

# Colombia may re-evaluate its U.S. ties

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BOGOTA, Colombia --

Colombia might have to re-evaluate its close relationship with the United States if Congress fails to ratify a free-trade agreement, Vice President Francisco Santos said Tuesday.

Santos' comments came as U.S. Deputy Secretary of State John D. Negroponte reaffirmed the Bush administration's support for the stalled trade pact during a visit to Bogota, the first stop in a four-nation, six-day tour of the region.

Negroponte, visiting a rose farm that stands to gain from the removal of U.S. tariffs on Colombian exports, said the United States was a "great friend" of Colombia, its staunchest ally in a region increasingly dominated by anti-American, leftist leaders.

In brief comments to reporters, he said he hoped that Andean nation "would soon benefit from the approval by our Congress" of the trade pact.

Santos, in an interview with RCN television, warned that failure to ratify the deal would "send a message to the eternal enemies of the United States that ... this is how America treats its allies."

In an uncharacteristically sharp tone, Santos said Colombia "might need to re-evaluate its relationship with the United States" if the trade pact is jettisoned.

The free-trade pact is facing stiff opposition among members of the Democratic congressional majority concerned over Colombia's human rights record and alleged links between the government and right-wing paramilitaries.

The trade agreement was signed in November. Colombia's congress is expected to ratify the pact in the coming weeks.

Colombian prosecutors have arrested several government supporters - including eight congressmen and Uribe's former intelligence chief - for allegedly colluding with right-wing paramilitary groups, which have perpetrated some of the worst atrocities in Colombia's five-decade old civil conflict.

Sen. Patrick Leahy, head of the Senate committee overseeing foreign aid, last month froze \$55 million in aid to Colombia's military following press reports that the head of the army was also tainted by past collaboration with the drug-funded militia, which the United States considers a foreign terrorist organization.

Colombia is the largest recipient of U.S. aid outside the Middle East, more than \$4 billion since 2000 for a counterinsurgent and anti-narcotics program known as Plan Colombia.

Negroponte flies Wednesday to Ecuador, where he's expected to complain about plans by popular left-wing President Rafael Correa to close America's only military base in South America, an air base used for drug surveillance flights in the port city of Manta.

Negroponte will also will visit Peru and Panama.