

Jewish Humanitarian Organization Opposes CAFTA

NEW YORK, June 23 -- The board of directors of American Jewish World Service on June 12 voted its opposition to the Central American Free Trade Agreement (CAFTA), calling it a "disaster" for the poorest of Central America's poor.

"CAFTA would be nothing less than a disaster for Central America's most vulnerable and impoverished citizens. Every local partner we work with in the region opposes it - without exception," said Ruth Messinger, AJWS board president and executive director of the agreement, which would create a free trade area between the United States and Costa Rica, the Dominican Republic, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras and Nicaragua.

While acknowledging that CAFTA could possibly bring some economic benefits, the board through its resolution expressed its deep concern that the agreement as written would benefit a relative few at the expense of the poorest of the poor.

"The board recognizes that with some commonsense and compassionate modifications, CAFTA could benefit the region far more equitably than it currently would," said Don Abramson, co-chair of the board's Advocacy Committee. "But unless the United States Senate demands these changes when it debates CAFTA ratification this summer, AJWS will continue to oppose this unjust and destructive agreement," he added.

Under CAFTA, access to lifesaving medicines could conceivably be curtailed through CAFTA's failure to conform to other international agreements that give nations the right to produce or import generic versions of drugs that treat epidemics such as HIV/AIDS. This means that pharmaceutical companies could obstruct legitimate public health efforts in CAFTA member countries with lengthy battles over patent rights, preventing the flow of affordable medicine to those who need it the most.

CAFTA also gives a free pass to the region's famously lax enforcement of labor laws. Though they are more or less equitable on paper, they are not so in practice; workers rarely enjoy the protections supposedly afforded them by law. But even if a member country decides to strengthen worker protections, foreign companies operating under CAFTA could challenge them in court as "anti-competitive." Laws traditionally eyed as anti-competitive under other free trade agreements include the minimum wage, health care, and the right to unionize.

CAFTA might also cause Central American markets to be flooded with heavily subsidized agricultural products from the United States, forcing small farmers out of work and deeper into poverty, as NAFTA has already done in Mexico.

"We have no reason to believe that the same thing would not happen under CAFTA in its current form," said Messinger.

This is the third trade resolution taken by the AJWS Board of Directors.

Previous resolutions include supporting fair trade coffee and United States agricultural subsidy reform.

American Jewish World Service supports 200 development projects in 40 countries and provides emergency assistance when disasters strike. Whether through its work on women's empowerment in Afghanistan, income-generation programs in Peru, HIV/AIDS prevention in South Africa, or Jewish community development in Ukraine, AJWS works to alleviate poverty, hunger and disease regardless of race, religion or nationality.

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