

# San Francisco Chronicle

June 13, 2007

## **EDITORIAL: The struggle for Colombia**

THERE EXISTS a country that has managed, with American aid, to stabilize its government, disarm most of its militias, drastically slash crime and foster economic growth. It's Colombia, and despite well-founded concerns about this country's continuing troubles, it deserves our support. The fact that the Democratic-controlled Congress is threatening to derail a worthy free-trade deal with Colombia says a lot about American politics and something about Colombia's failures, but it says very little about the global political reality we live in.

Critics list two arguments against renewing our free-trade agreement with Colombia. The first is that, despite \$700 million in annual U.S. aid and massive spraying operations, Colombia has failed to wipe out illegal coca planting. (Colombia still supplies about 90 percent of the cocaine entering the United States.) But this just shows the difficulty of enforcing a "war on drugs" that no country, including our own, has yet to win. Better than any other country, Colombia understands the human cost of cocaine -- the groups on both sides of recent civil conflicts got their money from the illegal drug trade. Instead of killing the program, we should be debating ways to restructure it so that it offers farmers reasons to grow different crops.

Of greater concern is criticism of President Alvaro Uribe's human-rights record. Uribe's government hasn't fully reined in the violent Colombian military, and American labor unions rightly decry the excessive violence suffered by labor organizers there. On top of all this, the Uribe government is embroiled in a scandal over alleged paramilitary connections. If the allegations are true, they will be ruinous. But free trade and economic growth haven't been the cause of these problems of violence and corruption, which are not new to Colombia and have, believe it or not, improved in recent years. It's impossible for Democrats to argue that shutting our markets to Colombia will lead to positive and constructive change.

"Unless we have an open door to the U.S. market, we won't have stable economic conditions," said Colombian Vice President Francisco Santos. "And democracies are under threat in Latin America right now. Colombia has huge room to grow, and we want to be part of the global economy, the liberal democratic world. This is huge for us."

As it must be for Congress. Offering the Colombians anything less than access to economic growth would be unfair and damaging not only to them, but to us.