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COLOMBIA-U.S.

## Free trade good for both nations

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BOGOTA -- A deal on the Colombia-U.S. Free Trade Agreement is teetering under fire from Democrats and labor unions claiming that various scandals mean Colombia does not deserve it -- but an entire people must not be punished when they could be saved by the FTA.

The original deadline for the Panama, Peru and Colombia deals was March 31. But U.S. House Ways and Means Committee leaders have said: "We will continue to pursue agreement on these issues in the coming days because reestablishing a bipartisan foundation on trade policy is more critical than meeting a procedural deadline."

Some representatives want higher labor and environmental standards to be included in these FTAs. This usually reflects protectionist strategies -- it does not mean they care about workers or the environment. If these conditions sink the agreement, then Colombians would be abandoned by the country that is supposed to be their greatest ally.

In the current decade, Latin America has seen the rise of several strongly anti-American regimes. Venezuela's president Hugo Chávez has endeavored to erode American alliances all over the world and he pressed Andean countries not to sign the FTA. Colombia resisted and remained a loyal ally of the United States. Chávez left the Andean Pact in retaliation.

### Friends of the U.S.

Colombians have paid a significant toll in human lives and economic efforts to pursue common goals with the United States. The failure of the FTA would create deep disappointment and would pave the way for radical local anti-U.S. politicians to gain the respect they have so far lacked, in a country where people in general are proud of its close friendship and massive trade with the United States. This would also make a fool of leaders who have promoted and defended a good relationship between Colombia and the United States, as well as those who defend free trade, free markets and democratic institutions against the authoritarian, socialist alternative in fashion. Colombia would be served on a silver platter to the "Chavista" project.

The AFL-CIO has common cause with the Colombian left and some Democrats on the issue of murders of union members in Colombia. Others want the deal thrown out in the wake of the recent "para-politics" affair, a scandal that has caused several congress

members and a former intelligence chief to be imprisoned and face trial for their links with paramilitary death squads.

Defenders of the FTA do not deny the cruel history of anti-union violence in Colombia. We do not minimize the importance of the "para-politics" scandal. We just think an entire country and a whole people must not be punished for the crimes of a few.

Colombians must not be denied the benefits of free trade, higher opportunities, open markets, higher competition, lower prices for consumers and a greater interaction with the world -- just because of a few criminals whose agenda has nothing to do with free trade. On the contrary, the actions of those criminals have aimed to consolidate a worse-than-feudal state of affairs in the areas they control, based on the power of violence and land ownership: They are totally opposed to the spirit of free trade, open markets and modernization.

In fact, the "para-politics" scandal only shows that Colombia is on its way to overcoming a legacy of violence and gangsterism that has tainted politics in recent decades. The Supreme Court has jailed eight Congress members, along with a former intelligence chief (freed at the moment), while awaiting trial.

This is hardly a picture of a country ruled by paramilitary mafias; it is the picture of a country where democratic institutions, not least the news media, are fighting back against organized crime, where fundamental elements of the rule of law are starting to work, even if this hurts powerful people.

### **This isn't charity**

There is every reason to demand basic levels of decency in employment law, but criminal violence against union members is no good reason to reject a trade deal that would give cheaper goods to the poor and expose the economy to stronger international oversight.

Yet the FTA is not an act of charity toward Colombia. It is in the interest of the United States to bolster a free economy, to enrich the poor, to strengthen the political and economic war on drugs and corruption and to slow the corrosive spread of authoritarian socialism across the region.

For all these reasons, Democrats should welcome the Colombia-U.S. trade deal. It's a great chance to fight poverty and to empower a nation that has already suffered enough.

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