

# Colombia blasts Clinton opposition to trade pact

Reuters

Nov 9, 2007

BOGOTA - Colombian President Alvaro Uribe on Friday called Democratic presidential front-runner Sen. Hillary Clinton's opposition to a U.S. free-trade deal with Colombia an "unforgivable" misunderstanding of his country.

Uribe has lobbied hard to show his government deserves a free-trade deal for curbing violence from a 4-decade-old conflict, but Clinton joined other Democrats in citing the continued killings of labor leaders for rejecting a deal.

"This is very serious, very serious, it's an unforgivable misunderstanding of Colombia," Uribe told reporters in Chile where he was participating in a regional summit.

The U.S. House of Representatives on Thursday passed a free-trade agreement for Peru, but Colombia's deal is in doubt as Democrats question Uribe's record in reducing attacks on labor leaders and bringing their killers to justice.

Clinton, a New York Democrat, said on Thursday she opposed pending free-trade deals with Colombia, Panama and South Korea, noting, "I am very concerned about the history of violence against trade unionists in Colombia."

The closest White House ally in South America, Uribe has said a refusal to approve the deal would be treating Colombia like a pariah, especially given the strong anti-drug cooperation between Bogota and Washington.

Funded by billions in U.S. aid, Uribe has helped reduce violence from Latin America's oldest guerrilla insurgency by driving back guerrillas and disarming illegal paramilitary death squads that once fought the rebels.

But he is under fire for a scandal tying some of his close lawmaker allies to former paramilitary commanders jailed under the peace deal. Rights groups say militia bosses have maintained their criminal networks and influence.

Uribe's government says labor killings have fallen sharply and it has increased funding to protect union leaders and strengthened units investigating violence against them.

(Reporting by Patrick Markey in Bogota; Editing by Peter Cooney)