

Colombia facing threat to cut U.S. aid

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BOGOTA, Colombia --

President Alvaro Uribe flew to Washington on Wednesday hoping to revive Colombia's trade accord with the U.S., but he could also face a move in Congress to slash anti-drug aid for the world's largest producer of cocaine.

Colombia is the biggest recipient of U.S. aid dollars outside the Middle East and Afghanistan, but Democratic lawmakers are pushing a major overhaul that they say reflects the failure of the seven-year-old, multibillion-dollar program to curb cocaine production.

If the changes are approved, the Andean nation stands to lose as much as 10 percent of the more than \$700 million it has received yearly under Plan Colombia, and see a severe curtailment of aerial eradication of drug crops - the cornerstone of Uribe's anti-drug strategy.

Despite record herbicide spraying, the latest annual estimate by the White House drug czar's office says Colombia is producing more coca, the plant used to make cocaine, than when the program was enacted in 2000.

The House subcommittee that oversees foreign aid proposed Tuesday to slash funding to Colombia's military by \$150 million, much of it used to pay for aerial eradication.

An additional \$100 million would be reassigned to boost economic development and strengthen the judicial system, including earmarking \$7 million for training Colombian prosecutors who are investigating alleged links between government allies and right-wing paramilitary groups.

As a result, the military's share of U.S. aid to Colombia would be cut to about 55 percent from its current 80 percent, said Rep. Nita Lowey, D-N.Y., chairwoman of the House subcommittee drafting the 2008 foreign aid bill.

"I have long felt that our policies in Colombia were ineffective and misguided," Lowey, who planned to meet with Uribe on Thursday, said in an e-mail. "My proposal would realign the funding to more of an even split."

The changes would not affect another, so-far untouched disbursement of \$150 million in Defense Department aid for Colombia.

The subcommittee's proposal has a way to go. It must be approved by the full House and Senate. After that it would need approval by President Bush, who has close ties to Uribe.

But the plan is a blow to Uribe, who despite being Washington's staunchest ally in Latin America is increasingly finding himself out of favor with Democrats concerned about Colombia's human rights record.

The Democratic-controlled Congress also has refused to ratify the revival of the bilateral trade agreement, which is the issue that spurred Uribe to schedule his second trip in a month to Capitol Hill before the drug overhaul came up.

Rep. Elijah Cummings, D-Md., co-chairman of the House's drug policy caucus, said Congress should hold hearings to rethink its anti-drug strategy in Colombia.

One of Plan Colombia's main goals was to halve production of coca within five years.

U.S.-supplied planes have fumigated coca fields totaling more than twice the size of Rhode Island, but the latest estimate indicates 27 percent more coca is being produced now than in 1999.

James O'Gara, director of supply reduction at the drug czar's office, said the increase could be attributed in part to a 19 percent expansion of the survey area compared to 2005.

He also argued that it should not detract from the broader achievements of Plan Colombia in reducing violence and putting leftist rebels who profit from the drug trade on the defensive.

"The bad news is that traffickers figured ways to move into smaller plots and quickly replant crops after they've been sprayed," O'Gara said in a telephone interview from Washington.

"But the good news, which is almost universally overlooked, is that these fields, which are regularly sprayed, pruned back, and otherwise brutalized, are far less productive than they traditionally have been."