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Central American bishops criticize free trade accords

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WASHINGTON (CNS) -- A delegation of Central American bishops visited Washington at the end of June to criticize free trade agreements between the United States and their governments. They said such agreements would favor U.S. exports and do little to alleviate the widespread poverty in their countries. They also criticized their governments, saying they provided little public information about the contents of the agreements and limited consultations on the accords to mostly business groups.

The United States, Guatemala, Honduras, Nicaragua, El Salvador and Costa Rica have signed the Central American Free Trade Agreement, known as CAFTA. The agreement still needs to be ratified by the national congresses of the six countries. The United States and Panama are currently negotiating a similar bilateral treaty.

Bishops from the six Latin American countries visited Washington June 23-24 for talks with U.S. church officials, members of the House of Representatives, Bush administration representatives and private organizations involved in Latin American issues.

The bishops said the public debate on the treaties was suppressed by a lack of public information. As a result there was little opportunity for rural farm workers, unions, urban poor and indigenous populations to offer their opinions, they said.

The bishops, representing the Bishops' Secretariat of Central America and Panama, also spoke at several public meetings while in Washington.

"It's wrong to sign a treaty behind the back of the people," said Auxiliary Bishop Gregorio Rosa Chavez of San Salvador, El Salvador. He said Costa Rica was the only country that had significantly debated the treaty. The bishop said the main criticism of the treaty is that it focuses on trade rather than human development.

Guatemalan Bishop Alvaro Ramazzini Imeri of San Marcos, secretariat president, said the church favors an approach that empowers people to develop a more dignified life.

Bishop Angel San Casimiro of Ciudad Quesada, Costa Rica, said it is questionable whether development based on free trade will reduce the gap between the rich and the poor. "We need to see if this economic growth reaches those who are never reached," he said.

The bishops said they were concerned that competition from U.S. agricultural products could destroy Central American farming and cattle production. The treaty would allow for a graduated reduction of import taxes on food and meat products over several years until the tariffs are

eliminated.

Opening up the U.S. market to Central America comes at the cost of opening Central American markets to the United States, said U.S.-born Auxiliary Bishop David Zywiec of Bluefields, Nicaragua. "The U.S. can sell beans and rice at a cheaper cost, ruining Nicaraguan farmers," Bishop Zywiec said.

Increasing poverty caused by the treaty will spur migration from rural areas to urban shantytowns and eventually increase clandestine immigration into the United States, several bishops said.

Bishop Rosa Chavez expressed doubt that the types of industrial jobs created as a result of the treaty -- mostly through foreign-owned clothing factories -- would bring long-term benefits to workers. Such factories already exist and provide work for women because they are paid less than men; making clothes also is a traditional occupation for women in Latin cultures, Bishop Rosa Chavez said.

"A woman earns \$120 a month and has no social benefits. They are paid the minimum wage or lower. They have to pay for their transportation and one meal a day," he said.

Bishops Rosa Chavez and Ramazzini said that their countries have good labor laws, but the laws are rarely applied; the treaty could provide a further stimulus to ignore the laws and provide cheap labor. The bishops said that their governments lacked transparency, despite being democratic.

Bishop Ramazzini said that "those with economic power determine social models and who wins elections. They chose the presidents."