

In Colombia, a Washington Sales Pitch

Bush Administration Leads U.S. Lawmakers on Visit Aimed at Free Trade Pact

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MEDELLIN, Colombia -- The U.S. congressmen were speedily transported in vans with tinted windows, their convoy escorted by policemen on motorcycles who ensured that no car ventured close. When the lawmakers stepped out, guards carrying M-16s watched wearily, whispering into microphones on their sleeves.

What the congressional delegation was told in [Medellin](#), however, is that this city is no longer among the most dangerous in the world. In fact, its recovery has been "nothing short of a revolution," one American official said.

For the six lawmakers, led by the U.S. commerce secretary, the story of Medellin was presented last weekend as part of a larger success story in [Colombia](#). It's one that the Bush administration is vigorously selling in Washington as it tries to prod Democrats, and not a few Republicans, into supporting a free trade pact with President Álvaro Uribe's government, the United States' closest ally in [Latin America](#).

"Everyone has a point of view or a perception about Colombia, but this is too important of a decision to make without being here," [Commerce Secretary Carlos M. Gutierrez](#) said. "This is a total administration effort. The president is totally involved."

In the early months of the Bush administration, the intense focus on a free trade agreement with a single country would have been seen as decidedly unambitious. The objective then was to adopt a plan by the Clinton administration to create a hemisphere-wide, 34-nation trade bloc stretching from [Alaska](#) to [Argentina](#), a pact [President Bush](#) once called a "vital link for prosperity."

Now, fighting hostility to trade in a Congress controlled by Democrats and suspicion in a region where Washington-inspired market orthodoxy has fallen out of favor, the administration is instead lobbying hard for individual pacts with three relatively minor economies in Latin America: [Panama](#), [Peru](#) and Colombia. It is in the last, though, that the administration is being most tenacious -- playing tour guide for delegations of undecided lawmakers who will be ferried here in the coming weeks.

Gutierrez said the administration wants to show American lawmakers on both sides of the aisle that under Uribe, and with billions of dollars in U.S. aid, Colombia has grown safer and more prosperous as its irregular armies have been weakened or dismantled. American officials also privately say Colombia serves as a bulwark against anti-Americanism in neighboring countries, most notably [Venezuela](#).

"I do see that President Uribe has made incredible bounds in moving this country forward," said a member of the delegation, Rep. John Salazar (D-Colo.), who said he had been undecided about a free trade pact.

Rep. Jim McDermott (D-Wash.), who is also undecided, said, "I'm impressed with the things that I've seen."

The reality of Colombia, though, is complicated.

"Of course, the government there and the American Embassy don't say, 'Oh, by the way, there are these problems that are unresolved and are really serious,' " Myles Frechette, a former U.S. ambassador here, said by telephone from Washington. "This is the way you're going to sell, and they don't sell the things that don't look so good."

Those things include a Marxist rebel group that, though weakened, controls swaths of rural Colombia. It also includes a new generation of paramilitary fighters -- steeped in the drug trade and led by commanders responsible for widespread war crimes -- who, by the government's estimates, number as many as 5,000.

Since Uribe took office in 2002, 400 trade union members have been killed, while convictions have been handed down in only 10 of those cases, according to the National Trade Union School, a labor policy group here in Medellin. This year, 25 have been slain, the group said.

To make matters worse, more than 40 members of Colombia's Congress -- virtually all of them close allies of the president -- are under investigation for having ties to right-wing death squads. They include the president's cousin, Mario Uribe, who is being investigated for allegedly conspiring with paramilitary commanders in a land grab.

"It's extremely worrisome -- the record of a government in Colombia that spends a lot of money and effort on self-promotion but not enough on real progress," said Jos  Miguel Vivanco, Americas director for [Human Rights Watch](#), the [New York](#)-based group. "I hope these congressmen don't let themselves be fooled by this dog-and-pony show."

Last weekend, the U.S. congressmen accompanied Uribe on a trip to Nueva Bellavista, an isolated riverside hamlet in the impoverished and predominantly Afro-Colombian state of Choco.

Wearing a blue open-necked shirt and a straw hat, Uribe displayed the considerable charm that has helped give him an approval rating that tops 70 percent.

After Uribe spoke to residents and kissed children, the delegation was shown the school and cinder-block homes that the government has built for residents, many of whom moved here after their homes were destroyed in a fierce firefight between paramilitary fighters and Marxist rebels in 2002. An errant rebel missile fired during the battle landed on a church, killing 119 civilians.

Uribe held one of his trademark town hall meetings, answering questions from residents on everything from electrical service to health care. The Americans were in Choco for barely four hours -- and in Colombia for about 45 -- but the visit made a quick impression on them.

"Just the fact that we were able to come here and go to other places where a few years ago we couldn't go makes us understand that this country is certainly moving in the right direction," Rep. Eliot L. Engel, a [Bronx](#) Democrat who is apprehensive about the trade deal, said after the meeting.

It was just the kind of comment that free trade proponents wanted to hear. While the Bush administration has enough votes to push through a deal in neighboring Peru, on the Colombia pact it has been able to muster, at most, only about 15 Democratic votes in the House, estimated Peter Hakim, president of the Inter-American Dialogue, a Washington policy group. The administration would need the support of an additional 35 or so Democrats to get approval.

Back in Medellin, as the delegation approached a new library built in a barrio reclaimed from drug gangs, Mayor Sergio Fajardo, who speaks near-perfect English, patiently answered questions about the impact of a trade agreement.

"If we are friends, we need our friends to solve problems, not make them bigger," he said. "That's the point."