

## **U.S. pushing Colombian trade deal**

The U.S. is stepping up its effort to convince members of Congress to support a trade agreement with Colombia.

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Miami Herald  
October 7, 2007

WASHINGTON - With little to show after months of lobbying by Colombian and U.S. officials, the Bush administration is trying a new way to sell a controversial free trade agreement with Bogotá.

Call it field-trip diplomacy.

In the coming months, top Bush administration officials will escort at least half a dozen congressional delegations to Colombia in the hope that lawmakers will like what they see and vote "yea" on the agreement.

"We are trying to encourage members of Congress to visit Latin America, in particular to visit Colombia to see for themselves," said U.S. Trade Representative Susan Schwab, whose office is helping coordinate the trips. "We believe the data is compelling about what has been accomplished in the past five years as it relates to violence and impunity."

### **STAKES HIGHER**

The aim is to promote all three pending Latin American free trade agreements: Peru, Panama and Colombia. But Peru and Panama are less controversial, and the stakes are much higher in Colombia.

Colombia receives more U.S. aid than any nation outside the Middle East for its counter-drug and counter-insurgency campaigns and is regarded as the strongest U.S. ally in the region. The second most populous nation in South America trades almost twice as much with the United States as Peru.

And the market-friendly policies of conservative President Alvaro Uribe run counter to the "21st Century socialism" of President Hugo Chávez in neighboring Venezuela.

The administration also is stepping up the more traditional forms of persuasion on the free trade pact: trips to Capitol Hill by Cabinet members and a barrage of public appearances by senior officials touting Colombia. President Bush will do it in Miami next Friday and Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice will speak on the subject in Washington Tuesday.

But all efforts have met resistance from members of Congress, most of them Democrats, who argue that the Uribe government has done too little to catch and prosecute rights violators.

## UNION CONCERNS

The AFL-CIO, which provides money and campaign volunteers for many political candidates, is especially concerned about the murders of scores of union leaders, most of them by right-wing paramilitary fighters.

Last month, Commerce Secretary Carlos Gutierrez, one of the most vocal promoters of the Colombia agreement, took eight members of Congress -- three Democrats and five Republicans -- plus Boston Mayor Thomas Menino and senior staff members of the Senate and House trade committees to Medellín. He is arriving in Bogotá with another delegation next week.

Schwab will go in late October and Colombian officials are preparing an agenda for Rice. Deputy Secretary of State John Negroponte, Treasury Secretary Henry Paulson, Secretary of Agriculture Mike Johanns and Secretary of Health and Human Services Mike Leavitt are also on tap for visits, U.S. officials say.

This means anywhere from 50 to 100 lawmakers could be visiting Colombia in the coming months. They will meet with Uribe and Colombian Cabinet members, plus talk to business leaders, union members and former guerrilla and paramilitary fighters who have turned in their weapons.

The Colombian embassy, eager to show how the economy is improving and violence is subsiding under Uribe, has arranged congressional trips for years, though not with the intensity of the upcoming blitz.

Colombian and U.S. officials dismiss any suggestions that the trips will be stage-managed to make Colombia look good.

"Colombia is a wide-open democracy," Gutierrez said. "People are there to talk to whoever they want, to ask whatever question they want."

Gutierrez took his delegation to Medellín, an industrial city once rife with drug-fueled violence. Now, he noted, the group walked around freely and met with the mayor, an opponent of Uribe.

## OPTIMISTIC

Gutierrez says the facts in favor of the free trade deal are "so overwhelming" that he's confident the agreement could win if the Democratic congressional leadership allowed a vote now. "I just can't imagine that Congress wouldn't pass this."

New York Rep. Gregory Meeks, one of the few Democrats to have declared his support for the agreement and a member of the Medellín delegation, believes the votes aren't there, but that the balance could shift.

"A lot of members of Congress have a misconception of what's taking place in Colombia," he said in phone interview. "That's why I'm urging members to go see themselves because . . . they'll get a whole different viewpoint."

Free trade deals are a difficult sell amid U.S. voter unease over job losses. Only 15 Democrats voted in favor of a 2005 free trade deal with five Central American nations and the Dominican Republic, known as CAFTA-DR, which passed by a mere two votes in the House.

To placate Democrats, Peru, Panama and Colombia agreed to include more labor and environmental protection provisions in their agreements. Peru and Panama got the green light, but not Colombia.

That was a blow for Uribe, who came to Washington in May and then again in June to lobby for the agreement.

## STRATEGY

Ochoa said Uribe is not planning to return to Washington anytime soon, but the Uribe administration dispatched Paula Moreno, the minister of culture and an Afro-Colombian, to lobby the black congressional caucus. Colombia's defense minister, Juan Manuel Santos, is planning a mid-October visit.

The Bush administration has also been busy on other fronts. Five government agencies have created a special website to promote free trade agreements -- [www.tradeagreements.gov](http://www.tradeagreements.gov).

Gutierrez has attended more than 50 events and met with 30 members of Congress pushing free trade, his office said, and the Department of Commerce has organized 70 pro-trade events in 30 states.