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A warning to Harper on the dangerous reality of Colombia; U.S. Democrats stalling trade link like the one Canada aims to negotiate

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Last week, as Prime Minister Stephen Harper stood next to Colombian President Alvaro Uribe in Bogota to promote the beginning of negotiations for a Free Trade Agreement, the news came as a shocker for audiences in both countries.

For one thing, Harper's initiative to travel to Latin America was already an unprecedented endeavour for a Canadian prime minister (he was the first ever to visit Colombia on an official trip).

Adding to that visit the beginning of a solid commercial relationship with Colombia was unexpected for Canadians, who know little about the South American country and the depth of its relationship with Canada.

Uribe's audience took the announcement as good news.

For a few months now, Colombians have seen how the signing of an FTA with the United States that was supposed to be ratified by the U.S. Congress this year has become a bitter public battle between Democrat lawmakers in Washington and Uribe himself.

Democrats, following the lead of House leader Nancy Pelosi -- and of other Democrat stars, like former vice-president Al Gore and presidential candidate Barack Obama -- have blocked the bilateral treaty alleging Uribe's poor record on human rights.

President George W. Bush, who has secured a loyal ally in Uribe, has gone out of his way to defend the treaty, managing only to make Uribe's case less convincing for the Democrats.

So Harper's announcement in the country's capital city was seen in Colombia as a break from the sour dispute, and a chance for Uribe to deliver on his free trade promises.

Trade main focus

Harper's trip to the south was much about trade.

The prime minister will engage in free trade negotiations not only with Colombia but also with Peru and 15 Caribbean countries as well.

But perhaps Canadians should pay close attention to the commitment with Colombia and the reasons why a similar agreement is being boycotted in Washington.

Colombia's current political situation is extremely delicate, and the Democrats' two main points of objection against Uribe's record on human rights are verifiable.

Unsafe in Colombia

One is that Colombia is amongst the most unsafe places in the world for union leaders, who are seen by illegal, radical right-wing armed groups as friendly to left-leaning guerrillas.

Uribe first became president in 2002. He was then re-elected after modifying the country's constitution in order to be able to serve for another four years.

The core of his policies are related to security, and fighting off the left-wing Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) that since their birth 40 years ago have evolved into a massive criminal organization that feeds off kidnapping and drug dealing.

Until recently, Uribe's efforts to fight the FARC were seen as somewhat successful. Kidnappings of civilians decreased dramatically since he took office and many roads across the country were deemed safe after a period of terror on Colombia's highways. Most of the president's impressive popularity numbers are explained on the security factor and a sound, recovering economy.

A second point against Uribe in Washington is that close political allies, including several lawmakers, are being investigated for their proximity to right-wing paramilitary armies.

Specifically, another focus of Uribe's mandate has been a peace negotiation with a federation of these paramilitary armies known as the United Self-Defence Forces of Colombia (AUC) that started in 2003. AUC members are to blame for gruesome massacres, and the disappearance of more than 10,000 people since the late 1990s.

Paramilitaries and lawmakers

Most of its group leaders are now in jail and are confessing to their crimes publicly in order to be eligible for controversial sentences of less than eight years. Some of them are revealing their ties with army members and politicians.

Uribe remains popular at home, but the international community sees the current political turmoil as a very negative sign.

Earlier this month, the "para-politics" scandal reached another climax with the imprisonment of Jorge Noguera, the former head of Colombia's intelligence service, for his alleged collaboration with the AUC. Noguera was appointed by Uribe to his post.

The Supreme Court also opened an investigation into Mario Uribe, the president's first cousin and a member of Congress, for his alleged proximity with the same groups.

On Jul. 16, Harper told reporters in Bogota he believes an FTA will help the country reach a better democracy, and declared: "We're not going to say, 'Fix all your social and political and human rights problems and only then will we engage in trade relations.' That's ridiculous. Colombia is a country that has made tremendous progress on shared values. We want to encourage them on those efforts."

Maybe Harper is right. But right or wrong, the U.S. Congress is turning its back on Uribe for a reason. This, the Canadian government should not take lightly.

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