

Corpus Christi Caller-Times

March 13, 2008 Thursday

Shelved trade pact would help Colombia, thwart Chavez

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The United States and Colombia, its beleaguered ally in a region where lately we seem to have fewer of them, concluded a free-trade agreement in 2006. It has been pending in Congress ever since, and the Democratic leadership shows no signs of bestirring itself to get it passed. Recent events in South America suggest that it is in the United States' interest to pass the agreement, and soon.

On March 2, Colombian forces bombed a rebel encampment inside Ecuador, killing, among others, Paul Reyes, the second in command of FARC, the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia. Whatever its one-time political goals, FARC exists largely for the sake of terrorism, drug trafficking and kidnappings for ransom. While deeply hated by most of the Colombian people, FARC's leftist rhetoric resonates with some nearby regimes.

Most instructive was the reaction of Hugo Chavez. Even though it was Ecuador's territory, not his, that was violated, the Venezuelan strongman ordered 10 battalions of troops to the border with Colombia, threatening to bomb his neighbor if it should dare go after FARC in Venezuela, where it is said to have several camps.

There was a reason for this bluster. Colombia recovered several computers, including Reyes' laptop, from the rebel camp. A continuing examination of the contents shows that Chavez was giving FARC considerable financial -- as much as \$300 million -- political and moral support. He may have also been aware of FARC's efforts to lay hands on uranium. The documents also showed unhealthily close ties between FARC and Ecuadorean President Rafael Correa, but Chavez is the bigger problem.

Chavez tries to thwart U.S. policy in Latin America and fancies himself the leader of a global anti-U.S. coalition. His political popularity at home has waned because of his economic mismanagement. He badly needs an external threat to regain his standing, but his efforts to goad the United States into an intemperate action have failed. He may have to make do with Colombia.

Since taking office in 2002, Colombian President Alvaro Uribe has made great strides against the guerrillas, and he is reliably pro-Washington. We don't want to be an unreliable friend. Passing the free-trade agreement would shore up a friendly government and help Colombia's economy and ours, too. Two years is long enough for any serious objections to the treaty to have arisen.

The Democrats should say no to the protectionist wing of their party.