

# US official urges passage of trade deal

The Miami Herald  
Oct. 22, 2007

NEW YORK --

The Bush administration warned Monday that failure by Congress to adopt a free trade agreement with Colombia would bolster the anti-American campaign of Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez.

Undersecretary of State Nicholas Burns said that refusal by lawmakers to pass the agreement "will embolden someone like Hugo Chavez to think that he can make hay out of that crisis, and it will be a crisis if the free trade agreement does not pass."

Since Democrats took control of Congress last January, it has not approved any free trade agreements that the administration has negotiated. Agreements are pending with three countries in Latin America - Peru, Panama and Colombia - and also with South Korea.

President Chavez, a fierce critic of American economic policies in Latin America, has championed his "Bolivarian Alternative for the Americas," which counts Cuba, Bolivia and Nicaragua as signatories, as an alternative to U.S. free trade pacts.

Burns said Chavez would gain a "public relations benefit" if the agreement is not passed.

"If it doesn't pass, someone like Chavez if not Chavez himself is undoubtedly going to make the argument that the United States doesn't take care of its friends," said Burns, "and we wish not to give that argument to our adversaries in the region."

The U.S. agreement with Peru is expected to win approval in coming weeks, but the other deals are facing greater opposition.

Approval of the agreement with Colombia hinges on Democratic complaints that the government of President Alvaro Uribe is not doing enough to prevent the killing of labor leaders trying to organize unions and to punish officials linked to right-wing paramilitary organizations.

Burns called the agreement a "fundamental base of our relations in Latin America," and said that human rights issues should not stand in the way of cooperation between the countries.

"We understand that this is a major challenge for Colombia, the challenge of human rights," said Burns. "But the question is, because there are human rights problems in Colombia, does that mean that you turn away from the government?"

Burns made the comments to reporters after giving a talk in New York hosted by the Council of the Americas, a U.S. business organization that supports free trade.

