

Andean bloc presidents to chart new course

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QUITO, Ecuador - Four Andean nations agreed Tuesday to chart new trade plans with the United States without Venezuela, a major U.S. critic.

Bolivia's Evo Morales, Ecuador's Alfredo Palacio, Colombia's Alvaro Uribe and Peru's Alejandro Toledo signed an accord pledging to respect the rights of Andean bloc nations to negotiate free trade agreements with the United States.

President Hugo Chavez of Venezuela, a fierce critic of U.S.-backed trade liberalization, announced in April that he was abandoning the Andean bloc, saying it had been "fatally wounded" when Colombia and Peru signed trade pacts with Washington.

Another focus of the summit was extending the U.S. trade preferences granted in 1991 to diversify the Andean nations' economies, helping to wean them away from the production of coca leaf, the raw ingredient of cocaine.

The preferences, covering thousands of products, are scheduled to end later this year. U.S. officials have said that an extension, in lieu of formal trade deals, is not in the cards.

The leaders agreed to urge Washington to extend the preferences.

Morales at first sided with Chavez in opposing U.S. trade agreements, but later relented and urged Chavez, who was not invited to Tuesday's summit, to reconsider.

Michael Shifter, a Latin American analyst at the Inter-American Dialogue think tank in Washington, said that "Morales cannot afford" to take Chavez's position.

"Chavez, after all, benefits enormously from the U.S. market, the recipient of an estimated 60 percent of its petroleum exports," he said. "It makes sense that Morales would also try to see how Bolivia can take better advantage of the U.S. market."

Colombian trade minister Jorge Humberto Botero said President Alvaro Uribe - Washington's staunchest ally in the region - was expected to appeal to President Bush during meetings Wednesday at the White House to restart stalled trade talks with Ecuador.