

Colombia: the High Cost of Free Trade

By James McEnteer
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Colombian President Alvaro Uribe came to Washington last week – along with a huge retinue to lobby Congress - seeking a Free Trade Agreement with the United States. He picked a bad time. Legislators were preoccupied with the meltdown of financial markets. But Congress may reconvene after the November to deal with fiscal questions. And in that lame duck session, with nothing to lose and nobody watching, lawmakers may decide to approve a free trade pact with Colombia

The Bush White House has pushed hard to get the deal approved. In a “fact sheet” press release the Bush administration calls the agreement “essential to our national security.” Not only will the free trade pact “bring economic gains for both countries” but it will send “a clear message to the region.”

But like the pre-Iraq war intelligence, the “facts” in the White House version of Colombian events have been bent to fit the policy. Bush claims that “Under the leadership of President Uribe, Colombia has been a strong and capable partner in fighting drugs, crime and terror.” In reality, despite billions of U.S. dollars earmarked under Plan Colombia to fight illegal drugs, more cocaine than ever is cultivated and exported to the United States from that country.

Though ineffective in eliminating cocaine production, the eradication campaign has driven millions of small farmers from their land. Colombia has more than two million internal exiles, citizens displaced from their traditional farmlands, impoverished and forced to move to cities. Fumigation has also caused major environmental degradation in many prime agricultural areas.

Uribe’s “crime fighting” has also been disastrous. With the assassination of Alexander Blanco Rodriguez in front of his co-workers on August 26, more union members have been murdered in 2008 (41) than in all of 2007 (39). More trade unionists have been murdered in Colombia in the past five years than in the rest of the world combined. Chiquita Brands recently paid a \$ 25 million fine for hiring paramilitary hit squads to kill union leaders fighting for decent wages and working conditions. Prosecutions of these murders are rare.

As an anti-terrorist, Uribe also deserves low marks. The Colombian Army, along with mercenary paramilitary forces, have acted as terrorists, forcing farmers and indigenous peoples from lands coveted by Mr. Uribe’s corporate clients and friends. True, the leftist guerillas are a menace. Average citizens are often caught in a deadly crossfire between the military and the FARC. But the Colombian army has acquired the habit of dressing up the corpses of their victims with weapons and clothing to make them appear as guerillas, - a practice known as creating “false positives” - instead of merely inconvenient

civilians. This exaggerates the leftist menace and justifies the army's own murderous violence.

Unfortunately, launching Plan Colombia in 2000, President Clinton waived the provisions of the Leahy Law, prohibiting military aid to governments which permit human rights violations with impunity. Given Colombia's abysmal record under Uribe, it is past time for Congress to rescind that waiver. Otherwise "the clear message" Bush wants to send to Latin America is that the United States cares little for human rights or environmental protections if the return on corporate investment is high.

Republican presidential candidate John McCain has also pledged his support for Mr. Uribe and for the Free Trade Agreement with Colombia. But his judgment in this instance – as in others – seems hasty and ill-considered. Unlike McCain, who spent less than a day in Colombia, in the Caribbean tourist haven of Cartagena, I recently spent two weeks traveling from Bogota through several Colombian states, in provincial cities and small towns, talking with farmers and workers and families of victims who had disappeared or been murdered. No one with whom I spoke thought the Free Trade Agreement was a good idea. Why not?

Such a pact would only signal U.S. approval for the widespread violations of human rights under the Uribe regime. More Colombians – especially indigenous peoples and small farmers – would be murdered or driven from their lands. Many millions more acres would be despoiled by fruitless fumigation.

Until Uribe, or a more principled successor to the Colombian presidency, can demonstrate respect for human rights, environmental protections and the rule of law, Congress should reject a Free Trade Agreement with Colombia. **Just say no.**