

Uribe's kisses intended to seal free trade deal

By Benedict Mander
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Bojayá, Colombia - A horde of sweating Americans airlifted deep into the Colombian jungle from Capitol Hill last week was treated to the sight of President Alvaro Uribe distributing kisses to small children.

Mr Uribe wanted the US congressmen and their entourages to see how peaceful the remote village of Bojayá had become.

Five years ago, a skirmish there between leftwing rebels and paramilitary gunmen left 119 civilians dead. Now Mr Uribe counts Bojayá as one of the success stories of his efforts to end a devastating, decades-long armed conflict in his country. It also helps soften Mr Uribe's poor image in the US, where his reputation has been marred by scandals linking his government with rightwing paramilitary groups.

Those scandals are damaging the chances of a Free Trade Agreement (FTA) between Colombia and the US being approved before the 2008 US presidential elections, even though a similar agreement with Peru is expected to be passed this year.

That is a growing concern for Washington. Nicholas Burns, US undersecretary of state, warned on Monday that a failure to pass free trade deals in Peru, Panama and Colombia could "embolden" strident critics of the US government including Hugo Chávez, the Venezuelan president.

"If it doesn't pass, someone like Chávez, if not Chávez himself, is undoubtedly going to make the argument that the United States doesn't take care of its friends . . . and we wish not to give that argument to our adversaries in the region," he said.

According to Vicente Torrijos, a political analyst in Bogotá, the US administration's closest ally in Latin America is already strengthening ties with its neighbours in the Andean region and Central America, as well as with Europe.

The links with Venezuela could be most troubling for Washington. Mr Uribe has signed up to the Bank of the South, a Caracas-backed financing institution due to be inaugurated next week, whose express aim is to replace Washington-based multilateral institutions in the region.

Mr Uribe has also signed energy deals with Venezuela and sought Mr Chávez's help to revive US-financed efforts to end the conflict with leftwing rebels, the Farc, by mediating negotiations for a hostage exchange.

Mr Torrijos says Mr Uribe's improving relations with Mr Chávez are part of the broader attempt to increase regional ties and have been beneficial for both countries. "Uribe realises that it is time to diversify strategic relations. He is a realist," he says, pointing out that Mr Bush's term is coming to an end.

But Washington's concerns have led to a renewed push to gain support for the FTA, by taking congressmen to Colombia to see the progress made with the help of US funding. The delegates from the US Congress were also taken to Medellín, a city once riddled by drug-dealing, now no longer considered one of the most dangerous on the planet.

"What I heard two months ago was, 'forget it'," Carlos Gutierrez, US commerce secretary, told the Financial Times, referring to the prospects of the Colombia deal being approved in Congress. Last week he was on his second trip to the country since that assessment, and expected Susan Schwab, the trade negotiator, and others to lead more delegations soon.

"It's very easy to sit in an office in Washington and assume you know what's going on, simplifying what is a very, very complicated situation," he said.

Nonetheless, most Colombian businesses believe an approval of the FTA is out of the administration's hands and are bracing themselves for the likelihood they will not gain its benefits until after the 2008 election.

Hernando Gómez, Colombia's chief negotiator for the FTA, admitted: "We've hit a bad moment, now that US elections are approaching."

But he said the problems "are more to do with protectionist efforts and electoral interests than anything else".

Mr Gómez said the FTA with Peru could be approved soon. "This proves that there are many Democrats who are pro-trade, which means the deal should eventually go through."