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The World in Houston

New trade plan under fire

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A decade ago, the Clinton administration lobbied for the North American Free Trade Agreement partly by promising that it would reduce illegal immigration from Mexico.

So much for promises. Illegal immigration actually increased over the decade.

Now, the Bush administration and Central American countries are negotiating a new free trade agreement. And they once again promise it will reduce illegal immigration, this time from Central America.

But as negotiators gather in Houston this week for a new round of talks on the Central American Free Trade Agreement, they will be met by opposition from an unusual source -- immigrants.

While no one expects tear gas or riots or even a massive crowd, a few dedicated Central Americans plan to turn out in the Galleria area to protest the negotiations. Protest organizers say Central American immigrants in the United States send \$5 billion back home every year in the form of remittances, and they demand to have their voices heard in any negotiations.

"The most important export from Central America is labor," said Teodoro Aguiluz, a Salvadoran who heads the Houston office of the Central American Resource Center. "Why do they ignore us?"

Aguiluz says the immigrants he represents are not sophisticated critics of global economics. "But they can understand that these (trade) agreements only increment the misery in our countries," he said. "They understand that it forces more people to make the illegal and unsafe journey to the United States."

The negotiations with five Central American nations have not drawn much attention in the United States, probably because Central America represents less than 1 percent of the U.S. export market. The Bush administration sees an agreement with Central America as a key step toward a hemisphere-wide deal known as the Free Trade Area of the Americas.

Bush has equated trade with property and freedom.

Central American supporters, including Salvadoran President Francisco Flores, say CAFTA would add jobs in the region through new factories, or *maquilas*, producing export products like textiles. The Salvadoran government says those who oppose free trade do so for ideological reasons.

Jobs were also the promise of NAFTA for Mexico, though the record has been decidedly mixed. A spate of articles in recent months have asserted that opening Mexican markets to U.S. and Canadian agricultural products might actually increase migration to the U.S. among displaced Mexican farmers.

Central Americans say their situation is even worse. The Mexican government has discovered the importance of its immigrants in the United States. President Vicente Fox calls immigrants "heroes."

But Central American presidents have not paid nearly as close attention to their immigrants. El Salvador alone has more than a million of its citizens living in the United States, and they send back more than \$1 billion to relatives in El Salvador every year.

Yet Aguiluz and other Salvadoran immigrants say they are essentially ignored by their government. From the government's perspective, Salvadorans "no longer exist" as soon as they leave their homeland, Aguiluz said.

Representatives of the Salvadoran consulate in Houston did not return calls seeking comment. But the government has shown one important sign of listening to the immigrants. The country's economic minister has agreed to meet with Aguiluz and other immigrant leaders in Houston this week.

Aguiluz said protesters are not entirely opposed to free trade. They want the negotiations linked to an agreement that would allow the free and legal flow of labor as well as goods.