

Colombia Extradites Paramilitary Leader

By David Luhnnow
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In a move that could help its image in Washington, Colombia extradited a notorious paramilitary leader Wednesday to face drug-trafficking charges in the U.S. -- the first time the Andean nation has sent a right-wing boss to face the music in the U.S.

Carlos Jiménez, a 42-year-old known in Colombia as "El Macaco," a type of monkey, was bundled into an airplane with agents from the U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration and flown to Washington via Miami hours after a Colombian court cleared the way for the extradition.

The move comes at a time when Colombia is trying to persuade the U.S. Congress to pass a bilateral free-trade deal. Democrats have put the deal on ice amid concerns about job losses in the U.S. as well as accusations that Colombia hasn't done enough to halt paramilitary violence against labor unions. Colombia points to a dramatic fall in the killing of union leaders as proof that it is making progress.

The extradition could help Colombia's argument that it is becoming a more open, tolerant society. Mr. Jiménez was viewed as a leading hard-liner within the disbanded paramilitary groups, a man seen as untouchable thanks to his vast wealth and connections.

"The symbolism here is huge. For any paramilitary to be extradited is big, but for it to be this guy is really important. This is a big victory for Colombia," said Adam Isaacson, a director of the Colombia program at the Center for International Policy, a Washington nonprofit.

The U.S. applauded Colombia's move. President Bush renewed his effort to get the trade deal unstuck on Wednesday, calling on Democrats to move forward with a pact the president said would create new export jobs and help stimulate the U.S. economy.

Colombia, a key U.S. ally in Latin America, is under pressure to take a harder line against paramilitaries that sprang up in the late 1990s and early parts of this decade. The groups reclaimed much of the countryside from leftist guerrillas but resorted to tactics such as massacres and were heavily involved in the drugs trade to fund their activities.

The paramilitaries largely called it quits four years ago under a peace deal offered by President Alvaro Uribe. The groups turned in their guns and confessed to their crimes in exchange for lenient sentences and the promise that they wouldn't be extradited to the U.S. The deal helped reduce violence in Colombia but was criticized by rights groups as too lenient.

Mr. Jiménez, who is believed to have commanded several thousand armed men who were responsible for about 1,000 deaths, was the first paramilitary leader to lose the benefits of the peace deal -- a risky proposition by Mr. Uribe that angered some paramilitaries. The U.S. and Colombian governments accuse Mr. Jiménez of continuing to work in the cocaine trade. Colombian officials said this week they had seized 25 apartments, 23 cars, several businesses and a boat belonging to Mr. Jiménez.

Many Colombians didn't want Mr. Jiménez to be extradited, fearing that the move would kill any chances that the families of his victims will be able to find the remains of their loved ones killed in massacres organized by his group. Colombia's Supreme Court had earlier blocked the extradition on the same grounds.

U.S. officials said they would cooperate with Colombian officials to ensure Mr. Jiménez answered to all his crimes and urged families to seek reparations through the U.S. justice system.

During the past decade, Colombia has extradited more than 600 people involved in the drugs trade to the U.S. Some were high-ranking traffickers, although most ranked much lower.

Write to David Luhnnow at david.luhnnow@wsj.com