

# **Bush wields Colombia trade deal to halt Venezuela**

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WASHINGTON — US President George W. Bush's contention that a Free Trade Agreement (FTA) with Colombia is key to halting the influence of Venezuela's leftist president in Latin America has convinced few in the US Congress.

Opposition Democrats that control Congress have refused to ratify the agreement -- which Washington and Bogota signed in December 2006 -- in part concerned over ties between President Alvaro Uribe's government and a right-wing paramilitary group involved in human rights violations and drug trafficking on the US list of terrorist organizations.

To help get the agreement approved, Bush is now presenting the FTA as the main US policy tool to halt the influence of Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez, a firebrand leftist who famously described Bush as "the devil" at the United Nations.

"The US-Colombia FTA is clearly the administration's top priority with regard to Latin America currently, now that the Peru FTA has been approved," said Nelson Cunningham, a former adviser on Latin America to ex-president Bill Clinton.

The US-Peru FTA, negotiated over several years, cleared the US Congress on Tuesday and awaits the president's signature for enactment.

On that same day Bush firmly warned the US Congress of the importance of approving a FTA with Colombia.

"I am going to repeat to you," Bush told reporters. "If the Congress does not pass the free trade agreement (with) Colombia it will be a destabilizing moment."

He said by implementing the agreement, the United States "can make a difference in South America, in terms of Venezuela and influence."

Not approving the agreement "would be an insult to a friend," Bush said.

Democrats however were unswayed by Bush's browbeating. "The concerns among Democrats regarding Colombia's record on labor union killings are strong and deep," said Cunningham. "At this point, passage (of the FTA) is far from assured."

Bush's tough talk is mere rhetoric, said Daniel Restrepo at the Center for American Progress think-tank.

Bush "is currently doing less than nothing to improve relations with the Democratic leadership in Congress," said Restrepo, "and if he does not get closer to the opposition (Democrats), it's impossible to think that the agreement has many possibilities of being approved in the coming year."

By presenting the FTA as a way to foil Chavez, Bush overlooks US trade ties with Venezuela -- which supplies about 11 percent of US oil imports.

"So to say that the United States will put the brakes on Chavez with an FTA (with Colombia) hardly makes sense," said Restrepo. "It's just rhetoric. Today, the free-trade link that is nearly the most important for the United States in Latin America is the purchase of petroleum from Venezuela."

Democratic leaders in the US Congress have accused the Bush administration of focusing its Latin America regional policy exclusively on free trade, while ignoring the area's growing economic disparity.

Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid recently described the administration's "narrow approach" in Latin America as being "harmful in many ways."

"We have left a vacuum of diplomacy and engagement in many areas, which has allowed unconstructive forces space to expand influence," Reid said, a reference to Chavez's growing influence.

Another Democrat, Senator Bob Menendez, asked for more US funds for economic and social development in the region.

"We should worry less about what Chavez is doing and more about what we are doing," Menendez said.