

# *News from Congressman Eliot Engel*

*Representing the Bronx, Westchester, and Rockland Counties  
Offices in the Bronx, Mount Vernon and West Nyack  
2161 Rayburn HOB, Washington, DC 20515*

---

Contact: Eric Jacobstein or Jason Steinbaum, 202-226-9980  
For Release: Wednesday, March 10, 2010

## **ENGEL CHAIRS HEARING ON FUTURE OF U.S. POLICY TOWARD THE AMERICAS**

*Chairman of Western Hemisphere Subcommittee Calls for Seven Key Policy Steps in  
2010*

Washington, D.C. – Congressman Eliot Engel, Chairman of the House Foreign Affairs Subcommittee on the Western Hemisphere, is holding a hearing today on U.S. Policy toward the Americas in 2010 and Beyond.

At today’s hearing, Rep. Engel argues that “Last April, at the Summit of the Americas, U.S. – Latin American relations began to change for the better.”

He calls on the Obama Administration to build on last year’s success with seven key policy steps, including a re-assessment of our counternarcotics policies, a renewed focus at the Organization of American States (OAS) on the closing of democratic space in the region, and special U.S. attention to key countries such as El Salvador and Paraguay.

Witnesses at today’s hearing include Arturo Valenzuela (Assistant Secretary of State for Western Hemisphere Affairs), Peter Hakim (President, Inter-American Dialogue), Riordan Roett (Director of Western Hemisphere Studies at the John Hopkins University School of Advanced International Studies), and Otto Reich (President, Otto Reich Associates, LLC).

Following the session, testimony can be read and the proceedings can be viewed at <http://foreignaffairs.house.gov/subcommittees.asp?committee=8&sec=hearings>

The following is Chairman Engel’s opening statement at today’s hearing:

“Last April, at the Summit of the Americas, U.S. – Latin American relations began to change for the better. I was in Trinidad as President Obama pledged an “equal partnership” and “engagement based on mutual respect, common interests and shared values.” In June, I saw a renewed U.S. commitment to multilateralism when I joined Secretary of State Hillary Clinton in San Pedro Sula, Honduras for the General Assembly of the Organization of American States (OAS).

“Secretary Clinton’s trip to Latin America last week certainly is an excellent start to the year. And, I hope that in 2010, the Obama Administration will build on the momentum from its first year in office. I would like to briefly share some thoughts on the direction that I think U.S. policy should take in a number of key areas:

“**First**, we must work diligently to help Haiti move from crisis to recovery. The Obama Administration has done an outstanding job in responding to the catastrophic earthquake that hit Haiti on January 12. I saw the devastation and our relief efforts first-hand when I visited the country on Friday. As we look ahead, we must reassure the Haitian people that we will be there for the long term. The Donors’ Conference on March 31 will be a key step in demonstrating the U.S. commitment to the Haitian people.

“Our hearts also go out to the people of Chile who suffered a tragic earthquake on February 27. We in Congress stand ready to help our Chilean friends as they move towards reconstruction.

“**Second**, in 2010, I hope we can take a fresh look at our counternarcotics policies both here at home and throughout the region. Billions of U.S. taxpayer dollars have been spent over the years in combating the drug trade. Unfortunately, the positive results are few and far between. In December, the House of Representatives unanimously passed the bipartisan Western Hemisphere Drug Policy Commission Act of 2009 (H.R. 2134) that I authored with Ranking Member Mack. This bill would provide a long-needed re-assessment of our counternarcotics efforts.

“I am a strong supporter of our security initiatives in the hemisphere. But, I believe we must have a more holistic approach to our counternarcotics strategy that can withstand the so-called “balloon effect” that results from pressure in one region causing the drug trade to move to another region.

“When I first became Chairman of this Subcommittee, I traveled to Trinidad and Tobago where Prime Minister Manning told me that his calls for just a small amount of security assistance from the Bush Administration were repeatedly ignored. Fortunately, this is no longer the case. I am pleased that the Obama Administration is offering security assistance to the Caribbean through the Caribbean Basin Security Initiative (CBSI). This week, I am sending a letter to the Appropriations Committee, along with Ranking Member Mack and several members of this Subcommittee, urging full funding of President Obama’s \$79 million CBSI request.

“**Third**, I am increasingly concerned about the closing of democratic space in the Americas. Just two weeks ago, the OAS’s independent Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (IACHR) criticized Venezuela for its deteriorating human rights situation. In the coming year, I would like to see the OAS Permanent Council be more vocal in speaking out about the closing of democratic space in the region.

“On a more positive note, Colombia’s constitutional court recently voted to bar Colombians from voting on a referendum to lift the ban on third presidential terms. This

decision by the court and President Alvaro Uribe's respect for the court's ruling is proof of the country's strong institutions and adherence to the rule of law. It should serve as an example to all of us.

**“Fourth,** I am pleased to see steps by the U.S. and several countries in the hemisphere to reach out to Honduran President Pepe Lobo. Resuming our foreign assistance to Honduras and working closely with the Lobo administration is crucial. **But,** the inter-American community must also ensure that steps are taken to implement key pieces of the Tegucigalpa/San Jose accord. This includes the establishment of a robust Truth Commission to investigate events from last year. Finally, we must continue to closely monitor the increasingly worrisome human rights situation in Honduras. The recent murders of three Hondurans who were active in their resistance to the coup or related to activists must not go unnoticed.

**“Fifth,** we must continue to keep an eye on Iran's expanded presence in the Western Hemisphere. I was deeply disappointed when Brazilian President Lula da Silva recently hosted Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad in Brasilia. And, I am concerned by Brazil's lack of interest in new U.N. sanctions against Iran. Brazil is a rapidly modernizing country which wants to gain a permanent seat on the U.N. Security Council. But, its failure to take Iran's nuclear program seriously is impeding its rise as a global leader.

**“Sixth,** I would urge the Obama Administration to focus on El Salvador and Paraguay. It may seem odd that I single out these two small countries, but they are key partners who want to have strong relations with the United States.

“I attended the inauguration of Salvadoran President Mauricio Funes in June. He is the first president from the FMLN since the country signed its peace accords in 1992. Funes, who was in Washington meeting with President Obama this week, faces opposition in his country from both the far right and the far left.

“In Paraguay, the second poorest country in South America, President Fernando Lugo is the first president not elected from the Colorado party in 60 years.

“Both presidents want to have close ties with us, and we must continue to nurture these important relationships. In the case of Paraguay, last year, I introduced the U.S. Paraguay Partnership Act (H.R. 1837) which would add the country to the Andean Trade Promotion and Drug Eradication Act (ATPDEA).

**“Finally,** on a more personal note, I am extremely concerned about the imprisonment of USAID contractor Alan Gross in Cuba. I understand that Mr. Gross's health has been on the decline while in detention, and he has lost over 50 pounds. Clearly, his release needs to remain a top priority.

“I hope today’s hearing will help create a framework for the Obama Administration to build on its successful first year in the Americas through a number of key, concrete actions.