

Keeping Faith with Colombia

By Barry R. McCaffrey

Tuesday, November 20, 2007; A17

The proposed free-trade agreement with Colombia has stalled in Congress. The success and stability of Colombia and the Pan-American region depend on our ability to recognize the importance of this agreement to the United States, to Colombia's economy, to human rights progress and to enhanced U.S. national security.

This fall I spent several days in Colombia, meeting with President Alvaro Uribe and other high-ranking officials in the government and military. I visited refugee camps, economic development zones and counter-drug operations. The Colombia I recently visited is drastically different from the place I visited seven years ago when I served as the U.S. national drug czar.

Colombia's transformation from a failing state in 2000 to a progressive democracy today is a U.S. foreign policy triumph. In less than a decade, Colombia's national leaders have made significant achievements reducing violence and the number of illegal groups, as well as improving the country's human rights situation. The murder rate is at its lowest in 20 years, and kidnappings have decreased by 80 percent. Among the illegal armed groups that have plagued Colombia, 45,000 fighters have been demobilized. The three principal narco-guerrilla groups (AUC, [FARC](#), ELN) have lost nearly all of their political credibility and have suffered more than 13,000 desertions. In addition, the economy has grown robustly, unemployment has declined significantly, and foreign investment has increased dramatically. Colombia's human rights record also continues to improve. The level of violence against union members and the number of politically motivated homicides are still unacceptable, but the rates of such incidents are down significantly.

The illegal production of cocaine and heroin remains a major challenge for Colombia. However, more than 525 drug traffickers have been extradited during the Uribe administration -- by far the most extraditions ever from any country to the United States. The effectiveness of the counter-drug campaign is clear: 66 percent of Colombia's opium production has been eliminated.

Alvaro Uribe is an extremely popular leader. This Harvard and Oxford-educated lawyer has accomplished near political miracles in successfully negotiating with criminal groups. Acts of terrorism have decreased 63 percent during his tenure. All of Colombia's major roads are open for civilian travel for the first time in the country's modern history. Uribe has also left his mark on the legal system. He has moved jurisdiction for human rights abuses from military to civil courts and appointed the first civilian (and woman) to head the military justice system.

Colombia has made great strides in recent years, but, as with any entity undergoing tremendous change, the roots of political and economic progress are still shallow. Significant disruption could compromise the country's future.

Approving the free-trade agreement would enable Colombia to continue on its positive course.

Consider three reasons this agreement is necessary:

First, Colombia is an independent, free-market, democratic and long-standing ally of the United States. The value of a relationship with such a strategically located country cannot be underestimated. Aid to Colombia has been supported by a bipartisan congressional majority in the Bush administration and in administrations past. Abandoning Colombia now would jeopardize its security and be a catalyst for human rights regression.

Second, failure to pass the agreement would cast Hugo Chavez and the Venezuelan regime as the best alternative model for Latin America. Such a choice would weaken Colombia's thriving democracy.

Third, the terms of the agreement would further decrease unemployment by 2 percent -- eliminating potential threats posed by additional fighters who are demobilized. Hunger is an enemy that has produced thousands of illegal drug cultivators, but the agreement would help ensure that they have legal, productive employment.

We are facing an unprecedented opportunity to reinforce a U.S. foreign policy triumph that involves a valued ally. Colombia already possesses duty-free access to U.S. markets, thanks to congressional approval of the Andean Trade Preference Act. The benefits of the proposed free-trade agreement lie in its mandate for economic openness, the rule of law and transparency -- elements that are critical to Colombia's long-term growth, stability and security.

Uribe has worked effectively and at great personal peril to combat violence and poverty while promoting economic development. He has improved the lives of his fellow citizens and the security of our hemisphere. We have a strategic and moral obligation to stand behind his successful leadership of a nation at war -- a nation that is only three flying hours from Miami.

The negotiations are done, and this historic agreement has been passed by the Colombian legislature. Support for Colombia and the trade agreement is smart foreign policy. Congress has a responsibility to act now.

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