A worthy ally

by The San Diego Union-Tribune

Colombia's President Alvaro Uribe got a rude shock on his recent visit to Washington. The Democrats who now run Congress treated Uribe, the staunchest U.S. ally in Latin America, like a scofflaw on probation. That's a red flag warning that congressional support for Plan Colombia - the strategic U.S.-Colombian alliance to fight drug trafficking, terrorism and a communist guerrilla insurgency in Latin America's oldest democracy - may be flagging.

We can scarcely imagine a less deserved message to send Uribe and his government, and what few other friends Washington has these days in Latin America.

House Speaker Nancy Pelosi and other Democratic congressional leaders reportedly rebuked Uribe for his government's alleged human rights violations, charges heavily publicized by left-leaning human rights activists in Washington. Specifically, Democrats are upset by reports of links between rightist paramilitary groups and certain members of Uribe's administration, past and present.

These allegations are, in fact, an old story in Colombia and largely discounted by the vast majority of Colombians. Public opinion polling in Colombia puts Uribe's current approval rating at 80 percent. It's no secret why. Uribe's tough law and order policies have dramatically reduced Colombia's chronic violence, much of it driven by the illicit cocaine trade. Foreign investment is returning thanks to improved security and Uribe's economic reforms. The resulting growing economy is putting Colombians back to work.

Uribe has accomplished this remarkable turnaround completely within the democratic framework. He's won two vigorously contested presidential elections by resounding margins while fully respecting Colombia's free press and adhering to other democratic norms.

Charges that Uribe's government is collaborating with right-wing paramilitary groups are belied by the facts. Uribe's demobilization and conditional amnesty programs have disarmed 30,000 members of the paramilitary right and put 60 of its leaders in jail.

Meanwhile, Uribe and his government are cooperating fully with U.S. officials to combat narco-trafficking, a clear danger to Colombia and the United States. An estimated 80 percent of all cocaine entering the United States originates in Colombia. Without the active participation of the Colombian government, there would be no effective way to attack the most serious drug-trafficking threat to the United States at its source.

Despite all this, Pelosi and company apparently see no harm in moves that can only weaken the U.S.-Colombia alliance. Democrats have put the Bush administration's proposed free-trade agreement with

Colombia on hold. Failing to approve it would inflict serious damage on Colombia's economy. Democrats may also reduce the proposed $700 million in U.S. military and economic assistance this year to Colombia. This, too, would be a serious mistake. In the 1990s, Colombia tottered on the brink of becoming a failed, narco-state. Plan Colombia, devised and approved by the Clinton administration with bipartisan congressional support, helped prevent disaster. Now is no time to weaken a strategy that's working, or assail a democratic president who is doing everything that could reasonably be asked of him.

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