

# The New York Times

## Democrats Talk Sense to Democrats

Published: October 8, 2007

It was an interesting document: a letter from a group of former Democratic leading lights from the Clinton White House and Congress telling their Democratic brethren on Capitol Hill to get their act together and pass the pending free trade agreements with Peru, Panama and Colombia. At home, the trade pacts would provide opportunities for American exporters and help create jobs. In Latin America, the pacts would contribute to economic growth, shake off dependence on the narcotics trade and cement relationships in a region where Washington's influence is increasingly trumped by the well-oiled diplomacy of Venezuela's Hugo Chávez.

The arguments are sound. In economic terms, the letter should have also recommended passing the pending agreement with South Korea. These benefits seem unlikely to sway Congressional Democrats. Late last month, key committees in the House and Senate approved the agreement with Peru, but the other three remain snagged on the new Democratic majority's hostility toward trade.

The South Korean agreement faces especially stubborn opposition from the Ford Motor Company and Michigan Congressman Sander Levin, who believes Detroit's carmakers got a raw deal. There are winners and losers in all such agreements, and the overall benefit — an estimated additional \$10 billion for the American economy — should carry the day.

With Panama, some lawmakers say they have turned against the pact after its national assembly elected as its leader a man wanted in the United States for the 1992 killing of an American soldier. This is a serious issue and one the White House and State Department should press with Panama's government. Over all, Panama's human rights record is good, and this should not block the agreement.

Only Colombia's deal should be delayed. President Álvaro Uribe and his government have not done enough to bring to justice the paramilitary thugs — and their political backers — responsible for widespread human rights violations.

Colombia is eager for the trade deal, and it has made some progress on human rights. But more is needed and withholding ratification can still be used as a lever to change Mr. Uribe's behavior. Meanwhile, Congress should move quickly to pass the Peru deal, for all the reasons in the Democrats' sensible letter — and to show Colombia what it's missing.