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EDITORIAL: Trading with Colombia

Jun. 23--Last spring, George W. Bush became the first U.S. president in 25 years to visit Colombia. He touched down in Bogota for a seven-hour visit to spotlight the progress that nation has made since Alvaro Uribe was elected president five years ago.

Colombia has been plagued for more than four decades by a civil war among drug gangs, Marxist guerrillas and right-wing paramilitary groups. Uribe's administration knows how cruel that war can be. His father was murdered by kidnappers in the 1980s. Vice President Francisco Santos was kidnapped and chained to a bed for eight months in the 1990s.

But life has been improving in Colombia. Uribe's government has made major strides, persuading tens of thousands of combatants to lay down their arms. Murders and kidnappings, the tools of choice during the decades of lawlessness, have dropped dramatically. The result is a more stable country with a booming economy and a strong diplomatic relationship with the U.S. Moreover, Uribe stands for democracy and free markets on a continent that has veered sharply left toward state control.

Congress has on its agenda free trade agreements with a number of nations, including Peru, Panama and South Korea. None may be more important than a proposed deal between the U.S. and Colombia. That agreement would immediately remove all duties on U.S. farm exports and 80 percent of other U.S. exports to Colombia. Tariffs on the remaining 20 percent of exports would be phased out over 10 years. The pact would signal a level of confidence in Colombia and likely spur a flood of foreign investment there.

But Congress may stand in the way. The Colombia pact has run into Democratic opposition, as have several other pending trade pacts.

Democratic opposition is focused on Colombia's troubling human rights record, particularly civilian deaths at the hands of the nation's military. Uribe also faces a growing scandal over links between his government and right-wing paramilitary groups. He has not been implicated, but at least eight lawmakers, most of them affiliated with parties that supported Uribe, have been arrested and charged with plotting assassinations, rigging elections and otherwise collaborating with the paramilitaries.

Human-rights concerns in Colombia are real. They can't be ignored. And this page, as well, has long been skeptical about U.S. military assistance to Colombia's drug-interdiction efforts.

But on the whole, Uribe's government makes a convincing case that the country is moving to investigate and prosecute crimes linked to paramilitaries as Colombia emerges from a period of vicious internal struggle. It needs the kind of economic boost this free-trade pact would bring. The deal would encourage investment and create jobs and opportunities for Colombians, including the more than 30,000 paramilitary fighters Uribe persuaded to give up their guns last year. It would help U.S. firms who export to Colombia.

Denying Colombia duty-free access to U.S. markets -- and denying American exporters such access to Colombian markets -- wouldn't improve human rights for the 44 million Colombians. The trade agreement should be approved.