

# Colombia plans to honor Bill Clinton

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BOGOTA, Colombia --

Colombia will honor former President Clinton for his efforts to reverse the country's image for violence and drugs at a gala event next month in New York City.

The June 8 event may become a political lightning rod for Democrats who are increasingly scrutinizing the human rights record of Washington's closest ally in Latin America.

President Alvaro Uribe, whom event organizers say is expected to present Clinton with the "Colombia is Passion" award, has recently been the focus of some controversy.

Last month, former Vice President Al Gore backed out of an environmental conference in Miami to avoid appearing alongside Uribe, who has struggled to defend himself against charges that members of his family and government supporters collaborated with murderous right-wing militias.

The 250 invited guests at the New York gala include high-powered businessmen, fashion designer Oscar de la Renta and hip-shaking Colombian pop star Shakira, according to Angela Montoya, organizer of the event for the "Colombia is passion" branding campaign.

Prominent Democrats on the guest list include former Clinton strategists Dick Morris and Vernon Jordan, former Clinton Cabinet members Lawrence Summers and Madeleine Albright, and several Democratic congressmen, Montoya said.

A spokesman for Sen. Hillary Clinton said in an e-mail the presidential candidate will not attend, but did not say why.

Frank Rothman, a spokesman for the William J. Clinton Foundation, said the former president was traveling and he was unable to contact him about his participation in the event.

The Colombian government is trying to counter its negative image among Washington Democrats and secure congressional passage of a free trade agreement signed by Uribe and the Bush administration last year, a deal Uribe considers his biggest foreign policy achievement.

According to Justice Department filings, Colombia agreed this month to pay \$300,000 to public relations firm Burson-Marsteller to help "educate members of the U.S. Congress and other audiences" about the trade deal and secure continued U.S. funding for the \$5 billion anti-narcotics program Plan Colombia.

The filings also show that last month Uribe's government put The Glover Park Group, a Washington D.C.-based lobbying firm that includes former Clinton spokesman Joe Lockhart, on a \$40,000 a month retainer.

Montoya said the idea to honor Bill Clinton came last year, "before President Uribe was re-elected and all of Colombia thought the free trade agreement was a fact, not an issue."

Clinton was responsible for pushing Plan Colombia through Congress when he was president, and for years he said he wore a bracelet honoring a Colombian culture minister, Consuelo Araujo, who was kidnapped by leftist rebels and killed during a botched military rescue attempt shortly after they met at the White House in 2000.