

# Good U.S. vibes toward Colombia's Uribe are turning

**Colombia's president used to get unmitigated praise in Washington. Now, relations with Democrats have soured and prospects for a free-trade pact are fading.**

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Colombian Ambassador Carolina Barco says the U.S. Congress has made clear the countries' 'changed relationship.'

## **Carolina Barco**

- **Daughter of** former Colombian President Virgilio Barco Vargas
- **Born in** the United States, when her father was studying at MIT
- **Has a BA** in Sociology and Economics from Wellesley College. Master's in city planning from Harvard University and MBA from Madrid's Instituto de Empresas
- **Foreign minister** under President Alvaro Uribe from 2002-2006. Ambassador to Washington since August 2006
- **Married to** Mauricio Botero Caicedo. The couple has three daughters.

## WASHINGTON --

When Carolina Barco, the U.S.-born daughter of a former Colombian president, was unexpectedly summoned to take over the Colombian embassy in Washington a year ago, her job seemed straightforward enough.

Barco, 57, was to shepherd a bilateral free-trade deal through a friendly U.S. Congress and keep the aid pipeline flowing.

That was until Democrats won the November congressional elections. Since then, statements of praise for Colombian President Alvaro Uribe, a stalwart U.S. ally, have turned to reprimands over Colombia's human-rights record. A free-trade agreement with Bogotá is stalled, and Democratic legislators have slashed millions of dollars in military aid.

Observers say the turnaround has been so dramatic that a frustrated Uribe has attacked his congressional critics for not showing his country "respect." He has lashed out at his own foreign-policy team for not pushing the trade deal hard enough.

"It's sort of a collapse, down in Colombia, of Uribe's relationship with the United States," said Myles Frechette, a former U.S. ambassador to Colombia.

"We have to understand there is a new U.S. Congress," Barco recently told The Miami Herald. "The relationship has changed."

Democrats, already skeptical of free trade, have become even more uneasy with new revelations of links between the Uribe government and right-wing paramilitary groups accused of human-rights abuses: 14 Colombian members of Congress -- most of them Uribe supporters -- have been ordered arrested by Colombia's supreme court for alleged ties with paramilitary groups.

Many rights organizations like Human Rights Watch and the AFL-CIO also have argued that the U.S. Congress should reject the Colombia trade deal because of too many unresolved cases of union leaders killed.

Colombian labor-rights groups have documented 2,515 killings of trade unionists since 1986, an average of about 120 a year. Most of those killings are attributed to paramilitary groups.

### **DEMOCRATS' CONCERN**

For a country that was once considered a bipartisan darling of Congress, Uribe suffered an especially humiliating episode last week. On June 29, a day after Colombia signed in Washington the amendments to a free-trade pact that presumably would set it on a path to congressional approval, Democrats put out a statement saying they were prepared to pass Peru and Panama, but not Colombia.

House Speaker Nancy Pelosi, Majority Leader Steny Hoyer and key trade Democrats New York Rep. Charles Rangel and Michigan Rep. Sander Levin cited "widespread concern in Congress about the level of violence in Colombia, the impunity, the lack of investigations and prosecutions, and the role of the paramilitary."

No free-trade deal could pass until there was "concrete evidence of sustained results on the ground in Colombia."

The following day, an infuriated Uribe said that "for our dignity, our democracy," he would not allow the relationship with the United States to be one of "a U.S. master and a Colombian underling."

### **COLOMBIA'S ARGUMENT**

Uribe said U.S. legislators were ignoring his accomplishments and instructed his speech be circulated to Democratic lawmakers in the United States. He scolded his foreign minister, Fernando Araújo, for not reacting soon enough to the Democrats' statement and appointed Sandra Suárez, a former minister, to lobby for the free-trade agreement in Congress.

Ambassador Barco has already brought an unprecedented parade of senior Colombian government officials since November to tell Colombia's side of the story, including Uribe himself several times. She has arranged for union leaders supportive of the trade agreement to make the Washington rounds and often invites rights activists critical of Uribe to embassy briefings.

The Colombians say the paramilitary scandal came to light thanks to Uribe's "peace and justice" process with the paramilitary. They argue that Colombia's pro-market economy is a counterbalance to Venezuela's growing influence in Latin America, and Colombia is now a safer place thanks to Uribe's policies and Plan Colombia, a strategic program developed by Colombia and backed largely with international dollars aimed at combating drug-trafficking, strengthening the economy and democratic institutions, and promoting the peace process in the country's decades-old guerrilla war.

At a recent Senate hearing, New Jersey Democratic Sen. Bob Menendez declared himself a supporter of Plan Colombia but said that after six years and \$5 billion, coca cultivation was not reduced by half as promised, despite aggressive U.S.-funded fumigation to reduce crop production.

"I'm growing skeptical," he said, "as I don't see the results adding up."

Others are busy reshaping Plan Colombia.

Senate Appropriations Committee chairman Patrick Leahy of Vermont is holding up \$55 million in military aid over human-rights concerns.

Last month, the U.S. House proposed cutting the \$600 million-a-year Plan Colombia by 10 percent and diverting \$100 million from military programs to social aid. A similar proposal is up for consideration in the Senate.

### **REPUBLICAN SUPPORT**

The Bush administration and Republicans have attempted to stem the Democratic tide.

Republicans refused to renew special trade preferences for Peru, Colombia, Ecuador and Bolivia for longer than eight months, thus keeping the pressure on Democrats to take up the pending free-trade agreements.

There also is talk that the Bush administration may insist that trade deals must be passed in the order they were signed, meaning the less controversial Panama and South Korea agreements would have to wait until Colombia was approved.

That may not happen soon.

"It doesn't help that everything from coca numbers to all of the military and parapolitics scandals . . . is just piling up," says Adam Isacson, a Colombia analyst with the Center for International Policy, a group critical of Uribe. Colombia could make arrests on every "murder of a union leader" and still face difficulties, Isacson said.