

Colombia, U.S. Trade Partner, Violates Labor Rights, Study Says

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By Mark Drajem

Workers in Colombia face legal hurdles to organizing unions and are often threatened with violence, according to a U.S. government report that may raise questions about a recent trade agreement with the Andean nation.

“Labor leaders continued to be targets of attacks by illegal armed groups, primarily for political reasons,” the State Department’s annual report on human rights said. “Union leaders contended that perpetrators of violence against workers operated with virtual impunity.”

The report, used by lawmakers to evaluate worker conditions before they vote on trade agreements, quoted the International Labor Organization as finding a “culture of violence” that has caused “destruction of the trade union movement” in Colombia.

The U.S. and Colombia completed a free trade agreement last month, which must now be approved by Congress.

The State Department analysis, which surveys the overall respect for human rights in 196 countries worldwide, also found some shortcomings in the labor laws and their application in Oman and Peru, which completed free-trade agreements with the Bush administration last year. Those countries are set to have their accords come up for votes in Congress this year.

“These reports confirm that these countries are seriously deficient in providing the basic internationally agreed rights to their workers,” Representative Sander Levin, a Michigan Democrat, said in an interview. The way the trade agreements are structured, they are “imperiled” politically, he said.

Levin and other Democrats say the Bush administration must get developing nations to toughen their labor laws and enforce them before Congress will sign off on these free trade accords.

“We have had that discussion with Colombia at the highest levels” about labor rights, U.S. Trade Representative Rob Portman told reporters while visiting Capitol Hill today. “This will be one of the issues we’ll work through, but we would not have concluded if we had not thought there was a good story to tell” about improvements in labor rights, he said.

Oman and Peru

In Oman a new labor law passed in 2003, “does not address strikes or explicitly provide for the right to collective bargaining,” the State Department said. Oman has already received a list of questions from Democrats in Congress about its labor rights. Max Baucus, the top Democrat on the Senate Finance Committee said March 6 that Oman has “a ways to go” on labor, before its trade accord will get approved by Congress.

In Peru, the statutory minimum wage does “not provide a decent standard of living for a worker and family,” the U.S. report said.

“I cannot believe our government would move forward with an FTA that ignores these problems so clearly outlined by our very own State Department,” Representative Charles Rangel, the top Democrat on the House Ways and Means Committee, said today.

Specific Cases

Neither Oman or Peru were reported to have the kind of violence against workers that Colombia does. The 7-page assessment on labor rights in Colombia provided details on specific cases in which union leaders were killed and the perpetrators not prosecuted.

“At year's end authorities had not identified those responsible for the killings of 13 trade unionists and 26 teachers affiliated with unions during the year,” the State Department said.

Colombia, the second-largest market for U.S. agriculture goods in Latin America, reached a deal with the U.S. Trade Representative's office on Feb. 27 that would make permanent duty-free access to the U.S. for its exports, and remove tariffs on U.S. goods. Colombian tariffs on more than 80 percent of U.S. goods would be scrapped immediately, and the remainder would be phased out, the U.S. trade office said.

Colombia, Latin America's fifth largest economy, expects a boost in its exports to the U.S. of 14 percent over three years, adding a percentage point of growth to gross domestic product a year.

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