

CONGRESS SHOULD OK AID TO COLOMBIA

Our opinion: But clear conditions must be attached, as well

Opinion
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There are plenty of reasons for members of Congress to be leery about giving more money to Colombia. A major political scandal surrounding President Alvaro Uribe and his party is growing, and getting closer to the president himself. An amnesty with paramilitary forces has been far too generous to these criminals. Human rights protections need to be strengthened, and too much of Colombia's territory remains beyond the reach of the government. And yet, Congress should approve more aid to Colombia -- with strings.

In a way, Colombia has become the Pakistan of Latin America -- a strategic U.S. ally in a troubled part of the world, with a government that leaves a lot to be desired. But even this comparison falls short, principally because President Uribe, unlike Pakistan's Musharraf, is a popular -- *and popularly elected* -- democratic leader.

Decrease in violence

Over the past few years, Mr. Uribe has waged an effective campaign against left-wing guerrillas, his "democratic security" policy has reduced violence by organized crime and lawless groups, and his government has improved its cooperation with the United States in the fight against drugs.

A failure by Congress to approve the Bush administration's request for \$600 million in aid for each of the next two years would send the wrong message to the rest of the hemisphere.

First of all, it would be interpreted in every country in the region as a failure by the United States to recognize who its friends are. Far more important, it would ignore the enormous sacrifices made by Colombia's people over decades of struggle against drug traffickers and organized insurgent groups of all stripes.

Congress must step up

Under President Uribe, and President Andrés Pastrana before him, Colombia has come from the brink of being a "failed state," but at a great cost to its soldiers, police, judges, journalists and anyone else who dared confront the forces of lawlessness. Congress cannot turn its back on this effort.

At the same time, it cannot turn a blind eye to the shortcomings of the government. Mr. Uribe has to get to the bottom of the scandal involving the penetration of his government by paramilitary forces. He has to show, as President Bush declared during his visit to Bogotá last month, that he is serious about protecting human rights.

The government has been very good about extraditing Colombian criminals wanted in the United States to this country, but the paramilitary leaders -- the

real kingpins -- remain in Colombia. All of this has to change, and Congress should set benchmarks and conditions on the aid it approves for Colombia.