

McCain to visit Colombia next month

By Glen Johnson, Associated Press Writer
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Republican presidential candidate John McCain said Tuesday he wants to show his support for Colombia's anti-drug efforts and a pending free-trade agreement with the U.S. by visiting the South American ally.

In announcing the trip and citing his friendship with Colombian President Alvaro Uribe, the Arizona senator sought contrasts with his Democratic rival, Sen. Barack Obama of Illinois.

McCain said Obama opposes U.S. anti-drug aid for the world's largest producer of cocaine and also is against the free-trade agreement, despite having described himself as a proponent of free trade.

McCain said his campaign committee would pay for the trip south — specific travel dates were not announced for security reasons — just as it did last week when he flew north to deliver an economics speech in Canada.

His staff committed one mistake in announcing the trip, though, repeatedly misspelling the country as "Columbia."

Nonetheless, McCain cast his support for Colombia, its leaders and its people in the friendliest of terms.

"I have been to Colombia before and I know President Uribe and I know the struggle that nation has undergone," he said, noting past descriptions of the country as a failed nation.

"I want to thank him. I want to know how we can work more closely together. I want to assure him that I believe in free trade between our two countries, that I believe that our two nations can work together and fight back the scourge of drugs that has so much afflicted their country and ours," McCain said. "I consider him a friend and I consider the people of Colombia my friends as well."

An aide to McCain said the trip would be before the Fourth of July.