

Bush Makes Renewed Push for Colombia Free Trade Agreement

By Paula Wolfson
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U.S. President George Bush is making a renewed push for Congressional approval of a pending free trade agreement with Colombia. VOA's Paula Wolfson reports he is urging Speaker Nancy Pelosi to allow a vote in the House of Representatives.

Washington -- At a White House event showcasing ties between the Colombian and American people, President Bush made one of his strongest appeals to date for passage of the free trade deal with Colombia.

"To demonstrate America's good faith, to stand by our strong friend, to send a clear signal that we appreciate our ally, the United States Congress must approve this free trade agreement," he said.

Mr. Bush said it will open up a major duty-free market to American goods, noting that exports remain one of the bright spots in the uncertain U.S. economy.

But he made clear that national security reasons are equally if not more important. He said under President Alvaro Uribe, Colombia is fighting drugs, crime and terror. "President Uribe has stood strong against tyranny and terror. He has done everything he has asked and more. He has told members of Congress that approving this agreement is the most important step that America can take to show its support for Colombia," he said.

Mr. Bush made specific mention of the recent rescue by the Colombian military of hostages that had been held for years by members of the leftist rebel group known as the FARC, the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia, which the United States considers to be a terrorist organization. He noted that on Sunday, more than a million Colombians marched in the nation's streets to denounce the FARC and demand the release of remaining captives.

"They chanted a simple but powerful message: Libertad! That means freedom," Mr. Bush said.

Democratic Party leaders in the House have put off formal consideration of the free trade agreement because of concerns about the Colombian government's human rights record.

But the White House contends conditions have significantly improved, that the Colombian justice system has been reformed and attacks on labor unionists have

significantly declined.

The president has also called on Congress to schedule votes on pending free trade pacts with Panama and South Korea. But he has spoken out more frequently on the deal with Colombia, indicating winning approval for this agreement is a high priority for the final months of his administration.