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**EDITORIAL**

# **Courting ill will**

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GIVEN THE CURRENT POLITICAL climate in Washington, President Bush doesn't have much capital to spend on the two issues perhaps most important to Latin America: agricultural subsidies and immigration. But by restoring money to help Latin American nations fight drugs and corruption, he can show allies at home and abroad that he remains committed to good hemispheric relations.

For the last three years, the Bush administration has denied aid to countries that have joined the International Criminal Court but refuse to sign a bilateral agreement with the United States granting immunity to U.S. personnel. Several nations in Latin America, including Argentina, Brazil, Costa Rica and Mexico, have refused to sign the bilateral agreement.

Its necessity is dubious. The International Criminal Court, based in The Hague, will not prosecute an individual where there is an able and willing national justice system in place. Further, under the Status of Forces Agreement, which the U.S. signs with any nation in which it has forces stationed, American troops are immune from prosecution in foreign courts for any acts committed in the course of their military duties.

In Latin America, moreover, the administration's insistence on the bilateral agreement is especially counterproductive. U.S. military forces provide training to help many Latin American nations combat drug traffickers and other criminals. Many U.S. civic organizations, meanwhile, offer anti-corruption programs, AIDS education and seminars on judicial reform.

Now those programs are in jeopardy. Ecuador, for example, which is host to one of the largest American military bases on the continent, has lost \$15 million in the last two years, and it stands to lose an additional \$7 million this year for refusing to sign the agreement. Peru has lost about \$4 million, part of which was used to support its fight against drug dealers.

Bush can put an end to this policy, which is as harmful to U.S. interests as it is humiliating to Latin nations, by simply waiving the requirement that these nations sign the bilateral agreement as a condition of receiving their aid. The cost in dollars would be small, but the payoff in political capital would be immeasurable.