

Colombian TV actors take to streets to protest proposed U.S. trade pact

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BOGOTA, Colombia - Hundreds of Colombian television actors and workers marched through the streets Monday to protest a proposed free trade deal with the United States that they claim could hurt the local TV industry.

The final round of negotiations for the free trade agreement between the United States, Colombia, Peru and Ecuador began Monday in Washington and is expected to be signed next month. It would break down trade barriers in agriculture but also soften a Colombian law requiring 70 percent of prime-time TV shows be produced in Colombia.

"Our culture will not be negotiated," chanted the protesters, many wearing designer sunglasses, as they strode through downtown streets trailed by a crowd of autograph-seeking fans.

Riot police watched and said they did not fear violence like that started by black-masked anarchists in Argentina during the Summit of the Americas earlier this month.

"I'm simply against the free trade deal," said soap-opera actress Marlen Romana. "It will take a lot of opportunities away from us, the artists of Colombia."

Colombia's Trade Ministry said last week a free trade deal would not immediately change the ratio of national to foreign programming, but acknowledged that eventually the law will be modified.

TV star Victor Cifuentes said the trade deal would represent "a tomb" for Colombia's television industry. "Not only would we lose our cultural identity, but we would also bury years of work, talent and efforts."

Nicole Alarcon, 29, watching the TV stars walk by, disagreed, saying Colombian culture is no longer represented on local television.

"What I see on Colombian TV is not our culture, it's our trash," she said. "It's all U.S. knockoffs."

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