

Colombia deal is a bad one

By Arnie Alpert
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Supporters of a new trade agreement with Colombia have said that the deal would bolster efforts by the South American country to improve human rights and spur economic development, to the benefit of both countries. However, a closer look suggests that corruption and violence run so deeply within the Colombian government that any talk of “free trade” should be met with skepticism.

Colombia’s political and economic climate is entrenched in deep inequalities. Decades of conflict with guerrilla groups, the rise of right-wing death squads tied to the military, and trafficking in illegal drugs contribute to widespread poverty in a country rich in natural resources.

Additionally, the Colombian government and army received \$6 billion, in mostly military U.S. aid since 2001, to “fight the war on drugs and terror” — despite the fact that both the government and military are closely linked to right-wing death squads that are responsible for most of the country’s human rights abuses.

Furthermore, after seven years of anti-drug counterinsurgency aid, the “war” model clearly has failed. Production of cocaine is up.

Moreover, high-level corruption is part of a pattern of widespread human rights abuses. Today more than 60 members of the Colombian Congress are under investigation for ties to right wing death squads. Among them is President Alvaro Uribe’s cousin, former Senator Mario Uribe Escobar, who was recently arrested. Former intelligence officer Rafael Garcia, himself imprisoned for his role in covering up the criminal histories of paramilitary leaders, testified that members of the armed forces and government ministries, too, are enmeshed with the illegal militias.

Additionally, Colombia continues to be the most dangerous country for trade unionists, based on the number of assassinations that take place each year.

Arguments that the rate of political murders is on the decline are unconvincing. The National Labor College, based in Medellin, reported a “worrying increase in assassinations against unionized workers” which in the first three months of 2008 occurred at nearly twice the rate of the same period last year.

There is no reason to believe a trade agreement would improve the situation. To the contrary, an influx of duty-free agricultural products and increased pressure for production of cash crops for export will most likely force out small farmers, just as NAFTA did in Mexico. Farmers who cannot earn a livelihood will feel increased pressure

to migrate or join the drug trade.

In a country where nearly 4 million people have already been displaced by civil war, that is a recipe for instability, not security.

For Colombia, a trade agreement with the United States will make a bad situation even worse. For the United States, a trade deal with Colombia will add to economic insecurity at home with no boost for security abroad.

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