

PRESS STATEMENT

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CENTRAL AMERICAN IMMIGRANT ORGANIZATIONS OPPOSE CAFTA –

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*Hondurans Against
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*Organización Negra
Centroamericana*

Salvadoran American

As organizations that represent tens of thousands of Central American immigrants in the United States, we express our deep concern about the CAFTA agreement that will be signed on May 28.

Our opposition to CAFTA is not ideological. As immigrants, we have a deep understanding of the potential benefits of improved transnational cooperation. We would welcome an agreement that would increase economic opportunity, protect our shared environment, guarantee workers' rights and acknowledge the role of human mobility in deepening the already profound ties between our countries. However, the CAFTA agreement falls far short of that vision.

CAFTA was modeled on the NAFTA agreement and the US agreements with Singapore and Chile. Over the past decade, we have seen the results of the economic formula embedded in those agreements. Our home country economies have taken steps to privatize key social services, eliminate subsidies to small farmers, and establish free trade industrial zones known as "maquilas".

At the same time, we have seen poverty increase and real job opportunities all but disappear. We have seen workers' rights eroded and we have seen our natural resources devastated as foreign corporations set up shop without regard to labor and environmental laws. We have seen farmers leave the land in record numbers, unable to compete with subsidized agriculture from developed countries. In recent years, we have watched even the meager employment opportunities from "maquilas" start to dry up, as companies seek ever-more inexpensive and compliant labor sources in Asia.

But most of all we have seen the effects of these economic policies in the continuing and increasing flow of people leaving the Central American region. When driven off the land and closed out of sweatshops, many families have survived by migrating northward. Yet that journey for survival remains a perilous one. Our people contend with militarized borders, as well as with a dysfunctional and outdated U.S. immigration policy. Ironically, they are treated as second-class members in their adopted countries, even as their labor is used to fuel economic growth.

Our organizations are at the front lines of providing services to newcomers from all over Latin America. We are keenly aware that the economies in Central America have become increasingly dependent on money that immigrants send home in the form of remittances. In the case of El Salvador, family remittances topped \$2 billion in 2002, constituting the largest share of its Gross Domestic Product (GDP). In effect, the largest export product from Central America has become people, that is, emigrant labor in United States. Based on our experience, we are convinced that this perverse pattern will not only persist but will worsen with the implementation of CAFTA.

We do not want immigration to be the only option for our people. We dream of a Central America that provides dignified opportunities that allow them to stay in their communities. Unfortunately, CAFTA will take us farther from that dream.

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