

Guatemalans Protest Trade Agreement

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MAR. 1 2:57 P.M. ET Thousands of teachers, union workers, farmers, leftist politicians and academics waged massive street protests Tuesday against a pending free-trade agreement between Central America and the United States.

About 8,000 protesters, the majority of them teachers, demonstrated in the capital to demand that Congress not ratify the Central American Free Trade Agreement without holding a public referendum first.

They also oppose passage of a law that would grant concessions to private companies for infrastructure construction projects, saying it was a maneuver aimed at privatizing public services.

The United States signed the free-trade agreement, known as CAFTA, last May with Guatemala, El Salvador, Honduras, Nicaragua, and Costa Rica. The Dominican Republic signed later.

"The congressmen are making unilateral and crazy decisions behind the Guatemalan people's back," said teachers union leader Joviel Acevedo.

Also participating in the march was Rodrigo Asturias, ex-secretary-general of the former guerrilla group National Guatemalan Revolutionary Unit, who warned that the government "should take these demonstrations seriously."

Congressional President Jorge Mendez said legislators were receiving "visits ... from Guatemalan citizens expressing their support or criticism of certain initiatives," and that their "points of view will be listened to."

But Acevedo said police were preventing dozens of busloads of teachers from entering the capital from outside towns. Security officials could not be reached for a response.

President Oscar Berger on Monday ruled out holding a public referendum on the free-trade agreement, saying the idea has been reviewed and commented on extensively already by many sectors.

CAFTA also faces a tough road ahead in the United States. President George W. Bush says the accord would open new markets for U.S. goods and services while encouraging economic and democratic reforms in Central America, but he didn't have the votes in 2004. He may not have support this year either because of competition fears among U.S. sugar and textile producers.

The Global Board, a group comprising 33 Guatemalan civic organizations, already has collected more than 20,000 out of 25,000 signatures sought for a petition asking Congress to take no action until the trade agreement's labor and environmental provisions are thoroughly reviewed again, and until a popular vote is held, group representative Jose Siguil said. The constitution stipulates that 5,000 signatures are sufficient to require a congressional review of citizens' petitions.

Congress plans to take up the concessions law this week, while the legislature's foreign trade commission indicated that it could approve CAFTA as early as Thursday, the last step before the issue goes to the full Congress for a vote.

A recent intra-congressional poll concluded that supporters already had more than the 81 necessary votes to pass the trade agreement.

Farmers opposed to CAFTA blocked the Atlantic highway about 240 kilometers (150 miles) northeast of the capital and another route about 160 kilometers (100 miles) north of Guatemala City, according to Rafael Volcanes, leaders of the United Farming Committee.