

President Bush Signs Letter To Send The United States-Colombia Free Trade Agreement Implementing Legislation To Congress

Agreement Will Advance National Security And Open Markets For U.S. Workers

Today, President Bush signed a letter to send Congress legislation that implements the United States' free trade agreement with Colombia. The U.S.-Colombia free trade agreement will advance America's national security interests in a critical region, strengthen a courageous ally in our hemisphere, and help boost our economy at a vital time. During the 16 months since the Colombia free trade agreement was signed, the Administration has worked closely with Congress to seek a bipartisan path for considering the agreement. President Bush and his Administration have worked with Congressional leaders to set a schedule for the consideration of the Colombia free trade agreement. The need for this trade agreement is too urgent and the stakes for national security are too high to allow this year to end without a vote. Congress needs to move forward with the Colombia free trade agreement and approve it as quickly as possible.

- **The Colombia free trade agreement will advance our national security by strengthening a key democratic ally and sending a clear message to the region.** The agreement with Colombia will bring increased economic opportunity to the people of Colombia through sustained economic growth, new employment opportunities, and increased investment. This trade agreement will reinforce democracy by helping in the fight against corruption, and encouraging transparency, accountability, and the rule of law. Approval of the agreement will bolster one of our closest friends in the hemisphere and rebut those in Latin America who say the United States cannot be trusted to keep its word.
- **The U.S.-Colombia free trade agreement will level the playing field for U.S. businesses and workers.** Over 90 percent of imports from Colombia now enter our country duty-free, but U.S. industrial and consumer exports to Colombia face tariffs up to 35 percent, and many U.S. agricultural products face much higher tariffs. Once implemented, the agreement will eliminate tariffs on more than 80 percent of American exports of industrial and consumer goods immediately and 100 percent of American exports over time. This agreement will provide U.S. companies and farmers that export to Colombia with duty-free access to this large and growing market.

Approving This Free Trade Agreement Is The Best Way To Show Our Support For Colombia

President Uribe and the Colombian government have directly addressed concerns over the situation in Colombia that have been raised by some Members of Congress. He has:

- Demobilized tens of thousands of members of paramilitary groups;
- Established an independent prosecutors unit and created a special program that protects labor activists; and
- Revised the free trade agreement to include some of the most rigorous labor and environmental protections of any trade agreement in history.

Under the leadership of President Uribe, Colombia has been a strong and capable partner in fighting drugs, crime, and terror. Since 2002, kidnappings, terrorist attacks, and murders have all dropped substantially. With Colombia's commitment, our rule of law and counterdrug assistance will continue to help make a difference.

Colombia has vastly expanded its police presence as part of an effort to bring security and stability to all of its territory. Colombia has established a police presence in each of its 1,099 municipalities, which has secured 187 primary and secondary roads throughout the country, freeing Colombians to use these roads. As a result, traffic along these roads has doubled since 2002, and commerce is flowing between areas that were once virtually cut off due to violence.

Colombia's economy is rebounding, and its citizens' lives are improving. Since 2002, the poverty rate has decreased by almost 20 percent, and unemployment is at its lowest level in a decade. Roads are now open, displaced farmers are returning to their lands, and economic growth in Colombia topped seven percent in 2007.

The Colombian government is continuing to battle narcotics trafficking, which provides the funding base for illegal armed groups. These efforts took 500 metric tons of cocaine off the market in 2006 alone, depriving terrorist groups of hundreds of millions in funds to buy arms and mount attacks. In addition, the Colombian government has extradited more than 600 narcotics traffickers and terrorists to the United States over the past five years.

The United States has been a vital partner in Colombia's efforts through Plan Colombia, an effort launched by the Clinton Administration that has enjoyed strong bipartisan support. The more than \$5 billion the United States has provided to the program has helped to defeat narco terrorists and reduce violence and crime. It is also providing developmental and humanitarian assistance. This partnership can only succeed in the long run, however, if Colombia can create jobs for the tens of thousands of combatants who have demobilized and the hundreds of thousands of citizens who have been displaced by armed groups. The free trade agreement can help Colombia create those jobs and bolster continued success.

Colombia has laid the foundation for bringing government services to areas retaken from illegal armed groups and increased investment in alternative development, human rights protection, and social services. Mayors have returned to their towns, and public school enrollment has increased to 92 percent. The child mortality rate has decreased dramatically thanks to economic growth and increasing wages that enable more people to provide adequate health and nutritional care for their children. The number of tourists visiting Colombia has more than doubled in the last five years.

The Administration Is Committed To Helping Workers Affected By Global Trade Adapt To The Changing Economy, Learn New Skills, And Find New Jobs

President Bush is committed to working with Congress to improve and reauthorize Trade Adjustment Assistance (TAA) to help trade-affected workers obtain the training they need to transition into a new career. The President believes the Federal Government has a responsibility to help workers displaced by trade. A strong TAA program plays an important role in helping workers obtain the skills and assistance they need to transition to good jobs.