The Miami Herald

Found on Miami.com
The Miami Herald

July 24, 2007 Tuesday

Congress ignores a friend in need; OUR OPINION: LAWMAKERS SHOULD APPROVE FTA FOR U.S. ALLY, COLOMBIA

SECTION: A; Pg. 16

LENGTH: 456 words

It doesn't take an expert in international relations to know that the strongest U.S. ally in South America is Colombia. Even as the leaders of neighboring countries raise their voices against the United States, led by President Hugo Chávez

Enhanced Coverage Linking

of Venezuela, Colombia has maintained strong, friendly ties with this country. This has earned Colombian President Alvaro Uribe more than a little criticism and spite from Mr. Chávez and his populist cohorts.

Unflinching leader

Colombia also has been the staunchest U.S. ally in the region in the war against drugs. For years, the people of Colombia have been paying a huge price in blood for refusing to give in to gangsters who want to ship their deadly product to the hungry market in the United States. Under President Uribe, Colombia has extradited an unprecedented number of narcotraffickers to the United States to face criminal charges.

Then there's the war against leftist guerrillas. No nation in the hemisphere has done more to combat anti-American insurgents over the years than Colombia. Under the unflinching leadership of President Uribe, and with the help of U.S. military aid, the insurgency has finally come under a measure of control.

Now ponder this: Which nation has the Democratic-controlled U.S. Congress kicked in the teeth as it considers new free-trade agreements in the Americas? You guessed it -- Colombia.

Recently, Speaker Nancy Pelosi and other Democratic leaders in the House paid lip service to Colombia as ''a crucial ally in a region that deserves our active engagement.'' Then, in a classic example of speaking out of both sides of their mouths, they said they could not support a free-trade agreement with Colombia.

They cited the continued level of violence, ''impunity'' and the role of right-wing paramilitaries in Colombia. Actually, this is just a pretext for rank protectionism. Under the prodding of the AFL-CIO, a powerful Democratic Party constituency that has never liked free-trade deals, Colombia has been pilloried for the serial murder of local union leaders.

Not Switzerland

You won't get any argument from us on that score; but, hello, this is Colombia, not Switzerland. Just a few weeks ago, the guerrillas murdered 11 Colombian legislators who had been held hostage, in some cases for years. That's what Mr. Uribe is up against as he tries to safeguard Colombia.

Helping Colombia is in our national interest. It's about helping our strongest friend in the region, not about catering to a domestic interest group. Unless Congress wants to send a signal that the United States either doesn't care or doesn't know who its friends are -- there are fewer every day -- lawmakers should extend Mr. Uribe a helping hand instead of giving him the back of the hand.