

Bush aims to extend anti-drugs funding for Colombia

By Andy Webb-Vidal in Cartagena, Colombia

Published: November 22 2004 22:03 | Last updated: November 23 2004 01:39

US President George W. Bush has backed an extension next year of Plan Colombia, the US military and counter-narcotics aid programme, during a lightning summit on Monday with his Colombian counterpart, Alvaro Uribe.

Mr Bush said he would work to ensure Congress approved continued assistance to Colombia.

“I will ask our Congress to renew this aid,” he told Mr Uribe.

“We are with you in this fight,” Mr Bush said. “The government of President Uribe has not let us down.”

Mr Uribe said: “We trust the US and President Bush will continue with the help until Colombia will be free of terrorism and the drugs plague. We cannot leave the job until we have finished.”

Mr Bush arrived in Cartagena, a former Spanish colonial city on Colombia's Caribbean coast, shortly before midday amid the country's biggest security operation for a foreign dignitary.

About 15,000 army troops and security personnel were deployed to guard against any threat to security. Black Hawk helicopters and fighter jets patrolled the skies above the city while two submarines monitored the usually bustling but now silent sea-port.

The summit, during Mr Bush's first foreign trip since his re-election, has given rise to suggestions that greater attention to Latin America might feature in US foreign policy during the president's second term in office, despite continued instability in Iraq and elsewhere in the Arab world. Since Mr Bush was first elected in 2000, Latin America has undergone an important political shift, with several countries electing leftwing governments averse to US policy, particularly on trade.

Mr Uribe is Mr Bush's closest ally in the region, sharing the US leader's focus on a “war on terror”. Under Plan Colombia, the country has become the largest recipient of US military aid outside the Middle East. However, the programme, which has pumped about \$3bn (€2.3bn, £1.6bn) into Colombia in the past five years, expires next year, and Colombia is hoping that the assistance will continue. Mr Uribe's term runs until 2006 and he may be re-elected.

Since coming to power two years ago, the popular Mr Uribe has pursued a tough line against rebels from the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (Farc), Latin America's oldest and most ferocious guerrilla army. Kidnappings for ransom and terrorist incidents have fallen significantly in number under his tough leadership, while the police and army have made inroads into the drugs industry. Colombia produces most of the world's cocaine.

However, most analysts agree that the Uribe government has little chance of finishing off the Farc or forcing the guerrillas to the negotiating table unless US military aid continues.

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