

## White House Wants More U.S. Personnel in Colombia

By Vicki Allen

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The Bush administration wants Congress to let it send more military and civilian personnel to Colombia to help it "deal a decisive blow against narco-terrorists" in the decades-long conflict there, the top U.S. general for the region said on Wednesday.

Gen. James Hill, chief of the U.S. Southern Command, said the administration has asked Congress to raise the cap that lawmakers imposed on U.S. personnel in Colombia to 800 military personnel and 600 civilian contractors from the current 400 limit on each. He said the ban on U.S. involvement in combat operations would be kept.

"It is vitally important that we sustain Plan Colombia's progress," Hill said at a House of Representatives Armed Services Committee hearing, where he praised Colombian President Alvaro Uribe for turning the tide in the 40-year conflict against rebel insurgents that has been fueled by the illegal drug trade.

Uribe, in Washington this week, met with President George W. Bush on Tuesday and was meeting lawmakers on Capitol Hill.

"As a result of this substantial progress, a window of opportunity has opened in which the Colombian government has the potential to deal a decisive blow to the narco-terrorists," Hill said.

More U.S. personnel are needed to help train and plan for the Colombian government's expanded, more aggressive military operations, he said.

Congress, worried that the United States could be sucked into the bloody conflict, put tight limits on the number of U.S. personnel who could be in Colombia at any particular time. The six-year operation was intended to contain the violence and trafficking in drugs that largely wind up on U.S. streets.

Four years into it, Hill said the personnel limit will hurt the mission just as it "is beginning to pay huge dividends."

But a number of lawmakers remained skeptical, saying Colombia has not done enough to fight its own conflict.

"They ought to be digging deeper into their own pockets and they ought to be asking their own kids to serve," said Rep. Gene Taylor, a Mississippi Democrat.

Taylor complained that while Colombia passed a one-time tax to help finance its military, it has not approved long-term revenue measures. He also said Colombia has not reformed draft laws that keep wealthier, educated people out of the service.

After the hearing, Hill said he would like to have the limit raised immediately, and that

the administration was looking for a bill moving through Congress quickly as a legislative vehicle for the request.