERONEAU: I will make recommendations privately.

Q I have a follow-up on that 90-day period in the Congress. Is there someone in the Congress with authority to halt this process? I mean -- I understand that the Speaker, for instance, has the power to stop the process if she gets a change in the rules. I am correct or not?

AMBASSADOR VERONEAU: Well, first I would say that sending -- if there is no common agreement of a process under which the President would send the agreement, I want to be clear that that does not mean that the conversation stops as to addressing some of the concerns that have been raised. There's still time -- the President sending it up does not mean there will be a vote the next day on this agreement. There is still time in that process after it is sent to obviously address concerns that members have.

With regard to the specific question, it's never -- the agreement has never been broken before. We have done our part: consulted, and tried to reach an agreement on a path forward. So we would be surprised if that agreement were not honored, but cannot foresee a scenario where there would not be some vote on this agreement. And there's -- this agreement is too important not to vote on, and there will be a vote -- I can't speak to the congressional leadership as to what process they would envision, but there would be a vote of some type on this agreement. And it is important to understand that rejecting this agreement through a substantive vote or a procedural vote has tremendous implications for the standing of the United States in the region, for all the reasons that the President laid out in his speech, and for the reasons that Dan laid out.

UNDER SECRETARY PADILLA: That's why not voting is simply -- that's why the agreement deserves a vote. Not voting, particularly with other of Colombia's neighbors now having free trade agreements, with investors pulling out of Colombia and going elsewhere, seeking certainty -- delay hurts Colombia, and not voting on the agreement has the same effect on investors as taking it up and defeating it.

So our important point is that the agreement deserves a vote, and I think, as Ambassador Veroneau said, that's what the President's message was today.

Q So what happens if you do get this bipartisan path forward? What -- would the President hold off sending it up in the near term, on the promise that Congress will take it up, and risk letting the clock run out? I mean, what would change?

AMBASSADOR VERONEAU: Well, the conversation that we have been trying to have is to address any additional issues that have been raised that -- I've mentioned the two issues that have been raised to us that we feel we've addressed -- and to have a path forward to address other issues in a common way; and as part of that, to have a process that assures a vote by a date certain. That is the conversation we've been trying to have.

Thank you.

END

3:13 P.M. EDT