

Colombian leader faces tough sell to US Congress

President Álvaro Uribe will fight for a trade deal and continued US aid when he arrives in Washington Wednesday amid a growing scandal back home.

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BOGOTÁ, COLOMBIA - Just six short months ago, Colombian President Álvaro Uribe would have had a relatively easy time convincing the US Congress to approve a free-trade agreement and to continue providing millions of dollars in military aid to the conflict-ridden country.

But that was before the outbreak of a widening scandal linking some of his closest allies to right-wing death squads. And it was before Democrats won control of the House and Senate.

Now Mr. Uribe will face skeptical Democrats in Congress as he embarks Wednesday on one of the most difficult trips to Washington of his six-year presidency.

Sen. Patrick Leahy (D) of Vermont, chairman of the subcommittee overseeing foreign funds, recently froze \$55 million in military aid to Colombia, and former vice president Al Gore shunned Uribe last month because of the scandal known here as "para-politics."

Yet despite the unease in Washington, Uribe's popularity at home, already high, has risen even as the allegations creep closer to him. The war-weary Colombian public – long aware of politicians' ties to paramilitaries – seems content with Uribe's success in lowering the violent crime rate and his no-nonsense approach to tackling the country's problems.

Uribe will be certain to point this out as US lawmakers decide whether Colombia's egregious human rights record and the scandal surrounding his administration trump fears of alienating a key US ally in a region increasingly hostile to US interests.

"The president has a big job in front of him when he gets here, [but] if he can launch a good clear explanation [of what's happening in Colombia] I think he can carry the day," says Riordan Roett, director of the Western Hemisphere program at Johns Hopkins University's School for Advanced International Studies in Washington.

US visit a counteroffensive

This week's trip is a counteroffensive against a series of setbacks for Uribe's government on the international front.

Before addressing critics and skeptics, Uribe will start his visit with a breakfast with President Bush, who called the Colombian president a "personal friend" during a March visit to Bogotá.

Uribe is Bush's most loyal ally in South America, not only in the fight against drugs and terrorism, but also as a stalwart conservative in a region leaning increasingly to the left.

In later meetings, Uribe faces tougher audiences that include House Speaker Nancy Pelosi (D) of California, Rep. Charles Rangel (D) of New York, and AFL-CIO president John Sweeney. From them Uribe can expect pointed questions about the growing scandal back home in which

many of his close political allies are under investigation for working together with paramilitary groups that once held sway over huge areas of the country.

Growing 'para-politics' scandal

Eight pro-Uribe lawmakers are in jail on charges ranging from mere collusion with the paramilitaries to conspiracy to kidnap and murder. Dozens of others are being investigated.

Uribe argues that it is precisely because of his government's successful negotiation with the paramilitaries – which lead to the demobilization of 31,000 fighters – that the truth of their influence is being revealed. The government says it supports the "para-politics" investigations and has approved additional funds to finance them.

But chief prosecutor Mario Iguarán, also in Washington this week, said at a forum at the Center for Strategic International Studies that his office is barely scraping by with the funds appropriated by the Colombian Congress, where pro-Uribe parties hold a majority. In an interview with the Colombian newspaper *El Tiempo*, Mr. Iguarán said he calculates the prosecutor's office needs twice its current budget of \$8 million.

The Bush administration, meanwhile, has requested \$3.9 billion in aid for Colombia over the next six years as an extension of controversial aid program known as Plan Colombia.

The new aid request is mostly geared to support the military in fighting leftist rebels and the country's burgeoning drug trade.

On Monday, Colombia reported its largest-ever cocaine seizure when 25 tons worth an estimated \$500 million were discovered buried on the Pacific coast ready for shipment.

But despite the spectacular seizure, US drug czar John Walters admitted in a letter to a congressman that the street price for cocaine fell by 11 percent from February 2005 to October 2006, to prices similar to those seen in the early 1990s. After \$4 billion in Plan Colombia aid, the drop in price – together with a simultaneous rise in purity – indicates that little dent has been made in supply.

Even when they were a minority in Congress, some Democrats questioned the effectiveness of the anti-drug strategy. Many lawmakers and rights groups would like to see a shift of US aid from a military focus to boosting drug-treatment and prevention programs.

"We will probably see a cut in military aid and a shift to a more social approach to the aid," Mr. Roett says.

Uribe still widely popular at home

Despite the recent scandal, supporters in Colombia have rallied around their president. An opinion poll released this week showed Uribe has an approval rating of 80.4 percent, up from 73 percent a month ago. After Mr. Gore's snub, business federations bought ads in the nation's largest newspaper with open letters of support for Uribe.

"Our president manages his image here very well, and he has improved security which has been very important to people," said Mauricio Suarez as he dined at a restaurant in the nation's capital, Bogotá. "Because of that a lot of people are willing to let other things, like this shameful scandal, slide."

US lawmakers will probably let it slide as well, says Mr. Roett, given Colombia's position as an "island in the Andes" surrounded by leftist government in Venezuela, Ecuador, and Bolivia.

"There's been a huge foreign policy investment in Colombia so I don't think Congress will throw out the baby with the bath water," Roett says.