

Video links Uribe to paramilitaries

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Colombia's President Álvaro Uribe has been pictured shaking hands with a paramilitary commander wanted for involvement in a massacre during the country's decades of civil strife.

The release of footage of a 2001 meeting between the two men comes ahead of crucial debates on US aid to the country in Washington this week.

Until now, Mr Uribe had been personally unscathed by the so-called "para-politics" scandal, and no evidence had been published associating him with the outlaw militias.

During his five years as president, Mr Uribe has adamantly denied any links with the country's rightwing paramilitary groups, who have been responsible for some of the country's worst human rights abuses.

"I never knew the paramilitaries, I have never been their friend, I have never had contact with them," said Mr Uribe during a live televised press conference in April.

According to local human rights activists, the video – first made public by the Miami Herald's Spanish-language paper, *el Nuevo Herald* – shows Mr Uribe greeting a known militia boss, Fremio Sánchez Carreño, at a small meeting during his first presidential election campaign in October 2001.

The video evidence is an embarrassing blow to Mr Uribe as he seeks to secure a beleaguered free-trade agreement (FTA) with the US.

Democratic critics in the US Congress have reiterated their concerns over an avalanche of allegations surfacing during recent months that suggest Colombia's lawmakers actively collaborated with the paramilitaries, who have since nearly all demobilised.

Militia leader Mr Sanchez, alias "Comandante Esteban", was arrested in 2001 and released four years later, and is now a fugitive.

Last week, Colombian authorities offered a \$5,000 reward for information leading to his arrest.

A press statement posted on the presidential website bluntly stated that "the president does not make comments or give explanations about each of every million of photos and hours of video taken", and asked the media to "abstain from making malevolent insinuations".

Adam Isacson, Colombia analyst at the Centre for International Policy in Washington, believes the latest incident will not greatly affect how Colombia is perceived in the US Congress but suggests it will do Mr Uribe no favours as US lawmakers debate a foreign aid bill, which includes the amount of US aid being sent to Colombia, later this week.

"It's just one more thing on the list and gives slightly more ammunition to Democrats critical of President Uribe," said Mr Isacson.

However, the recent revelation is unlikely to affect Mr Uribe's popularity at home, where he currently enjoys a 75 per cent approval rating.

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