

Cartagena: U.S. President Barack Obama talking about drugs

Transcript

PRESIDENT OBAMA: Well, this is a conversation that I've had with President Santos and others. Just as the world economy is integrated, so, unfortunately, the drug trade is integrated. And we can't look at the issue of supply in Latin America without also looking at the issue of demand in the United States. (Applause.)

And so whether it's working with President Santos or supporting the courageous work that President Calderón is doing in Mexico, I, personally, and my administration and I think the American people understand that the toll of narco-trafficking on the societies of Central America, Caribbean, and parts of South America are brutal, and undermining the capacity of those countries to protect their citizens, and eroding institutions and corrupting institutions in ways that are ultimately bad for everybody.

So this is part of the reason why we've invested, Chris, about \$30 billion in prevention programs, drug treatment programs looking at the drug issue not just from a law enforcement and interdiction issue, but also from a public health perspective. This is why we've worked in unprecedented fashion in cooperation with countries like Mexico on not just drugs coming north, but also guns and cash going south.

This is one of the reasons why we have continued to invest in programs like Plan Colombia, but also now are working with Colombia, given their best practices around issues of citizen security, to have not just the United States but Colombia provide technical assistance and training to countries in Central America and the Caribbean in finding ways that they can duplicate some of the success that we've seen in Colombia.

So we're mindful of our responsibilities on this issue. And I think it is entirely legitimate to have a conversation about whether the laws in place are ones that are doing more harm than good in certain places.

I personally, and my administration's position, is that legalization is not the answer; that, in fact, if you think about how it would end up operating, that the capacity of a large-scale drug trade to dominate certain countries if they were allowed to operate legally without any constraint could be just as corrupting if not more corrupting than the status quo.

Nevertheless, I'm a big believer in looking at the evidence, having a debate. I think ultimately what we're going to find is, is that the way to solve this problem is both in the United States, us dealing with demand in a more effective way, but it's also going to be strengthening institutions at home.

You mentioned earlier, the biggest thing that's on everybody's minds -- whether it's the United States, Canada, Brazil, Colombia, Jamaica -- is, can I find a job that allows me to support my family and allows my children to advance and feel secure. And in those societies where you've got strong institutions, you've got strong business investment, you've got rule of law, you have a law enforcement infrastructure that is sound, and an economy that's growing -- that country is going to be like a healthy body that is more immune than countries that have weak institutions and high unemployment, in which kids see their only future as participating in the drug trade because nobody has actually trained them to get a job with Google, or Pepsi, or start their own small business.

And so I think that it's important for us not to think that if somehow we look at the drug issue in isolation, in the absence of dealing with some of these other challenges -- institutional challenges and barriers to growth and opportunity and the capacity for people to climb their way out of poverty, that we're going to be able to solve this problem. The drug issue in this region is, in some ways, a cause, but it's also, in some ways, an effect of some broader and underlying problems. And we as the United States have an obligation not only to get our own house in order but also to help countries in a partnership to try to see if we can move in a better direction. (Applause.)