

[Colombia to start new FTA approval lobby](#)

Colombia Reports

By: Adriaan Alsema

January 4 - Colombia's Vice President Angelino Garzon will travel to Washington to lobby the ratification of a free trade agreement (FTA) between the U.S. and Colombia, Caracol Radio reported on Tuesday.

According to the radio station, Garzon will meet with lawmakers and labor unions while in the U.S.

The vice president told the radio station that he will be traveling to Washington with a delegation of Colombian businessmen and union representatives.

The U.S.-Colombia FTA was signed by the countries' governments in 2006, but under pressure of U.S. labor unions was never ratified by Congress because of the labor rights situation in the Andean nation.

[One step forward... Free trade agreement with South Korea should be just a start](#)

The Chicago Tribune

December 31 - We're heartened by the news that President Barack Obama has cut a deal with South Korea on a long-stalled free trade pact.

The pact with Korea was signed in 2007 by President George W. Bush, but never ratified by Congress because of persistent opposition from organized labor. Obama will send to Congress a revised agreement, though the guts of the original deal remain in place. The pact will still pry open South Korea's market for U.S. exports: cars, trucks, agricultural goods, and services.

When he campaigned in 2008, Obama talked like a free-marketer. But free trade has not been a high priority for the administration. We hope the president's action on the Korea pact signals a welcome, if belated, acknowledgement that opening other countries' markets to U.S. manufactured exports is a solid way to create jobs here. It's key to achieving the president's goal, stated a year ago, of doubling U.S. exports over five years.

So what about pending U.S. agreements with Colombia and Panama? They have languished along with the Korea deal.

The news there isn't nearly as bright. Just before Christmas, White House spokesman Robert Gibbs declared that the president would not send the Colombia trade pact to Congress "because it doesn't have the votes." The Panama pact also remains in limbo.

Organized labor in the U.S. continues to oppose both deals. Labor says Colombia must do more to protect the rights of trade unionists in that nation. That view ignores the significant strides the Colombian government has made to reduce anti-union violence. Labor's opposition to the Panama deal stems from that country's opaque banking and corporate registration laws, which Panama's new government is addressing.

Both trade pacts would make it easier for American companies to sell goods there that they make in the U.S. American-made goods face steep duties in Colombia and Panama, though exports from those countries are allowed in the U.S. duty free. These trade pacts would equalize the treatment, to the benefit of U.S. companies and workers.

While the U.S. stalls, the rest of the world takes advantage of us. Colombia has approved free trade agreements with the European Union and Canada.

Incidentally, right before Christmas, Congress did act on behalf of Colombian exports to the U.S. It voted to extend trade preferences benefiting Colombia's textile and flower industries that would have expired at year's end. Obama signed the bill Wednesday. That's good news for job creation in Colombia. How about bestowing some job-creating benefits on American companies?

So, congrats to Obama for the progress on South Korea. He should encourage Congress to move on Colombia and Panama, too.

[By letting trade pact languish, the U.S. aids Colombia's misery](#)

America Society-Council of the Americas

By: Edward Schumacher-Matos

December 30 - President Obama should lead a delegation of American union and human rights leaders to this Caribbean resort, not to marvel at the stunning colonial fortresses but to wander into the barrios of dirt-floor houses and with inventive names such as one called Boston.

What they would find are several hundred thousand displaced people from Colombia's longrunning guerrilla war. There are also many thousands more from the past three months, as extraordinary flooding and landslides washed away houses, roads, farms and even entire villages in a slow-motion catastrophe that meteorologists say may continue until May.

About 2.2 million Colombians have had their lives damaged, according to the popular new government of President Juan Manuel Santos, which has had to tear up its ambitious development plans to focus on the recovery that he now expects will take up to four years. Then Obama and his entourage of well-meaning Americans should hang their heads in shame.

They aid the misery.

They do so by blocking a free-trade agreement signed four years ago that still awaits ratification in the Senate. Their actions have little to do with the human rights they proclaim and a lot to do with ideology and politics.

The ideology is against anything that smacks of freer trade. The politics was opposition to George W. Bush and Alvaro Uribe, the presidents who negotiated the deal.

An irony that a truly beneficent person might find bitter is that, under a temporary Andean antidrug program, Colombia has for the past 19 years enjoyed almost all the access to the American market that the trade agreement offers. It is U.S. companies and workers who would benefit from access they don't now have to the Colombian market.

Colombia's interest is that the trade agreement makes its U.S. access permanent. That would give confidence to investors the country badly needs as it attempts to pay for the resettlement of more than 1 million people displaced by the war, pay indemnity to victims of violence, finance its ever expanding and ever more effective judicial investigations, and fund other measures that are central to real human rights.

The investment would also go to build a modern infrastructure of highways, railroads, telecommunications and affordable electricity that Colombia desperately needs to be economically competitive but that it has been unable to achieve because of war and, now, natural disaster. Economic development that raises the standard of living to a decent level in urban barrios and rural villages is also a human right.

The right that groups such as Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International, in alliance with the AFL-CIO, claim to be protecting has to do with the murder of unionists. As of Nov. 11, according to the main Colombian union federation, 38 union members were killed this year. But as scores of such cases have come to be investigated and resolved with convictions by Colombia's very professional judiciary system, few of the solved murders have had to do with union activity. More important, nothing indicates a systematic, anti-union campaign, much less government complicity.

The murders, in other words, appear to be isolated cases, usually having more to do with passion or common crime. And Colombia's culture of violence is such that a third of all murders nationally this year were due to feuds, the national police reported this week.

The human rights groups are carrying the protectionist water for the AFL-CIO, which itself is not defending its members' interests in the jobs that would be created by allowing exports to Colombia. Together, they have cowed Obama and congressional Democrats so that the trade agreement hasn't even come up for a vote.

What rings hollow is their attempt to blame Republicans, as White House press secretary Robert Gibbs did when he said Dec. 17 that Obama would not send the Colombia deal to the Senate "because it doesn't have the votes."

Colombia has paid dearly in blood in fighting our drug war and the guerrillas, whose customers primarily are Americans. Santos leads a national unity government and has popularity ratings of 90 percent by some measures. What have we done to help? Congress last week extended the expiring Colombian preferences by just another six weeks, creating even more uncertainty for that country's economy.

[Santos is a new breed of diplomat at Colombia's helm](#)

The Washington Post

By: Juan Forero

December 26 - The fiery socialist Hugo Chavez of Venezuela used to deride Juan Manuel Santos as the No. 1 "little Yankee." Now, as Colombia's new president, Santos calls Chavez "my new best friend."

It has been an abrupt shift for Colombia, Washington's most stalwart ally in the hemisphere and the recipient of \$9 billion in U.S. aid over the past three American administrations. But it has not been the only shift. In his four months in power, Santos has taken a series of stands strikingly at odds with those adopted by his predecessor, Alvaro Uribe, who was closely tied to the United States.

In two recent interviews with *The Washington Post*, Santos, 59, said he realizes his moves have raised eyebrows, as much here as in Washington, which has been a steady partner in Colombia's fight against drug traffickers and a Marxist insurgency. Santos's landslide victory in a June election, after all, was seen as a message of support for the policies of Uribe.

"They thought that I was going to be a surrogate of President Uribe and simply follow his policies. That was absurd from the beginning," Santos said. "Uribe is Uribe, and Santos is Santos, and Santos has a different approach."

But some current and former American officials say they believe the change in power in Colombia has left the United States better off, because many South American leaders viewed Uribe as overly militaristic and had come to distrust him.

In particular, Santos's decision to heal the long rift between Colombia and Venezuela has won support from the Obama administration, which sees it as playing to American benefit. The approach effectively left Chavez with little case to be made that Washington planned to use Colombia as a platform to invade his country, an argument that Chavez once frequently used to whip up his followers.

The diplomat

Santos is "doing something that's absolutely fantastic," Myles Frechette, a former American ambassador to Bogota, said of Santos. "He's taking Colombia into the 21st century diplomatically. He's gone out there to engage with the Brazilians and all the others."

Santos has good relations with both parties on Capitol Hill, and no U.S. lawmakers have criticized his approach. But Republicans who work on Latin American policy have disparaged the Obama administration for being too soft on Chavez.

"They think he should be more confrontational and slap Chavez down," Frechette said.

Buoyed by an approval rating topping 70 percent, the Santos administration is pushing legislative initiatives to compensate victims of Colombia's decades-long internal conflict, including those targeted by the state's security forces. Officials are also working to return to poor farmers up to 10 million acres of land stolen by corrupt politicians and local warlords. One bill winding its way through the congress would use mining royalties to help fund public education.

Rafael Pardo, a former senator who ran against Santos for the presidency, said Uribe would not have pursued those policies.

A tough conservative who looked to Washington for funding and guidance, Uribe worked tirelessly over his eight years as president to weaken a guerrilla group once thought invincible.

But his policies were seen as favoring the elites, particularly wealthy landowners. His administration was also tarnished by scandals, the details of which continue to surface, and he left office with Colombia largely isolated in the region.

"Santos came from the Uribe administration, but he is executing a government completely different in style and in content," Pardo said.

From elite class

Some political analysts say the changes spring from a background markedly different from Uribe's.

While the former president comes from Colombia's conservative and influential ranching class, Santos is from a Bogota elite often at odds with rural landowners. After spending much of his life studying and working overseas, he held ministerial posts in successive governments, displaying what analysts have called a chameleon-like ability to adapt to the current political mood.

"You know, politics is an art," said Fabian Sanabria of Bogota's National University. "It is knowing how to navigate, knowing how to change when you have to change. He knows that." As defense minister until last year, Santos ordered unprecedentedly ambitious blows against Colombia's biggest guerrilla organization, including the 2008 aerial bombardment of a jungle camp across the border in Ecuador. That strike killed a top guerrilla chief but triggered a diplomatic crisis that embroiled much of the continent.

Now, as president, Santos has shown a softer, gentler side, pressing to reestablish diplomatic relations with Ecuador, whose president was furious over the bombing. Santos has handed over

secret computer files that Colombian commandos had seized from the rebels; Ecuador's president, Rafael Correa, had requested the files to help his government investigate the strike.

"Juan Manuel Santos has been a welcome surprise," Correa told a Colombian television interviewer during a recent visit to Bogota. "I think he is a person with great human warmth."

The shift on Chavez

The biggest diplomatic priority, though, has been to reestablish relations with Venezuela. That task fell to a respected career diplomat, Maria Angela Holguin, who had resigned as Uribe's ambassador to the United Nations, citing political meddling in the diplomatic service.

"We were in the worst possible situation with Chavez," Santos said in one of the two interviews with The Post. "No communication, no relations, no trade, and we were starting to talk about war, which is for me inconceivable."

Santos recounted how in his days as a journalist - he is a scion of a newspaper family here - he had criticized Chavez's approach to democracy. And as defense minister, he filtered intelligence information that seemed to show Venezuelan support for the guerrillas in Colombia.

Indeed, with concern swirling in Bogota about a possible military threat from Venezuela, Santos had also lobbied the United States for a security guarantee similar to that enjoyed by Israel and spearheaded a defense agreement that would have given the United States access to Colombian military bases, which rankled many Latin American leaders.

"Now I am not a journalist. Now I am not the minister of defense. I am the president of Colombia," Santos said. "I decided to forget what we had told each other - because it went both ways - and start a new relation."

In the end, the Obama administration never offered the guarantees that Colombia wanted, and Santos appears to have shelved the base agreement.

There is also a new outlook toward Washington, where some lawmakers were surprised when Santos approved the extradition to Venezuela of a suspected cocaine trafficker, Walid Makled, even though U.S. prosecutors had also requested his extradition. Santos said he wants a more active partnership with Washington on issues including trade and resolving regional diplomatic spats.

"We want to enhance our agenda, get out of the traditional points of the agenda that were only concentrated on drug trafficking and the fight against terrorism," Santos said.

Adam Isacson, an analyst at the Washington Office on Latin America, a group that tracks U.S. policy in the region, said the Santos and Obama administrations have new priorities that alter the long collaboration between Bogota and Washington.

Mexico, with its drug-related crisis spiraling out of control, may require more long-term U.S. attention and funding, Isacson said. He added that Colombia and the United States also say they need to place a greater priority on forging economic and diplomatic ties with the leading regional power, Brazil.

"I don't see the two countries saying no to each other on many things," said Isacson. "But I think, in general, both countries are going to be diversifying their relations in the region."

[Santos: 'Colombia can play a role . . . that coincides with the U.S. interest'](#)

The Washington Post

By: Juan Forero

December 26 - Colombian President Juan Manuel Santos, who was inaugurated Aug. 7 and has taken his country by storm with a wide array of new initiatives, spoke to The Post's Juan Forero on Dec. 6 in New York and again on Dec. 10 in the Colombian capital, Bogota.

Q: You and President Hugo Chavez of Venezuela had been bitter rivals. How did you change that relationship?

A: I told Chavez from the beginning: "Let's not pretend to change each other's minds. We think very differently on many aspects but let's respect our differences, and if we respect our differences we can have cordial relations, and that is in the best interest of both the Venezuelans and the Colombians." And that is what I have been doing, establishing a cordial relationship under the understanding that he doesn't mingle in our internal affairs and vice versa.

Q: What did you get out of this new relationship?

A: So far we have done very well in the sense that we have been starting to collaborate on aspects that for us Colombians are very important. We started having trade, he started paying our exporters, he started collaborating in security issues and for the first time he has helped us recover a couple of kidnapped people that were taken to Venezuela.

Q: You also immediately began to try to reestablish relations across the continent, though your closest ally is the United States. What's your strategy?

A: I have had extremely good relations with the United States and with both parties (Republicans and Democrats), and I hope to continue to have these good relations, which I, again repeating, do not consider to be mutually exclusive with having good relations with Venezuela or Ecuador or whichever country in South America. And as a matter of fact, President Obama, Secretary Clinton and many members of Congress have celebrated that we have improved our relations with Venezuela and with Ecuador.

Q: You speak of "enhancing" the relationship with the U.S., which has long been defined by the war on drugs. What do you mean?

A: We have improved enough [in the security situation] to be able to include other points in our bilateral agenda like education, the environment, like transfer of technology. . . . Let's really be strategic partners, not in name but in practice. And what does that mean? That means that Colombia can play a role in the region that coincides with the U.S. interest, like for example helping the Central American countries and the Caribbean countries and even Mexico and other South American countries in the fight against drug trafficking.

Q: You were defense minister in Uribe's government but are taking a different path as president. Did you not support his policies?

A: Uribe and I have very good relations. I owe him loyalty, I admire him, he did great things for our country, and I think that because of what he did, I can now concentrate on different issues, different from what he concentrated on.

Q: The Colombia congress has been busy since you took office. What initiatives are you hoping to push through?

A: In these first four months, the congress is approving reforms that nobody ever imagined were going to be even presented, and we not only presented the reforms but they have been approved by congress and with an overwhelming majority. Reforms on royalties, for example, something almost impossible a couple of years ago. This law that is going to allow us to restitute the land to the peasants that were displaced by the illegal groups, or another law that is going to repair [through compensation] the millions of victims that have suffered more than four decades of violence.

Q: Your predecessor, President Uribe, fought with the Supreme Court and criticized its rulings. Was that damaging to democracy and how important do you see the separation of powers?

A: Of course it was damaging the democracy. . . . Democracy is like three oxen pulling a plough. The oxen are the independent powers, but you have to walk in the same direction; otherwise, you cannot plough and that is what was happening in Colombia. One ox was walking in one direction, the other in another direction, so the democracy was not working. The very first step I took was to reestablish relationships with the judicial power, respecting its independence but reestablishing good relations.

Q: What worries do you have about the drug war?

A: There are some fundamental structural contradictions in this war on drugs. . . . We in Colombia have been successful, but our success is hurting the whole of Central America, Mexico, the Caribbean, Africa, and eventually it will backfire on us again. So are we pursuing the correct long-term policy?

Q: So is legalization of drugs an alternative?

A: I don't object to discussing any alternatives, but if we are going to discuss alternatives, let's discuss every alternative. Of course, I am not going to be stupid enough to propose legalization by myself, as a country, but let's discuss what alternatives do we have - what is the cost, what is the benefit of each alternative?

Q: Are you looking more toward Asia, as are other Latin American countries?

A: We depend too much on the U.S., as we depend too much on Venezuela, but that doesn't mean that we don't give a tremendous importance to the U.S. The fact that we are looking to China and Asia is simply the reflection of reality. China is becoming an engine of growth, and we want to participate in that growth.

[Latin trade deals must not lose out to Korean pact](#)

The Washington Times
By Daniel Griswold

December 21 - President Obama can continue the success of the bipartisan tax extension bill he signed last week by working with the new Congress in 2011 to advance the long stalled U.S. trade agenda.

Trade should be an important component of the congressional agenda in the new year. Robust trade growth, of imports as well as exports, has been a key component of past economic expansions. If U.S. businesses hope to continue to expand output and resume hiring, they will need to sell in growing markets abroad and to import the raw materials, intermediate inputs and capital machinery they need to fuel production.

If the president and congressional leaders want to give the economy a boost and deepen ties with important allies, high on the agenda should be passage of pending trade agreements with South Korea, Colombia and Panama.

To his credit, Mr. Obama is actively promoting the Korea agreement. The U.S.-Korea trade agreement, signed in 2007, would eliminate most barriers to goods trade between the two countries, with a few exceptions. It also would reduce regulatory and investment barriers to the export of U.S. services to our nation's seventh-largest customer.

The administration did extract concessions from Seoul earlier this month that will make the deal acceptable to the Detroit Three automakers - Ford, Chrysler and General Motors - and the United Auto Workers union. In the revised agreement, the South Korean government agreed to a more protracted phaseout of U.S. tariffs on Korean cars and light trucks, a move that will not help sell a single extra American-made car in Korea but will help sell the deal on Capitol Hill.

With one of the agreements headed for a vote in the new Congress, the fate of the other two is up in the air. While neither the Colombian nor the Panamanian agreement is as commercially significant as the Korean agreement, both are important for trade as well as U.S. foreign policy.

Neither should be sacrificed in a rush to pass the Korean deal.

The Panamanian agreement is the smallest of the three. Its biggest selling point in Congress is the improved access for U.S. companies offering goods and services to help on the Panama Canal expansion, one of the world's largest public-works projects.

The trade agreement with Colombia was signed in November 2006. The most vocal opponent of the agreement is the leadership of the AFL-CIO, which claims union members are special targets of violence in Colombia and that the perpetrators are not prosecuted. Democratic leaders in the House agree, and they have kept the agreement on the shelf since 2008, when President George W. Bush requested an up-or-down vote on the agreement.

Colombia has been a staunch ally of the United States, perhaps our best friend in a region where Venezuela's Hugo Chavez has been working to spread his brand of anti-American "21st-century socialism." Colombia also is a robust democracy that has just elected a new president, Juan Manuel Santos, who is committed to reducing violence in the country and promoting the rule of law while battling the remnants of the vicious Marxist insurgency, the FARC.

Under his predecessor, Alvaro Uribe, the FARC was routed from most of the country, homicides dropped by 40 percent, and killings of trade unionists dropped 80 percent. Mr. Santos has vowed to build upon that success.

Passing the agreement would solidify our ties to Colombia while rewarding a pro-American democracy. It also would eliminate almost all barriers to U.S. exports to Colombia, promoting an additional \$1 billion in exports, according to the U.S. International Trade Commission. Colombia is an especially good market for U.S. manufacturing equipment useful in that country's resource-rich economy. American companies such as Caterpillar Inc. face significant tariffs in Colombia. As Colombia negotiates and implements free-trade agreements with Canada, the European Union and Brazil, U.S. producers will be at a competitive disadvantage. Market share will be lost if Congress fails to act.

On Friday, White House spokesman Robert Gibbs said the administration would not seek a vote on the Colombia agreement anytime soon "because it doesn't have the votes." That's debatable. Incoming Republican House leaders are keen to move ahead with all three agreements and could be expected to work hard to round up the votes.

It sounds more like a convenient and self-fulfilling prophecy on the part of the administration. If the votes are not there for the Colombian agreement, it is only because Mr. Obama so far has failed to exercise the same leadership he recently displayed in moving the Korean agreement toward passage.

[Losing out in Latin America](#)

The Washington Post

December 21 - At last, the Obama administration has cut a deal with South Korea, paving the way for congressional approval of a long-stalled free-trade agreement with that crucial Asian ally. Now, what about Colombia and Panama? Alas, the administration's answer still appears to be "not yet." White House spokesman Robert Gibbs announced Friday that the president would not be submitting the Colombia or Panama free-trade deals to Congress anytime soon, ostensibly because they don't command majority support.

This is getting ridiculous. Both of these Latin American countries, longtime friends of the United States - in a region where it's not always easy to be America's friend - made tariff-slashing agreements with the Bush administration in late 2006. Thereafter, the deals languished because of objections from the Democratic Congress. In the case of Panama, the ostensible concerns were the presence of the alleged killer of an American soldier in Panama's national legislature and the lack of transparency in the country's banking and corporate-registry sectors. With a new government in power in Panama City since July 2009, those issues have been addressed. All that remains is to take advantage of new opportunities for U.S. exports in a small country with which the United States already enjoys a \$4.5 billion annual trade surplus.

As for Colombia, free trade would also be lopsided in favor of the United States. Colombia already enjoys duty-free access to the U.S. market under existing laws benefiting Andean nations threatened by drug traffic. The trade agreement would give U.S. exporters similarly free access to Colombia's market. The argument against congressional approval has been Colombia's purported neglect of human rights, specifically for trade unionists. In truth, though the record is not perfect, there has been dramatic improvement across the board on human rights in Colombia over the past decade. Only 27 union members have been killed in Colombia this year - in contrast to 196 in 2002 - and it is not clear that they were killed for political reasons. Meanwhile, homicides in general have fallen from nearly 29,000 in 2002 to under 11,500 this year.

The Obama administration, however, has continued to drag its heels on Colombia and Panama free trade, in deference to U.S. labor unions - for whom the very phrase "free trade" seems to be anathema, regardless of the economic merits of any particular deal. Meanwhile, Colombia has approved free-trade agreements with the European Union and Canada, putting the United States at a competitive disadvantage - and raising the question of why the United States, but not these democratic powers, should scruple about trading with Colombia.

Indeed, Colombia is in danger of losing its usual preferences in the United States; they may lapse at the end of this year amid partisan wrangling in Congress over extraneous trade matters. Recent floods have killed 300 Colombians, left 2 million homeless and caused \$5 billion in damage, adding a humanitarian argument to the already convincing economic and strategic case for stronger U.S.-Colombian ties. The Obama administration, supposedly intent on boosting exports and the domestic jobs they create, must stop equivocating and add Panama and Colombia to its free-trade priorities in the new Congress.

White House Offers 'Ridiculous' FTA Excuse

The American - The Journal of the American Enterprise Institute

By: Claude Barfield

December 21 - In a hard-hitting editorial, the Washington Post derided the Obama administration's "equivocation" over the pending Colombia and Panama free trade agreements (FTAs). It quoted White House Spokesman Robert Gibbs as claiming that the reason the president won't be sending up the FTAs any time soon is that (even in the new Republican controlled House in the next Congress) "they don't command majority support."

The Post is too polite to say it, but Gibbs' statement is patently false and a cynically deceptive explanation. During and since the 1990s (even with Bill Clinton, whom they detested as president) between two-thirds and three-quarters of House Republicans could be counted as supporting new FTAs. In the new Congress, incoming Republican Ways and Means Committee trade leaders, Representatives Dave Camp (R-Michigan), and Kevin Brady (R-Texas) have vowed to move all three pending agreements—Korea, Colombia and Panama.

Doubters regarding the votes for Panama and Colombia refer vaguely to alleged antiglobalization, anti-trade attitudes of the incoming Tea Party freshmen. No doubt a few new Republicans will be trade skeptics, though more from their geographic base (Southern districts still dependent on textile manufacturing) than from Tea Party dogma. Ways and Means Committee Chairman Camp stated recently, however, that he had canvassed a number of these freshmen and had found no large-scale animus against trade.

Interestingly, also, out of nowhere, in her letter to Republican freshmen, Sarah Palin not only espoused free trade as a principle but also urged the new congressmen to support all three pending FTAs.

With a 242 majority, House Republicans could drop 20 or so votes from their caucus and still prevail on the FTAs, and this doesn't count the remaining members of the New Democratic Coalition, who have expressed support for the agreements (the NDC lost 20 of 70 signed-up members).

The bottom line is that no one can force the president to send the two FTAs for a congressional vote—but the administration should not be allowed to hide behind a trumped-up, "ridiculous" excuse.

[The U.S. has no good reasons to stall on Latin America free-trade deals](#)

The Washington Post

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