

Colombian president Uribe sworn in for second term

President Alvaro Uribe promised to continue seeking peace, but his speech lacked bold proposals.

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BOGOTA - President Alvaro Uribe was sworn in for a second term Monday, promising to seek an elusive peace with leftist rebels while maintaining the hard-line security policies credited with a sharp drop in Colombia's murder and kidnapping rates.

In a ceremony attended by 11 heads of state but marked by the absence of presidents from regional heavyweights Argentina, Brazil, Mexico and Venezuela, Uribe said he would devote "all of his energies" to pursuing a peaceful end to this nation's four-decade-old civil war.

"I'm not afraid of negotiating peace. I confess what worries me more is falling short of that goal and instead seeing our gains in security eroded," the 54-year-old Uribe said after retaking the oath of office, in a speech short on specifics.

After reforming the constitution last year to allow him to seek a second term, the law-and-order Uribe coasted to victory in May 28 elections, winning 62 percent of the vote -- 10 points more than in his 2002 victory.

Uribe is Colombia's first sitting president to be reelected.

Despite his reputation as a free-market conservative and Washington's closest ally in Latin America, Uribe, in his inaugural address to a Congress stacked with loyal supporters, at times sounded like the left-leaning social democrat favored of late by voters in neighboring countries.

"We are against a fiscally tight macroeconomic policy that leaves economic growth to the luck of supply and demand. The state must be devoted in equal parts to growth and equality," Uribe said.

But he made no bold proposals for improving the lot of the 50 percent of Colombians who live under the poverty line -- on less than \$3 a day -- even as the rich benefit from the increased foreign investment that improved security has brought.

Also absent was any mention of how he hoped to stamp out drug trafficking in the light of new evidence showing that record amounts of aerial fumigation of coca has done little to reduce the crop that is the base ingredient of cocaine.

As Washington's caretaker in the war on drugs, Colombia, the world's largest producer of cocaine, has received more than \$4 billion in mostly military aid since 2000. The U.S. delegation at the inauguration ceremony was headed by Treasury Secretary Henry Paulson and included Commerce Secretary Carlos Gutierrez.