

Bush Administration Boosts Pressure to Pass Colombia Trade Pact

By Mark Drajem
Bloomberg
October 3, 2007

The Bush administration is increasing pressure on lawmakers to pass a free-trade agreement with Colombia, pledging new aid to the South American nation, offering to take members of Congress there and showing that murders have declined in the country.

The strategy seeks to counter opposition from Democrats and labor unions who argue that violence against labor organizers and human rights activists in Colombia means the agreement shouldn't be ratified.

The administration plans a series of congressional visits this year to Medellin, a Colombian city that gained notoriety in the 1980s as a drug haven. It also plans a new aid package aimed at beefing up the ability of President Alvaro Uribe to prosecute those accused of killing labor organizers, according to U.S. trade officials.

“We've known violence is a real issue for many Democrats and Republicans, too,” U.S. Trade Representative Susan Schwab told reporters today. The administration is looking at “what kind of measures are out there to show what the Colombians have accomplished”.

“Colombia indicated that they will do more,” she added. The U.S. and Colombia reached a deal on a free-trade agreement in early 2006 and signed it a year ago. The U.S. renegotiated it to toughen labor standards, but Democratic lawmakers including House Majority Leader Steny Hoyer say that isn't enough to get congressional approval. They want to see progress on reducing violence in the world's largest producer of coca, used to make cocaine.

Peru Agreement

The administration's lobbying is aimed at pressuring Congress to approve the Colombian pact once an agreement with Peru is ratified, which may come as early as this month. The Peru agreement is scheduled to be considered by the Senate Finance Committee tomorrow.

Last year, 72 Colombian labor leaders were killed, according to the U.S. Labor Education in the Americas Project, an independent group that examines data on Colombia for the AFL-CIO. While such killings have dropped by more than half since Uribe took office in 2002, there are still more union officials killed in Colombia than the rest of the world combined, the group says.

The labor federation said that of the 236 killings of trade unionists between 2004 and 2006, perpetrators were convicted in only in five cases.

While Uribe has “done a good job” cutting violence, there are measures he must take to prosecute murderers of unionists, Senate Finance Committee Chairman Max Baucus said yesterday.

AFL-CIO Opposes

The AFL-CIO, the largest U.S. labor federation, testified to Congress last month that it doesn't support pending free trade agreements with Peru and Panama, but that it opposes the Colombia agreement. That opposition means the administration faces a tougher battle to get the deal approved.

“We're not there yet,” Baucus said.

The Bush administration is making the case that Colombia is a key ally of the U.S. in a region where anti-American sentiment is rampant, and it says the Uribe government has succeeded in bringing down violence and ramping up prosecutions.

“While significant challenges remain, we must not lose sight of what is clear: the Colombian government and people are making progress toward peace, justice and prosperity,” Commerce Secretary Carlos Gutierrez, who visited Colombia last month, wrote in a letter to Democratic senators critical of Colombia.

Murder Rate Down

For example, Medellin, once the most dangerous city in the world, brought its murder rate down to 29 per 100,000 last year from 381 per 100,000 in 1991, Gutierrez wrote. New York's murder rate peaked at 14.5 per 100,000 in 1990 and is now less than 5, according to FBI data published by the Disaster Center, an independent group that collates and publishes crime data.

Gutierrez is set to lead a second bipartisan delegation to Colombia next week. His trip will be followed in coming months by others led by Schwab and other Cabinet members.

“The best thing we have going for us is to encourage members of Congress to visit Colombia,” said Bill Lane, a lobbyist for Caterpillar Inc. and a leader of the business group pressing for the pact.