

Press Releases: Remarks at the Plenary Session of the Organization of American States General Assembly

Remarks

John J. Sullivan

Deputy Secretary of State

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DEPUTY SECRETARY SULLIVAN: Thank you, Mr. President, distinguished heads of delegations, participants in this general assembly, ladies and gentlemen. I want to thank – start by thanking President Pena Nieto, Foreign Minister Videgaray, and the people of Mexico for hosting this year’s general assembly. I also want to thank Secretary General Almagro for his leadership and for organizing this 47th general assembly for the OAS.

I have four brief but important points.

The first is a statement of the United States goals for engagement in the Americas for mutual security and shared prosperity. The United States recognizes the importance of our partnerships with our neighbors and friends in the Western Hemisphere. Our partnerships in this region are vital to our economic competitiveness and our ability to solve our shared security challenges. We’re prepared to work with all nations to further this common agenda. Enduring prosperity and our common security require effective democratic institutions that respond to the needs of and deliver results for our populations.

We all require strong institutions that help to provide economic and social opportunity and safeguard citizens’ security. We share many common goals in these areas, including working together to combat transnational crime of all kinds. No nation can flourish economically or strengthen its democratic institutions if people are afraid to open a business, attend school, visit a doctor, or congregate in a city square. The United States understands that by working together and recognizing shared responsibilities, we can address this challenge and others.

Second, the United States strongly supports the role of the OAS and is committed to the success of its important work. The OAS electoral observation

missions throughout the hemisphere ensure that governments honor the voices of their people. The Inter-American Human Rights System performs an essential role in offering a line of defense against abuses. The Secretariat of Multidimensional Security does important work to improve law enforcement and promotes transparency in judicial systems. The OAS mission to support the peace process in Colombia plays a critical role in monitoring the implementation of the process and ensuring commitments are met. And we are proud to support the OAS mission against corruption in Honduras, and we hope that other nations will demonstrate this type of aggressive anti-corruption effort.

The third issue is Venezuela. The United States remains committed to working with OAS member-states to face what is a great challenge: helping the people of Venezuela find a peaceful, democratic, and lasting solution to that country's current crisis. The OAS has a critical role to play. The Inter-American Democratic Charter remains an essential element of the inter-American system that our nations created together. Today we recall the charter and the commitment of our countries to uphold and defend democracy. We've all been alarmed by the dramatic deterioration of democratic norms in Venezuela, as well as the attendant violence in which many people have died. As neighbors and fellow citizens of the Americas, we can no longer stand by and watch this suffering, nor can we ignore the denial of basic freedoms like freedom of assembly, freedom of expression and political participation. The Inter-American Democratic Charter was designed for moments like this, and the responsibility falls to us to show the kind of leadership the people of our hemisphere deserve.

The United States has joined with a growing number of courageous democracies in our region to urge the Venezuelan Government to hold free elections, respect the independence of the national assembly, release all political prisoners, and directly address the country's humanitarian crisis. We join with these partners in recognizing that the principle of nonintervention cannot be used to justify inaction or avoid responsibility.

Yesterday's discussion highlighted the growing alarm among Venezuela's neighbors. The United States joins with many allies in condemning efforts to undermine Venezuela's constitution by convoking a constituent assembly absent a popular referendum required by Venezuela's own constitution. Our common goal remains to help the people of Venezuela return to peace and prosperity with a full restoration of the rule of law and respect for freedom, political expression, and participation. The United States supports the establishment of an action-oriented contact group of governments, in accordance with the principles of the OAS Charter and in the spirit of the Democratic Charter.

My final point concerns Caribbean strategic engagement. I want to highlight this renewed critical area of focus for the United States. Recently, we sent to the United States Congress a multiyear strategy for the Caribbean, the Caribbean Strategic Engagement Act. Our strategy established – establishes a broad-based framework for deepening our multilateral cooperation in forums such as the OAS for enhancing the United States partnership with the region in the areas of security, diplomacy, prosperity, energy, education, and health. We look forward to working with our Caribbean partners to strengthen

these areas of mutual benefit.

I conclude with a statement of appreciation for the important role of the OAS and the leadership and courage of Secretary General Almagro, as well as Mexico and other key partners, in the face of our common challenges. Secretary Almagro recently received the prestigious Freedom Award in Washington, D.C. He noted at that time that while the OAS is an organization of states, the organization's founding and its framing documents were signed in the name of our peoples. It is in that spirit that we must act today.

Thank you.

(Break.)

DEPUTY SECRETARY SULLIVAN: I just have – one minute, please, Mr. President, to respond. One minute.

My response to the statement we've just heard can be summarized in three words: distractions, distortions, and irrelevancies. The facts on the ground in Venezuela are apparent to all of us. This is a moment of challenge for this organization to prove its relevancy, to be dedicated to its charter, to do right by the people of Venezuela – not to intervene in Venezuela, but to take a modest step that has been proposed under the leadership of the foreign minister of Mexico, to take a modest step to put together a group that would help facilitate a resolution of the serious problems which we all acknowledge are present in Venezuela. If we can't take that step forward now, we seriously impair our ability in the future to go forward as an organization collectively.

Please think about the choices that are – we face now. If we leave here with no accomplishment – even the modest step that's been proposed, the modest resolution that's been proposed, not an intervention into the affairs of Venezuela, the modest step to prepare this – to authorize this group of nations, without defining who the members of that group will be, to put forward that group to help facilitate a resolution of the crisis that we all know exists in Venezuela is the least we can do to be faithful to our charter.

Thank you, Mr. President. (Applause.)

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