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What a difference six years makes; OUR OPINION: REBELS ON THE RUN, COLOMBIA OFFERS SUCCESS STORY

To get an idea how far the once beleaguered nation of Colombia has come since June of 2002, consider a few headlines in this newspaper back then:

Explosion in Colombia Kills 9, including 7 children. -- June 4.

Colombian mayor slain; rebels blamed. -- June 6.

In Colombia, war expanding from the jungle to the cities. -- June 17.

Colombian mayors heed rebel threats to quit or die. -- June 28.

Effective fighting tool

The leftist, narco-terrorist movement known as the FARC had the nation by the throat and was slowly tightening its grip. Vast parts of the countryside were under the sway of FARC rebels. City dwellers were prisoners of their urban enclaves. Residents of the capital, Bogotá, dared not venture far beyond the city limits for fear of being kidnapped, robbed or murdered by FARC marauders.

Enter President Alvaro Uribe, who was elected in May of 2002 on a "get-tough" platform. Within days of his Aug. 7 inauguration, he declared a national state of emergency, imposed a wartime surtax and vowed to take a "firm hand" against the rebels. Did he ever.

By increasing the size of the armed forces and weeding out corrupt commanders, he made them a more effective fighting tool. His determination and bold leadership style encouraged Colombians to believe that the war could be won.

The belief has paid off. Although it is far too early to declare victory in the war to eradicate the 40-year FARC insurgency, the government clearly has the upper hand today. With the loss of several key commanders, including FARC founder Manuel Marulanda, known as "Tirofijo" (Sure Shot), the rebels are very much on the defensive. The area of government control continues to expand, the military is more confident and Mr. Uribe enjoys high popularity ratings.

U.S. aid in the form of \$4.35 billion from Plan Colombia played a big role in this reversal of fortune. The aid, which began in 2001, has been well spent. With strong support from President Bush and billions of dollars from Congress, the United States was able to help an ally -- and help itself -- turn the tide against the biggest anti-American insurgency in the region.

Credit goes to Uribe

The recent history of Colombia, in short, is a success story. Most of the credit goes to Mr. Uribe, but President Bush has done his part by being a strong advocate for Colombia. Previous sessions of Congress, mostly under Republican leadership, have done their part by appropriating aid money. Now it is time for the last step: Democrats in Congress must support a Free Trade Agreement that can tighten the bonds of economic security between the two countries. President Uribe and the people of Colombia deserve it.