

Bush, Uribe to Meet on Drug, Rebel War Aid

by Laura Bonilla

23 March 2004

Agence France Presse

White House advisors asked Congress on Monday to double US military staff in Colombia on the eve of Colombian President Alvaro Uribe's meeting with President George W. Bush, an official said.

The State Department official also said on condition of anonymity that Washington expects to extend Plan Colombia, a 2.6-billion-dollar anti-drug, anti-rebel agreement due to expire in 2005.

Bush is expected to repay his major Latin American ally with a free-trade deal and extra military aid for Colombia's drug and rebels fight as part of Plan Colombia, passed by Congress in mid-2000 and due to end in 2005.

The State and Defense departments have already held talks with Congress.

The Bush administration wants to boost the number of soldiers Congress allows to operate in Colombia from 400 to 800 and to raise from 400 to 600 the number of civilian contractors, the official said.

"The increase of military and US civilian contractors is needed to stay in the current high tempo of operations in progress," the official told AFP.

"We call Colombia a key friend and partner in the hemisphere and a strategic regional ally in the fight against terrorism and drug dealing."

The move requires approval in Congress, where some lawmakers are skeptical.

"President Bush's policy in Colombia is a miserable failure, and risking the lives of more US soldiers and wasting millions more taxpayer dollars on private military contractors will only make that policy worse, said lawmaker Jan **Schakowsky** in a statement.

"The Colombian people deserve more from the Bush administration than a policy that will escalate violence and do nothing to promote a peaceful resolution to the civil war that has ravaged that nation for more than 40 years," said the Democratic lawmaker who has visited Colombia several times.

Uribe on Monday began a four-day visit to Washington with a meeting with Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld.

On Tuesday morning Uribe is hosted by Bush at the White House.

The US president "looks forward to discussing with President Uribe the many ways we can work together to further strengthen our partnership and achieve our common goals with respect to security, trade and justice," the White House said in a statement Monday.

"As close partners in the war on terrorism, the two leaders will also review efforts to defeat transnational narco-terrorist groups in the Americas," it said.

Through Plan Colombia, Washington has granted Bogota 2.6 billion dollars of aid in the past three years, providing mainly military equipment and assistance.

According to Michael Shifter of the Inter-American Dialogue, a Washington think-tank, the United States will repay Colombia because "Uribe has been faithful to all US policies."

However, he warned that increased US military presence "will provoke much discussion in Congress."

"That will force the administration to show greater clarity on what exactly Colombia wants to achieve and how much time is required."

Washington is also to announce the start of formal negotiations toward a bilateral free trade treaty, according to Colombia's ambassador to Washington Luis Alberto Moreno.

The two nations will set a date for the first round of negotiations, the ambassador said.

Official Colombian sources said talks will take 10 to 11 months and that the accord could be in force by 2006.

Later Tuesday, Uribe is scheduled to meet US Trade Representative Robert Zoellick, Commerce Secretary Don Evans, White House drug czar John Walters and Secretary of State Colin Powell.

The Colombian president will stay in Washington until Thursday.