

Remarks by Vice President Pence at First Plenary Session of the Summit of the Americas

 trumpwhitehouse.archives.gov/briefings-statements/remarks-by-vice-president-pence-at-first-plenary-session-of-the-summit-of-the-americas

Remarks

Foreign Policy

Issued on: April 15, 2018

Lima, Peru

THE VICE PRESIDENT: Secretary General Almagro, President Vizcarra, Presidents, Prime Ministers, and leaders from across the Western Hemisphere — it is my great honor to join you today, as Vice President of the United States of America, at the 8th Summit of the Americas.

And I bring greetings and great respect to each of you from the 45th President of the United States of America, President Donald Trump.

As you are all well aware, last night, at President Trump's direction, the United States, together with our allies France and the United Kingdom, launched precision strikes to cripple Syrian dictator Bashar al Assad's chemical weapons program.

We acted in response to Assad's horrific use of chemical weapons on his own citizens one week ago — an attack that horrified and shocked the conscience of the world. The United States assesses that the Syrian regime was responsible for this attack, and that chlorine and possibly nerve agents were used.

As President Trump said, these were "crimes of a monster." And together with our allies, we took action in the wake of that "barbarism and brutality." And I'm pleased to report that the strike by the United States, UK, and French forces was effective, overwhelming, and successful.

We delivered a clear and unambiguous message to the Syrian regime: The United States and our allies will not tolerate the use of chemical weapons against innocent men, women, and children; and we are prepared to deter any further use of chemical weapons by the Assad regime.

The United States and our allies will continue to integrate all instruments of our national power in this moment. And as President Trump made clear, our nation is ready to "sustain this response until the Syrian regime [abandons] the use of prohibited chemical agents." Assad and his patrons would do well not to test our resolve or the capabilities of the Armed Forces of the United States.

The President also sent a message to the two nations that are most responsible for “supporting, equipping, and financing the criminal Assad regime” — Russia and Iran.

Even now, Russia is deliberately spreading disinformation about Assad’s heinous actions and even their own complicity in this crime. But the horrific pictures of dead children, the videos of suffering people prove what happened. Russia’s lies will crumble in the face of truth. And as the President said to both Russia and Iran, nations can be judged by the company they keep.

Allow me to take a moment to thank the nations here who have already offered their expressions of support for last night’s military action. Prime Minister Trudeau of Canada and President Santos of Colombia and others, we are grateful for your support. As President Santos said earlier today in support of the actions to, in his words, “punish [the] use of [chemical weapons] and seek their total elimination” — and we’re grateful for that moral clarity.

But today, I call upon every nation in this hemisphere of freedom to support this military action taken by the United States and our allies and to support it publicly, and also to add to that your condemnation expressed by nearly everyone here of Assad’s regime’s use of chemical weapons. The civilized world must send a message of resolve and unity that we will not accept such barbaric attacks now or ever.

With that, let me say, Mr. President, it is a great pleasure to be in Lima, and it’s my great privilege to address this historic summit. President Vizcarra, let me thank you, and congratulate Peru for hosting this 8th Summit of the Americas.

Peru has done a magnificent job on the summit. And in fact, it has inspired the United States to announce today that we will be submitting a bid to host the 9th Summit of the Americas, three years from now, in 2021. And we’ll see if we can do just as well as Peru has done.

We gather today to continue a great work. Twenty-four years ago, the nations of the Western Hemisphere came together in Miami, Florida, to chart a new era for ourselves and our posterity. At that first Summit of the Americas, we issued a Declaration of Principles, in which this body agreed to work together as never before to advance the prosperity and democratic values, as well as institutions and security in our hemisphere.

The United States is proud to stand with free nations across this hemisphere in pursuit of these noble goals. President Trump sent me to South America last year to deliver our message of commitment to the region. It’s a message I will deliver again when I visit Brazil next month.

But under President Donald Trump, the United States will always put the security and prosperity of America first. But America first does not mean America alone. The United States has always cherished our neighbors and friends across this region. Our nations are bound together by geography, but also by history and by an enduring aspiration for freedom.

Ours was always meant to be a hemisphere of freedom. As the charter of the Organization of American States declares, “the historic mission of America is to offer... a land of liberty.” And as President Trump has said, the United States seeks “a future [in the Western hemisphere],” in his words, “where the people of each country can live out their own dreams.” From the very first day of our administration, we have also taken decisive action to make this vision a reality.

Like the citizens of your nations, the people of the United States seek a future of opportunity and prosperity. That’s why, in America, I’m pleased to report to our friends and allies present that this administration has been rolling back burdensome regulations in record numbers, we’ve been unleashing our boundless natural resources, and quite recently President Trump signed the largest tax cuts and tax reform in American history.

And the results have been dramatic. Businesses large and small across the United States have created nearly 3 million jobs. Unemployment is at a 17-year low. Companies are investing in the United States again. Confidence is back, and growth is back. A strong America and a growing America is back.

Our President has also placed a renewed emphasis on trade relationships that are fair and reciprocal. While the United States trades nearly three times as much with our neighbors in the Western Hemisphere as we do in China, we recognize that there is still tremendous opportunity to forge stronger and more balanced trade relationships across this region.

Our administration has already taken action to reach new deals and update existing agreements, and we’re encouraged by the progress we’ve made. Last year, in Colombia, I announced that the United States will allow Colombian Haas avocados into the U.S. market, while Colombia has expanded access for U.S. rough rice.

And as we speak, I’m pleased to report the United States is working very closely with Canada and Mexico to modernize the North American Free Trade Agreement. We believe we are fairly close to a deal, and we’re going to be working earnestly to make that a reality for all of our nations.

Beyond trade, the United States will continue to share our traditions of entrepreneurship throughout the region. I’m honored to be joined today by Ivanka Trump, who is a great champion for women’s economic empowerment all over the world. She helped organize our administration’s new “2X Women’s Initiative.” And as Ivanka announced in Lima yesterday, through this vital program, the United States will invest an unprecedented \$150 million to support women entrepreneurs throughout Latin America.

These actions, we know, will strengthen the prosperity for the people of the United States, and strengthen prosperity across this region. But ultimately, as we gather today, we all recognize, with few exceptions, that we cannot forget that security is the foundation of our prosperity.

For despite our progress, as we gather here for this historic summit, the challenges facing the Western Hemisphere remain. We see the gangs and criminal syndicates that plague our cities and towns. We see the illegal drugs that poison our children and tear families

apart. We see a flow of migrants fleeing hardship and oppression in their homelands. And we see the migration of criminals, human traffickers, drug traffickers, and even terrorists making their way across our borders.

In the category of terrorists, the United States actually refuses entry to seven known or suspected terrorists every day — nearly 2,500 a year are stopped. We have real challenges for security at our borders.

Just yesterday, we were reminded of the threats that we face when Marxist narco-terrorists in Ecuador brutally killed two journalists and their driver. And I extend the condolences and the prayers of the American people to the victims and their families and the people of Ecuador.

Under President Donald Trump, the United States is working hard to confront these security challenges. We're securing our borders, enforcing our laws, removing dangerous drug dealers and violent criminals from our streets as never before.

We've also taken significant steps to strengthen our partnerships with nations across the wider region. Our efforts include the Caribbean Basin Security Initiative to stop the flow of drugs, expanded security collaboration with Mexico, security assistance to a wide array of Central American countries. And be assured: We will continue to deepen our security relationships with countries across the region in the years ahead.

President Vizcarra, let me commend Peru for your ambitious agenda for this summit: "Democratic Governance Against Corruption." This is a vitally important issue that bears upon the long-term prosperity as well as the wellbeing of the people of this hemisphere, and I commend this body's agreement on the Lima Commitment earlier today.

Corruption emboldens vicious criminals and endangers public safety. Corruption corrodes the foundations of democracy as well, and undermines trust in government. For we know as corruption grows, freedom and prosperity wither.

And as all freedom-loving nations know as well, the greatest corruption of government is when the people lose their voice, their vote, their freedom, and their basic human rights under the heavy hand of dictatorship. And the free nations of this conference are right to focus in renewed ways on ending dictatorship here in the New World.

As we speak, a tired communist regime continues to impoverish its people and deny their most fundamental rights in Cuba. The Castro regime has systematically sapped the wealth of a great nation and stolen the lives of a proud people. Our administration has taken decisive action to stand with the Cuban people, and stand up to their oppressors.

No longer will the United States fund Cuba's military, security and intelligence services — the core of that despotic regime. And the United States will continue to support the Cuban people as they stand and call for freedom.

But Cuba's dictatorship has not only beset its own people, as we all well know — with few exceptions in this room acknowledging that. Cuba's dictators have also sought to export their failed ideology across the wider region. And as we speak, they are aiding and abetting the corrupt dictatorship in Venezuela.

In Venezuela, as in Cuba, the tragedy of tyranny is on full display. As this body knows well, Venezuela was one of our hemisphere's richest nations once, and not too long ago. It is now among the poorest. Venezuela was also once a flourishing democracy. It has now collapsed into dictatorship and tyranny.

Now let me be clear, the responsibility for the Venezuelan people's suffering can be laid at the feet of one man — Nicolas Maduro. He promised his people he would restore prosperity, but delivered them only deeper poverty. He promised them safety and security, but Venezuela is now riven by chaos and rampant crime. Nicolas Maduro promised the people of Venezuela renewed greatness, and he has only brought a nation to its knees.

Just yesterday, I met with four courageous leaders of the Venezuelan opposition — great defenders of democracy who have been forced to flee their homeland or face Maduro's wrath. They described to me how Maduro has corroded Venezuela's democracy and corrupted the upcoming election. They also told me about the heartbreaking humanitarian crisis their family, friends, and fellow Venezuelans now face. It's heartbreaking to think about.

I saw it firsthand when I visited Colombia last year along the border of Venezuela. But today, nearly 9 out of 10 Venezuelans live in grinding poverty. Venezuela's grocery stores are all but empty. Food and daily necessities are often impossible to find. Hospitals lack the most basic medical services and supplies, putting lives at risk and causing untold misery and death.

And every day, some 5,000 Venezuelans flee the land of their birth, in the largest cross-border mass exodus in the history of our hemisphere. Under the Maduro regime, Venezuela is essentially a failed state. Failed states know no borders.

Venezuela's ongoing collapse is already affecting economies across the region. It's giving drug traffickers and transnational criminal organizations new opportunities to endanger our people.

President Trump has made it clear: The United States of America will not stand idly by as Venezuela crumbles. Our administration has already imposed strict financial sanctions on more than 50 current or former senior Venezuelan officials. And three weeks ago, we cut off the so-called "Petro" from the United States' financial system.

Last month, we also announced that we are providing, through the generosity of the American people, \$2.5 million to help meet the needs of vulnerable Venezuelans living in Colombia. And yesterday, it was my privilege to announce that we'll add nearly \$16 million more dollars of direct aid to assist Colombia's efforts to come alongside those Venezuelans.

To be clear, the United States and our allies and partners stand ready to do more, much more, to directly support the long-suffering Venezuelan people. But the world deserves to know that as the people of Venezuela suffer, lacking basic humanitarian aid, Nicolas Maduro stands in the way. Maduro stands today, refusing to allow humanitarian assistance simply because he claims there is no humanitarian crisis, as his people starve and die and flee.

I'll never forget when my wife and I visited the border of Venezuela in a visit to Colombia last year. We met a grandmother who had just made the long journey with her five grandchildren out of their small town in Venezuela. She told me, with tears in her eyes, how the poverty had become so acute, her grandchildren had to stand in line at 5:00 in the morning to get a ticket to buy a piece of bread at 5:00 in the afternoon. And that was the sum total of sustenance that was available to their family.

And today, we call on the Maduro regime to open up their country to life-saving aid the Venezuelan people so desperately need. Allow me to thank the many nations here who have already taken action to support the Venezuelan people with assistance and aid — nearly two million that have been displaced thus far. And the compassion and generosity of nations across this region is inspiring to see.

Let me also thank all those that have stepped forward to join us to rebuke and isolate the dictator Maduro and his brutal regime through economic and diplomatic means. Costa Rica has refused to let Venezuela's Minister of Defense land on its territory, setting a precedent for other nations to deny Venezuela official travel.

Canada has sanctioned more than 40 Venezuelan officials. Argentina and Brazil led the effort to suspend Venezuela from Mercusor.

Panama designated more than 50 Venezuelan officials as high risks for money laundering and recalled its ambassador from Caracas.

And Peru withdrew Venezuela's invitation to this summit. Mr. President, that sent a powerful message that Maduro and dictatorship and his despotism is not welcome here, and I commend you.

To all of you whose nations have taken action: Thank you for your stand. Thank you for your stand for freedom in our hemisphere.

But let me say on behalf of President Donald Trump: The United States believes now is the time to do more, much more. Every free nation gathered here must take stronger action to isolate the Maduro regime. We must all stand with our brothers and sisters suffering in Venezuela. And I can promise you, the United States will not rest. We will not relent until democracy is restored in Venezuela and the Venezuelan people reclaim their birthright of liberty.

And I believe with all of my heart, Mr. President, as I close, that that day will come. For as Simón Bolívar declared, and I quote, "A people that loves freedom will in the end be free." And the people of the New World love freedom, and have proved throughout the

generations the capacity to fight for it, to achieve it, to defend it.

This New World, from its very birth, was destined to be a hemisphere of freedom. In the long annals of our shared history, names like Bolívar, San Martín, and Martí stand shoulder to shoulder with Washington, Jefferson, and Lincoln as champions of freedom and great defenders of the freedom — the freedom that each one of us are endowed with by our Creator.

As we gather here, we have much work yet to do. So today, let us rededicate ourselves that most cherished ideal. Let us strive with all our strength to reach the day when freedom reigns in every nation across the New World.

And as we go forward, let's have faith — faith in the boundless capacity of the people of the New World to advance the principles that have always been the source of our greatness.

And let us have that other kind of faith. Remember to pray for people that are struggling under the weight of tyranny, remembering, as the Good Book says, that “where the spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom.”

And with the courage of our citizens, with the conviction of the leaders gathered here, and with God's help, I know this New World will prove, once more, that no force on Earth can overcome freedom.

Thank you. May God bless all the people and nations of this great Western Hemisphere, and may God bless the United States of America. (Applause.)

END