

Colombia deserves renewal of trade agreement

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The Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) are once again making major headlines -- this time with what appears to be backing by the Venezuelan and Ecuadorean governments. The FARC is well known for a large array of activities, including bombings, murder, mortar attacks, narco-trafficking, kidnapping, extortion, hijacking, as well as guerrilla and conventional military action against Colombian political, military and economic targets.

These actions are indefensible on any grounds and, when carried out by armed insurgents in such a manner, are acts of terrorism. In 1997 the FARC was added to the State Department's list of foreign terrorist organizations, securing a spot on the original FTOs list along with such organizations as Hamas and later joined by al Qaeda. Which is what makes the comments by Presidents Rafael Correa of Ecuador and Hugo Chávez of Venezuela as reported in the press -- expressing outrage in response to Colombia's successful attack on a top FARC rebel leader and a large group of his guerrilla lackeys -- such an odd reaction, as well as quite telling.

Leaders across the world who aid, abet and defend terrorism work only to crush their people's hopes and dreams of a peaceful, prosperous future. Leaders who choose to promote peace and democracy over terrorism and war should be applauded and rewarded. This is why the U.S. Congress' decision to hold up the Colombia Trade Promotion Agreement, which was renegotiated to include additional labor and environmental regulations to appease influential groups in the U.S. Congress, is also an odd reaction.

The FARC has been terrorizing the Colombian people for more than 40 years, executing their missions with alarming precision while maintaining their prevalence and ability to garner around \$1 billion in yearly income; feeding the insecurity in Colombia while fueling the drug war that the FARC perpetuates. The FARC's public mission is to overthrow the Colombian government and establish a communist-agrarian state.

However, despite all of these obstacles and more, Colombia has progressed by leaps and bounds over the past eight years. Roads are now open, displaced farmers are returning to their lands and economic growth topped more than 6.8 percent in 2007, the highest in eight years. The observance of human rights has improved, standards of governance have been enhanced and the fight against narcotics trafficking and illegal armed groups continues unabated. Citizens and foreign travelers alike have gained some precious security in their mobility.

Yet the FARC remains practically unscathed. In March 1999, the FARC executed three U.S. Indian rights activists in Venezuelan territory after it kidnapped them in Colombia. In February 2003, the FARC captured and continues to hold three U.S. contractors, and it killed one other American and a Colombian when their plane crashed in Florencia, Colombia. Besides kidnapping for ransom, the FARC has well-documented ties to the full range of narcotics trafficking activities, including taxation, cultivation and distribution.

The U.S. Congress cannot continue to sit idly by while threats of military action are pursued by Ecuador and Venezuela against a true visionary leader and ally as is found in President Alvaro Uribe. We are asking our allies around the world to stand shoulder-to-shoulder with us to fight terrorism, and we must not abandon the people of Colombia, who are doing this very task.

There is something that can prove more powerful and lasting than acts of terrorism and war, and that is inclusion in the international arena. It is time for U.S. House Speaker Nancy Pelosi to stop delaying a vote on the ratification of the Colombian Trade Promotion Agreement. Chávez has clarified that either the United States must bolster true leaders in the region who have stood up for freedom and democracy, or we will be left to watch the southern portion of our hemisphere crumble into disarray before our eyes. It is now up to the leadership in the U.S. Congress to choose our path.

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