

Alliance for Responsible Trade

PRESS RELEASE

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

11 June 2004

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U.S. and Andean Groups Demand Accountability in Free Trade Talks

Citizens' organizations from Colombia, Bolivia, Peru and the United States denounced the secrecy of talks on the U.S.-Andean Free Trade Agreement, which will next be held from 14-18 June in Atlanta.

This will be the second round of talks on the proposed Andean FTA. The first round was held last month in Cartagena, Colombia. Future negotiating sessions are scheduled over the next few months in Peru, the United States and Ecuador, with an eye to reaching an agreement by February 2005.

Local Atlanta groups are planning a peaceful mobilization at noon on Monday, 14 June at the Downtown Hilton, the site of the official talks. Kelli Potts, an Atlanta peace and economic-justice activist with the Peace, Not War committee of North Decatur Presbyterian Church, said, "We want to know what is going on behind those closed doors at the Hilton. We are very concerned that they will simply duplicate agreements like NAFTA and CAFTA that put corporate profits ahead of people's lives here and in Latin America."

Like talks for the recently completed U.S. Central America Free Trade Agreement (CAFTA), there is little transparency in these negotiations. While officials in the Andean region have announced that there could be some public access to reading rooms to review the text, those doing so would be banned from revealing that information to the public, thus severely limiting an informed public debate on the prospective agreement.

Enrique Daza, a spokesperson for the Colombian Action Network on the Free Trade Area of the Americas (RECALCA) stated, "The lack of transparency and the government's decision to maintain secrecy in the negotiations only reveals the magnitude of the outrage they plan to commit in the FTA. We demand that they publish the contents of the U.S. draft text and the Colombian negotiating team's text."

"People are right to be worried," said Karen Hansen-Kuhn of The Development GAP, a Washington, DC-based organization and the Coordinator of the Alliance for Responsible Trade (ART). "All indications are that this agreement will contain the same wrong-headed policies on investment, labor, environment and other issues that have forced the Bush Administration to hold off on a vote on CAFTA until after the elections."

Javier Diez Conesco, a Peruvian Member of Parliament, also expressed concerns about the potential outcome of the talks. "We have months of arduous negotiations ahead of us with the United States, a superpower whose interests often don't coincide with - and often contradict - our own, and which could use its influence and power to achieve an agreement in its favor."

Provisions in the Andean FTA would serve to dramatically liberalize trade in goods and services between the United States and Andean countries and likely provide strong protections for foreign investment and intellectual-property rights (patents) while containing only weak provisions to support labor rights and the environment. Information on U.S. negotiating positions published in the Colombian newspaper, *El Tiempo*, on 2 June, for example, indicates that the United States will seek through the agreement to patent plants, animals and surgical procedures. Such provisions would go far beyond anything negotiated in other trade pacts.

Bolivia is currently participating in the talks as an observer, although it may officially enter into negotiations at some later date. Pablo Solon, a leader of the Bolivian Movement against Free Trade, said, "We are opposed to the Andean-U.S. FTA because it being negotiated behind people's backs, ignoring the fact that the popular uprising in Bolivia that forced President Sanchez de Lozada out of office demanded a substantial change in economic policy, including actions to recover our country's natural gas and hydrocarbons, which were being taken over by transnational corporations. We oppose the FTA with the United States because we do not want to be stripped of our cultural identity, because we are against making water, health, education and biodiversity mere commodities, and because we believe that the rights of people and other living beings are more important than free trade."

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