

Commerce chief urges OK of Colombia treaty

Protesters at Rice decry violations of labor rights

By Jenalia Moreno
Houston Chronicle
November 30, 2007

Congress must approve a free-trade agreement with Colombia to ensure continued economic growth and democracy in that nation, U.S. Secretary of Commerce Carlos Gutierrez said Friday.

"To deny Colombia's FTA would be not just a step backwards, but one of the biggest foreign policy mistakes of our time in our region," Gutierrez told a crowd gathered at Rice University.

Gutierrez and many members of the Bush administration have toured the nation and Colombia, promoting the free-trade deal.

Friday's meeting at Rice comes after Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez froze ties with Colombia, a nation he has criticized for its close relations with the United States.

"It's the right message to send to a staunch ally of the United States in the region," said Eduardo Muñoz, Colombia's vice minister for foreign trade.

The Bush administration is lobbying for three free-trade agreements with Latin American partners. Congress appears likely to approve a free-trade agreement with Peru.

But pacts with Colombia and Panama seem less certain. Critics oppose the agreement with Colombia, in part, because of the history of murders of union leaders there.

"The Colombia agreement is the most egregious because of all the violations of labor rights," said Sarah Taylor, a Rice senior who was one of several protesters who gathered outside of Rice's James A. Baker III Institute for Public Policy, where Gutierrez delivered his remarks.

Muñoz said the government recognizes the problem of violence in the country and that murders and kidnappings have dropped under President Alvaro Uribe's administration.

Under the Bush administration, seven free-trade agreements have taken effect, including the Central American Free Trade Agreement, which passed Congress by just one vote.

The Free Trade Area of the Americas talks between all 34 nations of the Western Hemisphere, excluding Cuba, broke down in the last few years and the administration has since pursued agreements with individual nations or blocs.