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## **Four-way trade talks encounter discord Hesitancy in negotiating room - and hostility outside**

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American optimism about a free-trade agreement with three Andean countries met some hesitance in the negotiating room at Tucson Convention Center and outright hostility on the street as the talks opened Tuesday.

The United States is eager to complete a treaty with Peru, Ecuador and Colombia that would broaden the nations' trade relationships, said Regina Vargo, assistant U.S. trade representative for the Americas.

"I think their interest is in solidifying the market openings they currently have in the U.S.," she said during a meeting with the Arizona Daily Star editorial board. "For our part, we would like to help them cement their democracies ... and increase their opportunities for prosperity."

Rep. Jim Kolbe, R-Ariz., in a speech to the delegates at their opening luncheon, said these negotiations have high stakes.

"There can be no doubt that Latin America is disillusioned with democracy's slow pace at producing prosperity," he said in prepared comments.

"For the United States, negotiation of a free-trade partnership with the Andean countries is a clear expression of our commitment to the region. A free-trade agreement is about more than trade. It's about development. It's about opportunity. It's about hope," Kolbe said.

Other representatives expressed some hesitance about the ultimate fairness of the negotiations, even though they remained generally optimistic about the agreement.

"We'd like to think that these are actually negotiations. But, in some stages, it feels not like a negotiation but an invitation to adhere to certain requirements," said George Schofield, president of Peru's National Society of Industries, which represents the manufacturing and mining sectors.

Standing beside Schofield as he spoke outside the convention center, three other Peruvian representatives listened intently and nodded in response to points he made.

As a private representative, attending on behalf of an industry group, he was not privy to the private meetings taking place among government officials. Rather, he and his cohorts were present to offer advice and suggestions on the proceedings as observers.

In discussions on intellectual property, Schofield said, there is little flexibility to change what has already been largely determined by the United States. But, he concluded, he hoped these negotiations would ultimately be fair to the Andean nations, and he shrugged.

Outside the convention center, about 90 protesters lined the drive, peacefully waving signs and shouting slogans against the proposed agreement as negotiators entered and exited the building's main exhibition hall.

One protester carried a sign reading, "Break the chains of free trade slavery," while another, Dave Langen, a 20-year-old University of Arizona student, carried one with the simple message "Free Trade Kills."

Langen said he's concerned about the plight of Andean farmers who would lose government subsidies under AFTA, or the Andean Free Trade Agreement, and American farmers who would see lower prices for their crops.

"I can't stand by complicitly while my country is conducting secret negotiations that would affect the human rights of these people," he said.

Another protester faulted the Bush administration, saying it has allowed corporate interests to guide U.S. trade policy for their own gain as Congress sits idly by.

"We're letting major corporations set our trade policy, and it's not right," said Jeffrey Chimene, owner of a local computer-systems company, as he scribbled a protest sign with a felt-tipped marker.

"I like capitalism - I own my own business - but unrestrained capitalism is not necessarily a good thing. 'Free trade' represents an indulgence in unrestrained capitalism, and it must be stopped," he said.

An attending Colombian delegate, Hernando Jose Gomez, said in the meeting with the Star editorial board that he is aware of the opposition to the agreement. That's why compromises must be struck when dealing with sensitive industries such as agriculture.

With respect to these areas, all four nations "will have to accommodate each other ... to ensure that the competition is fair," he said.

Both he and fellow delegates Cristian Espinosa of Ecuador and Pablo de la Flor from Peru, stressed the need to include provisions enabling the poorer countries to provide protection for farmers and other producers in the agrarian sectors.

In a press conference Tuesday at Southside Presbyterian Church, a leader of a major Peruvian farm group said he fears that without such protection, small farmers producing crops such as wheat, corn and cotton will be forced into the illicit coca trade. U.S. agribusiness would overwhelm Peruvian growers if Peru lifts the duties it charges on heavily subsidized U.S. agricultural imports, as planned next year, said Miguel Caillaux Zazzali, vice president of the National Convention of Peruvian Farming in Lima.

"We can't compete with their production," he said.

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