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Ecuador Police Break Up U.S. Protest

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Police used tear gas Thursday to disperse about 2,000 demonstrators after they burned an American flag in front of the government palace to protest a free trade pact with the United States.

No serious injuries or arrests were immediately reported. The protesters included students and members of left-leaning political groups.

President Bush last week notified the U.S. Congress of his plan to sign a free trade agreement with Peru, after the two nations wrapped up negotiations in December.

The deal was reached following stalled discussions with Ecuador and Colombia in what had been expected to be a regional agreement linking all three countries with the United States.

Ecuadorean President Alfredo Palacio plans to meet with his Colombian counterpart, Alvaro Uribe, in Bogota on Jan. 16 to agree on a joint negotiating position.

"The president and everyone involved will have to be criminally tried for this crime" if the trade agreement is signed, Rene Vargas, one of the protesters, told Channel 4 television.

Ecuador's Trade Minister Jorge Illingworth said Thursday that Ecuador hopes to reach an agreement with Colombia to present a united front when negotiating intellectual property rights and agriculture - the main sticking points in the agreement.

He expressed optimism about completing trade talks with the United States in February.

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