Remarks at Organization of American States General Assembly Plenary Session

Secretary Condoleezza Rice
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SECRETARY RICE: Thank you very much. I'd first like to thank the Government and the people of Panama for being such gracious hosts for this year's OAS General Assembly. I look forward today to seeing President Torrijos later and I want to thank the Foreign Minister Samuel Lewis for presiding over this gathering. Let me also thank you, Secretary General Insulza. Under your leadership, the OAS has grown into an even stronger and more principled ally to the citizens of our hemisphere who keep faith with the principles of democracy and who want to be included in the benefits of democracy, prosperity, personal security, and social justice.

Fellow ministers, ladies and gentlemen, our Inter-American Democratic Charter states that democracy is essential for the social, political, and economic development of the peoples of the Americas. It is the duty of every government in this hemisphere to deliver on the high hopes of its citizens, deliver on what President Bush has called the revolution in expectations in the Americas today. Our people are impatient for a better life and we must be impatient too.

Every democracy must govern democratically, respecting and protecting the human rights and fundamental freedoms of all of its citizens. Every democracy must ensure that its people have an equal opportunity to prosper through free markets and free trade. And every democracy must open the doors to social justice for its citizens by governing justly, fighting corruption, reforming its economy, and investing in its people, in their education, in their health, and in their housing.

In all of these ways, we must take action to ensure the long-term success of democracy in the Americas. And one of the most pressing challenges that we face right now, one that affects the economic development of every nation in this hemisphere is indeed energy. I am pleased that the OAS has made energy the focus of this year's General Assembly and I am eager to hear your thoughts about how we can meet this common challenge together.

We are off to a good start. The declaration of Panama drafted here demonstrates that energy is a vital part of our hemispheric agenda and that we will work together to address the challenges of energy security, climate change, environmental stewardship, and sustainable development. These four challenges are indivisible and we must tackle them together.

Under President Bush, the United States is helping to lead on the issue of energy. We recognize the problem. It is, in the President's words, about our addiction to oil and we are going to do something about it. We are working to realize the President's goal of cutting our use of gasoline by 20 percent in ten years through better automotive efficiency and greater use of alternative fuels.
Over the past six years, with the full support of Congress, we have provided more than $12 billion for research into alternative sources of energy. And just last week, President Bush announced a long-term strategy to address the problem of climate change, calling for the world's top 15 countries to work together to reduce greenhouse gas emissions. This declaration realizes that biofuels will be critical to diversifying the use of our energy in our hemisphere. We completely agree. And that is why the United States and Brazil recently concluded a groundbreaking bilateral agreement on biofuels. Our two countries are now transforming the way we work together, deepening research and investment, helping developing countries in our hemisphere to supply energy for themselves and others and enabling them to fuel their own growth.

In short, we seek to promote the democratization of energy in the Americas, increasing the number of energy suppliers, expanding the market, and reducing supply disruption. We are starting this work now with El Salvador, the Dominican Republic, Haiti and St. Kitts. And we are eager to expand our cooperation on energy with more countries and especially with the OAS. Our goal should be nothing less than to usher in a new era of inter-American security in energy.

Solving the challenge of energy will clearly strengthen the link between democracy and development in the Americas and it will contribute to the long-term success of democracy. But we must always remember that our greatest source of energy as democracies is not oil or gas, wind or water, biofuels or fossil fuels; it is the talent and the creativity of our people unlocked by the democratic and human rights that the OAS stands for and defends. This is the purpose and the meaning of our democratic charter.

Freedom of speech, freedom of association and freedom of conscience are not a thorn in the side of government. They are the beginning of justice in every society. The unfettered public discussion of ideas is the greatest guarantee for the rule of law and the surest protection against the whims of rulers. Disagreeing with your government is not unpatriotic and it most certainly should not be a crime in any country, especially in a democracy. Open dialogue and debate is not only a fundamental principle of democracy, it is a practical necessity for good decision-making, for transparent oversight, and for effective policy implementation. This is the only way that democratic governments can hope to make economic development and social justice real for their people.

All of this is important to bear in mind as we consider recent events in Venezuela. Many Venezuelan citizens are raising their voices in peaceful protest at their government's closing of RCTV. Many international groups and institutions have added their voices to this course of concern and I applaud Secretary General Insulza for doing so as well.

The United States Senate has called on the OAS to address this issue. President Bush and I agree. In keeping with Article 18 of the Democratic Charter, we urge the Secretary General to go to Venezuela to consult in good faith with all interested parties and to present a full report to the foreign ministers through the Permanent Council.

We, the members of the OAS, must defend freedom where it is under siege in our hemisphere, and we must support freedom whenever and wherever it is denied. In that regard, a process of change is taking place in Cuba, and the OAS must be ready to help the Cuban people realize their aspirations and freedom and to secure the rights that are
now enjoyed within our democratic community of the Americas. No other country in the hemisphere, including the United States of America, should, can, or will determine Cuba's political and economic future. That decision is for Cubans in Cuba. But it is our responsibility as American democracies to help the Cuban people chart whatever course they freely desire.

The demand for freedom and democracy has transformed this hemisphere in but a few short decades. Today, we can hear the voices of our people more clearly than ever. Their expectations are high and their patience is not unlimited. They want good governments and economic opportunity. They want better schools and better hospitals. They want their rights protected and their neighborhoods safe. They want social justice and good jobs. And they want limitless horizons for their children.

We must listen to our people's voices. They are voices of dignity and worthy aspiration, transcending all the borders and cultures of this diverse hemisphere. We must respect and heed those voices, for they embody not just our common humanity, but also our shared future.

Thank you very much.