

See Colombia. Ratify Free Trade

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MEDELLIN -- Not too long ago, Medellin, not Baghdad, was considered the world's most violent city. Now where gun battles between drug gangs once raged in the Santo Domingo-Savio neighborhood sits a shiny new library: a perfect place to enjoy a book, and an even better place to witness the transformation of a city and of an entire country, Colombia, once known as the global capital of murder, kidnap and cocaine.

The library has become a requisite stop on the U.S. Commerce Department's tour of Colombia as part of its attempt to push a Free Trade Agreement (FTA) with the country through Congress. American legislators are taken to flower farms that live off of exports to the United States, meetings with President Alvaro Uribe and business and labor leaders. Optional stops include textile plants, urban slums and remote villages being rebuilt from the ashes of guerrilla and paramilitary violence.

U.S. Commerce Secretary Carlos Gutierrez recently slumped into the seat of the American embassy's air-conditioned van at the end of his third stint as tour guide to a group of U.S. lawmakers in as many months. He was weary from the whirlwind tour but hopeful that what he showed the members of Congress had convinced them that Colombia deserves and needs an FTA with the U.S. Since September Gutierrez has ushered 24 members of Congress to Colombia. U.S. Trade Representative Susan Schwab led a mission of six lawmakers.

Gutierrez says he'll keep coming back as long as it takes to get the votes for the controversial trade deal to pass. "It's not fair to the American people and it's not fair to the people of Colombia to make a decision [on the FTA] without coming here," the former CEO of Kellogg said as the van sped through the Colombian countryside. Most visiting lawmakers have remained noncommittal about their positions on the Colombia FTA, and Gutierrez says he does not press them to take a stand. But, he says, there's a "definite shift in attitude" among the lawmakers who come here.

The trade deal is still not an easy sell. The U.S.-Colombia Free Trade Agreement was signed by President Bush a year ago this month with much fanfare, but its fate was mixed with uncertainty as it headed for Congress for ratification. The Democrats had just taken the House in mid-term elections and it was unclear then how the new political climate in Washington would affect the trade deal.

What was unclear then is now manifest. House Democrats reject even bringing the Colombia trade deal up for a vote until they see "significant progress" by the government of Colombian President Alvaro Uribe to stop murders of labor unionists and bring their killers to justice.

Gutierrez, like Colombian officials who want to see the trade deal come into force as soon as possible, seems frustrated by those arguments. He grumbles that people who take that view do not recognize the "tremendous progress" that Colombia has made on those fronts. Union member killings are down to 30 so far this year from a peak in 1996 of 275 murders. About 98% of those cases remain unsolved. However, special prosecutors have been now trained to investigate labor union crimes and three judges have been detached from their regular duties to concentrate solely on cases of violence against union members.

It is precisely the threat of non-passage of the trade agreement that has led to the improvement on that investigative front, say Colombian union leaders. "Without that pressure from the U.S. the Colombian government would not be acting to clear up these cases and seek convictions," says Jose Luciano Sanin, director of the Escuela Nacional Sindical, a labor rights group that tracks violence against Colombia's labor movement. "All of a sudden, with this external pressure, impunity in union cases has become a priority because it is a condition for approval of the FTA."

But FTA proponents say the best way for Colombia to continue to make progress on freedom and democracy is through economic growth and the engagement that comes with a trade deal. "The FTA allows internal observation of what's happening in Colombia," said Gutierrez. The agreement has special protocols that require Colombia to uphold international labor rights standards. "What I don't understand is how labor will be helped if there is no FTA."

Even though at this point there do not appear to be enough legislators backing passage, Gutierrez says he wants the Colombia FTA to at least be given a chance for a vote. "We can get the votes for Colombia," he said. But by his own admission it will take "a lot of hard work and a lot of convincing." And it will probably take a few more visits to that hilltop library, too.