

Trade pact would benefit all sides

November 5, 2007

By Juan C. Zapata

After many years of progress, Colombia finds itself at a crossroad.

One path is where Colombia enjoys the dividends of a free trade agreement and continues its course of peace, human rights and prosperity through economic opportunities. The other is a path of instability and violence, where paramilitary and narco-guerrillas try once again to bring Colombia and its people to their knees.

Unfortunately, the direction Colombia will take rests in the hands of the Democratic-controlled Congress, and specifically Speaker Nancy Pelosi. Why would she be willing to sacrifice the best friend the United States has in the region for political gain? The Democratic leadership believes that it's worth throwing Colombia's progress into a tailspin, turn its back on a key ally and give Hugo Chávez the political high ground in the region, all as payback to national labor unions and other special interests.

These groups have come together to launch an underhanded campaign of misinformation, political threats and personal attacks on President Alvaro Uribe. These efforts, if allowed to be successful, will give these groups a political victory at the very expense of what they claim to be their objective.

The labor unions' justification is that Colombia hasn't done enough to protect labor leaders and human rights. Of course, the facts speak to the contrary; murders, kidnappings and violence directed at groups such as unions and others are all dramatically down since Uribe first got elected. Areas of Colombia where terror, despair and pessimism once stood have been replaced by increased security, peace and optimism. President Uribe has been able to demobilize the paramilitary groups, the main source of human right abuses, and has aggressively gone after corruption in his government. But for Speaker Pelosi, and others in her inner circle, this has not been enough.

When the Democrats first took over Congress, they insisted on changes to the agreement. They wanted the agreement amended to include stronger labor and environmental standards, which Colombia quickly agreed to. President Uribe has also dramatically increased the number of prosecutors investigating union leaders' murders but, of course, that hasn't been enough.

The reason the unions may lose by winning is that weakening an economy or a government makes the job of ensuring human rights that much more difficult in a country as complicated as Colombia. How should the Colombian government be expected to retrain and employ the 40,000 demobilized fighters in the economic uncertainty created by a lack of a trade agreement? What will those fighters do if they don't find work? They will surely go back to their murderous ways. In addition, how is an economically vulnerable Colombia going to be able to counter the destabilizing influence of an empowered Hugo Chávez?

From an economic standpoint Florida stands to gain the most from a U.S.-Colombia Trade Agreement and reap the benefits of greater stability in the region. In 2006, Florida's export shipments of merchandise to Colombia totaled \$1.6 billion, the second largest export total to Colombia among the 50 states.

All of us should hope that Democratic leaders in Congress figure out that not helping Colombia comes at too high a price. The time has come for the Florida congressional delegation to step up and urge the House leadership to approve this important agreement that will not only benefit Florida, the United States, but our neighbors to the south.

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