

Posted on Mon, Jun. 14, 2004

U.S., state hope to push deals during Atlanta trade talks

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Associated Press

ATLANTA - U.S. trade officials will seek to hammer out a pact with three Central American countries this week, while Georgia leaders take another stab at landing the Free Trade Area of the Americas headquarters in Atlanta.

Federal negotiators began meeting Monday at the Hilton Atlanta hotel with representatives from Peru, Colombia and Ecuador.

Bolivian representatives are attending as observers.

U.S. trade officials want to craft a trade agreement with those countries to pave the way for a larger FTAA deal that would include virtually every nation in the Western Hemisphere.

"All these are stepping stones to the FTAA," said Loretta Lepore, a spokeswoman for Georgia Gov. Sonny Perdue, who is lobbying for the group's permanent headquarters to be located in Atlanta.

But Venezuela - which provides 13 percent of U.S. oil - is not present at this week's talks and Brazil, which heavily influences the smaller Andean nations, has expressed reservations about the larger agreement.

A handful of protesters gathered outside the hotel on Monday, saying that trade agreements with the U.S. would exploit workers in poor Latin American countries.

"The Bush administration's free trade agreements represent a giant step backward in protecting the basic rights of workers," said Stephen Coats, executive director of the U.S./Labor Education in the Americas Project.

This week's Atlanta summit was organized by Hemisphere, Inc., the nonprofit group formed by Georgia government to help recruit the FTAA's permanent headquarters.

While 11 cities have submitted bids, Atlanta, Miami and Panama City are considered the three major contenders. Advocates say the designation could bring up to 11,000 jobs and \$500 million to Georgia by 2015.

Perdue, who is not involved in this week's summit, has already made one trip to Latin America to support Atlanta's bid and plans another next week to Brazil, Chile and Argentina.

Lepore said Perdue considers the Atlanta sessions a chance to sell the city to a new batch of potential FTAA countries.

"His belief is that the more opportunities these leaders and decision makers have to come here and the more exposure they have to Atlanta, the more confident he'll feel that they'll want to come permanently," she said.