

Church World Service urging citizen action on Peru Free Trade Agreement

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Washington, D.C. -- As a result of the Nov. 8 House of Representatives passage of a trade agreement that would harm resource-poor Peruvians, humanitarian agency Church World Service is urging people to Contact their Senators and ask them to oppose the US-Peru Free Trade Agreement (Peru FTA). The call to action was made via a CWS Speak Out alert. As a global development agency, Church World Service is concerned that recent free trade agreements undermine rather than promote broad-based development and poverty alleviation, says to the Rev. John L. McCullough, Executive Director and CEO.

In a statement lamenting the Nov. 8 passage of the US-Peru Free Trade Agreement by the U.S. House of Representative, the humanitarian agency affirmed the poverty-fighting potential of international trade but said agreements must be judged by whether they truly promote development in developing countries.

CWS recognizes that the agreement includes some advances in labor rights and environmental provisions, negotiated between the Democratic Party leadership in Congress and the Bush Administration. However, the flawed agreement is likely to harm small farmers in Peru and destroy the livelihoods of rural people, just as NAFTA did in Mexico.

In response to concerns raised by its ecumenical partners in Latin America and throughout the world, Church World Service has called for the U.S. Congress to withhold ratification of free trade agreements and re-think its trade policies.

In a 2004 statement adopted by the CWS Board of Directors, church leaders from Mexico, Canada and the U.S. declared, "We believe that current economic arrangements, international financial institutions and trade and investment treaties (e.g. the North American Free Trade Agreement among the U.S., Mexico, and Canada) unjustly distort the rules governing trade and investment to the advantage of the affluent and powerful." (What Does God Require of Us? A Declaration for Just Trade in the Service of an Economy of Life.)

Since NAFTA took effect, Mexico has lost some 2 million jobs in agriculture, according to the U.N. Committee on Trade and Development. Much of the job loss was the result of imports of heavily subsidized grains from the U.S., which undercut Mexican farmers. The impact on Peru is likely to be greater because more of the population is engaged in farm work.

A 2003 Latin America Council of Churches (CLAI) statement said, "We are not against regional integration initiatives in and of themselves, but against integration processes that favor transnational corporations instead of the large majorities," and force countries to compete against each other in unequal conditions.

Prior to the 2005 approval of the Central American Free Trade Agreement, CLAI members in Central America spoke even more forcefully, saying "we reject free trade agreements between Central America and the United States [because] it accelerates the process of impoverishment of the people . . ."

According to a statement issued in 2005 by Andean region Catholic Bishops, "the provisions [in trade agreements] under negotiations could leave small farmers and their families in our countries very vulnerable. . . The programs that exist in our countries for the substitution of coca and other illicit crops would also be affected."

Church World Service calls for new models for trade agreements that advance genuinely broad-based development and poverty alleviation.

Church World Service, the humanitarian relief agency of 35 Protestant, Orthodox and Anglican denominations in the U.S., regularly calls citizens to action through its "Speak Out" email alerts on a range of important public policy issues.

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