

## **Colombia Min: US Trade Deal Should Lift Tariffs Gradually**

**February 8, 2005 3:26 p.m.**

BOGOTA (AP)--Colombia's trade minister said Tuesday that any free trade agreement with the U.S. should allow for a gradual lifting of trade barriers rather than imposing a tariff-free rule on all products at once.

"Each product should have its own timetable," said Jorge Humberto Botero, who is in the coastal city of Cartagena where negotiators from Colombia, the U.S., Ecuador and Peru are discussing a possible free-trade deal.

Botero also said Colombian products should have tariff-free access to the U.S. as early as or even before U.S. products are granted such privileges to enter Colombia, according to a statement from the government.

The weeklong Cartagena talks are the seventh since free trade negotiations began last May. If everything goes according to plan, a four-country free trade agreement will be signed in March in Washington. Lawmakers from each country would then have to separately approve the deal. Implementation could begin by the end of this year.

But huge disagreements remain among the 1,500 negotiators, politicians and businessmen from the four countries taking part in discussions. The Andean nations are concerned about allowing entry into their countries of cheap imports of food produced by farmers in the U.S. who receive huge government subsidies.

There are also worries that any intellectual property clauses could cause medicine costs in Colombia and the other South American nations to soar because it could make the local production of generic drugs illegal.

Colombia, Ecuador and Peru would like to iron out these problems so its exporters can gain free access to the world's largest economy. Only six countries have a free trade deal with the U.S.

Colombia has said it is willing to sign a bilateral deal with the U.S. if an agreement between all four nations cannot be reached.

Colombia's leading trade unions have called for a nationwide protest of the free trade negotiations for Thursday. They say a deal would spell disaster for farmers and workers in other industries, such as textiles.

Colombia, Ecuador and Peru already enjoy a preferential trade deal with the U.S. through a program aimed at helping countries on the front line of the drug war. But this deal expires in 2006.