

CELAM-TRADE

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Latin American bishops caution against effects of free trade pacts

BOGOTA, Colombia (CNS) -- Citing possible harmful effects on the poor, Latin American bishops pledged to help grass-roots groups have an effective voice in free trade agreements being promoted in the Western Hemisphere.

As currently structured, free trade agreements tend to favor multinational companies, the economic elites in Latin America and the industrialized countries, said a statement by the Department of Justice and Solidarity of the Latin American bishops' council.

Landless rural farmworkers, small businessmen, women, youths, the elderly and the handicapped often lose out under such agreements, said the document.

The four-page statement was written after an Aug. 10-13 meeting in Sao Paulo, Brazil, between Latin American bishops and economic and trade officials of several governments. It was organized by the bishops' council, known by its Spanish acronym as CELAM. The statement was made public Sept. 8 at CELAM headquarters in Bogota.

The United States has been promoting free trade agreements similar to the North American Free Trade Agreement, which in 1994 implemented a free trade zone in the United States, Mexico and Canada.

The Latin American bishops' criticisms add to a string of concerns about free trade agreements voiced by church leaders in the Americas.

The bishops' statement said that free trade agreements go beyond influencing economic life in Latin America. They also influence cultural identity, agriculture, copyrights and patents, the environment, labor laws and the lives of the poor.

"The current economic model in our region -- which tends to concentrate economic, political and social power in the hands of a few -- has notably put the brakes on the consolidation of integral and sustainable human development," it said.

Free trade agreements must include "sufficient financial resources that permit Latin American and Caribbean countries to substantially improve the quality of life of their inhabitants as well as invest in their commercial possibilities," said the statement.

It said that governments are engaging in trade negotiations without adequate information being made available to the public so that there can be "a responsible participation by citizens." Ample public discussions are needed prior to ratification of such treaties, it said.

The bishops "are committed to promoting a broad process of participation by citizens which permit persons and communities to become informed, deliberate, analyze cost and benefits,

develop proposals" and present them to government officials, it said.

"We reaffirm our evangelical option for the poor and our commitment to continue accompanying the struggle for survival of social, farmworker and indigenous movements in the persistent task of building a society that is just and has common cause," it said.

The statement favored the concept of increased international trade as a way of further integrating the region's countries.

It supported using the World Trade Organization as a forum for discussing issues related to overcoming the trade disadvantages of underdeveloped countries in relation to industrialized ones.

Similar criticisms to those of CELAM were aired in July in a joint statement by bishops from the United States and Central America. In 2003 the Mexican bishops' social action commission criticized the North American pact and said that 3 million Mexican small farmers and farmworkers are worse off because of it.

The United States, Nicaragua, Honduras, Guatemala, El Salvador and Costa Rica have signed a free trade agreement, but the legislatures of each country have yet to ratify it. The United States also is promoting bilateral treaties with several countries and an overall treaty for the hemisphere.

The U.S. government maintains that such treaties promote economic and political stability.

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