

Posted on Tue, Dec. 04, 2007

Bush seeks support for Colombia

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WASHINGTON --

President Bush Monday praised the defeat of Venezuelan President Hugo Chávez's proposals for constitutional and declined any recognition of his outspoken foe for accepting the loss, as other governments have done.

"The Venezuelans rejected one-man rule and voted for democracy," Bush said at a news conference, when asked about the rejection of Chávez's proposals during a vote Sunday.

Other governments, including Spain and Cuba, have praised Chávez for accepting defeat, and the Venezuelan government has boasted that the results show its electoral authority, long accused of bias by the president's critics, remains a neutral body.

Bush did not dwell on Venezuela and quickly moved on to a free trade agreement with Colombia held up in the U.S. Congress because of Democrats' concerns over the human and labor rights record of conservative President Alvaro Uribe.

"The United States can make a difference in South America, in terms of Venezuela's influence. Here's how" he said. "Congress can pass a free trade agreement with Colombia."

"If the Congress does not pass the free trade agreement with Colombia," Bush added, "it will be a destabilizing moment."

Quoting Canada's conservative Prime Minister Stephen Harper, Bush said the "biggest fear in South America is not the leader of Venezuela. The biggest fear for stability is if the United States Congress rejects the free trade agreement with Colombia."

He added that failure to pass the Colombia agreement would be an "insult to a friend" and a "contradictory message" to a "very strong leader who is working hard to deal with some very difficult problems" -- a reference to Colombia's long conflict with leftist guerrilla groups.

The Venezuelan embassy in Washington issued a statement criticizing recent statements by State Department and White House officials that called into question the transparency and effectiveness of its electoral system, while accepting the result it favored.

"These statements serve as evidence of a clear double standard in which Venezuela's electoral system is judged not on how effectively it serves voters, but rather on whether the final results it emits agree with U.S. policy," the embassy said.