

Opportunity in diversity

By H.E. PETER TIBBER

AMBASSADOR OF THE UNITED KINGDOM TO COLOMBIA



PETER TIBBER has been Britain's Ambassador to Colombia since September 2015. He was previously Ambassador to Sudan and interim High Commissioner in Kenya, and has held diplomatic posts in France, Turkey, Mexico, Germany and Pakistan. He holds a Doctorate in medieval history from Oxford University and an MBA from the Open University.

One of the pleasures and duties of being British Ambassador in Colombia is travelling through this large, beautiful and diverse country.

I am writing this in Santa Marta on the Caribbean coast. I am here to support a trial run of a rail freight service by a British company. Britain built the railroads here and we are now helping to bring them back to use.

The previous week I was with a colleague in Bogotá to review our investments in support of Colombia's ambition to stop deforestation. Our programmes total some £30m. Colombia is home to around 6 per cent of the Amazon rainforest and will play a decisive role in contributing to the targets agreed in Paris last year for reducing carbon emissions.

The week before that I was in Medellín, Colombia's second city and home to some of Colombia's most successful companies. They are market leaders not just in Colombia but throughout Latin America. They offer British companies great commercial and investment opportunities in sectors such as financial services, retail and construction.

On 26 September I accompanied the Home Secretary to Cartagena. She was there primarily to witness the signing of the peace agreement between the Government and the FARC. But she took time out to witness at first hand the close cooperation between the UK and Colombia in the fight against organised crime.

I recount all this to give a glimpse of the range of our bilateral engagement. Commercial and investment opportunities, support for the peace process, cooperation against organised crime and protection of the environment are only some of the most important themes in our bilateral relationship. The State Visit will be a unique opportunity to review the relationship in the round and to set the direction, and identify the opportunities, for the future. This is the first ever State Visit by a Colombian President, and it signals the importance of the relationship for both countries.

It comes at a critical juncture in Colombia. The peace agreement, whose signing the Home Secretary witnessed, was of course narrowly rejected by the Colombia people only a few days later. But all sides in Colombia are clear that the peace process continues; and they are now engaged in intensive discussions to find a way forward. The UK has supported the peace process in many ways: sharing our experience in Northern

Ireland, leading the work in the UN Security Council to mandate a Mission to monitor and evaluate the ceasefire, providing financial support for specific contributions to the peace process. Our collaboration on peace will be one of the key issues for discussion during the State Visit.

The referendum result should not obscure the huge progress Colombia has made towards peace over the last few years. This has required great energy, determination and commitment from President Santos and his team, several of who are accompanying him on this visit. The award of the Nobel Peace Prize is the highest possible recognition of the President's contribution and the progress he has achieved.

Peace is of course above all important to Colombia itself. But it is also a significant contribution to prosperity and stability in the broader region. And it opens the way for strategic partners to engage more broadly and substantively with Colombia. The UK is looking to take advantage of such opportunities and the State Visit will be the occasion to explore them.

Commercial exchange is one obvious area. In the last decade, we were the third largest foreign investor in Colombia. But the level of trade is relatively small. The UK accounts for only 0.9 per cent of Colombia's export market. The State Visit will be the opportunity to close or take forward a number of deals. I hope also it will stimulate the interest of British companies in such sectors as business services, infrastructure, financial services, energy, education and many others where good business is being done but where there is scope for much more. Some of the measures announced during the visit will make this easier.

Another area where we are developing our relationship is in scientific collaboration. Through the Newton Fund we are supporting exchanges and joint working between the best of British and Colombian scientists and scientific institutions. This is an area of collaboration in which the UK is Colombia's number one partner. A particular focus of cooperation, which we will mark during the State Visit, is support for 'Colombia Bio', Colombia's programme to catalogue, investigate and protect Colombia's extraordinary biodiversity (it is the second most bio-diverse country in the world). Its importance not just for Colombia, but globally, is self-evident. There can be no better expression of the modern, forward-looking, strategic partnership between the UK and Colombia which this State Visit will celebrate.