

INTERFAITH WORKING GROUP ON TRADE AND INVESTMENT

✠ A WASHINGTON-BASED WORKING GROUP WITH REPRESENTATIVES FROM A RANGE OF FAITH-BASED ORGANIZATIONS COMMITTED TO ASSERTING A STRONGER PRESENCE OF COMMUNITIES OF FAITH IN PUBLIC POLICY DISCUSSIONS ON INTERNATIONAL TRADE AND INVESTMENT ✠
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RELIGIOUS ORGANIZATIONS OPPOSE U.S.-COLOMBIA FREE TRADE AGREEMENT

March 7, 2008

Dear Member of Congress:

As representatives of religious institutions and faith-based organizations with extensive global relationships and concern, we oppose the pending U.S.-Colombia Free Trade Agreement (FTA). International trade and investment activities should advance the common good and be evaluated in light of their impact on those who are most vulnerable, including Afro-Colombian and Indigenous peoples. The U.S.-Colombia FTA fails these tests.

We realize that Congress is under pressure from a massive promotional campaign to vote on and approve the Colombia FTA. President Bush is talking about bypassing the Congressional committee and leadership structures to require a vote. We urge members of Congress not yield to this unwelcome pressure.

In the debates over the FTAs with Peru, Colombia and Panama, some have stressed the importance of ratifying the agreements so as to not drive Latin American countries toward other powers in the region. But this warning shows a dangerously mistaken idea about why so many Latin American countries have turned in another direction and elected populist governments in the past decade.

In the 1980s and 1990s, Latin American economies were heavily influenced by the policies recommended by the International Monetary Fund and other international lenders. It was the failure of these policies and others that drove populations throughout Latin America to vote for candidates that spoke out for changing these policies.

Trade agreements contain policy provisions similar to those required by the IMF. In particular, FTAs are likely to have an adverse impact on the incomes and livelihoods of ordinary Latin Americans. By ratifying these agreements, Congress will only increase the animosity toward our country.

By increasing poverty and instability, which underlies Colombia's violent conflict, the FTA is likely to perpetuate the war rather than help bring it to an end.

How Free Trade Harms the Poor

The Colombian FTA will undermine conditions for family farmers in Colombia by requiring it to lower tariffs on agricultural imports. Colombian farmers and farm workers are worried that they will face the same fate as 1.3 million Mexican farmers who were displaced when heavily subsidized U.S. agricultural products flooded the Mexican market after NAFTA was signed. This will only add to Colombia's 3.8 million internally displaced people, which is already second only to the Sudan, and disproportionately impact Afro-Colombian and Indigenous communities.

Poor consumers are also harmed. The corporate consolidation by investors in the Mexican corn market as a result of NAFTA helped bring about a steep climb in the prices of tortillas. More imports do not guarantee lower prices. The same thing can happen in Colombia.

People in developing countries need affordable access to essential medicines, not only for pandemic diseases like HIV/AIDS, but for a whole variety of serious health conditions. While the amended text of the agreement removes the most egregious provisions limiting the access to affordable medicines, it still includes elements that undermine the right to affordable medicines. This will further undermine a Colombian health system that only covers ten percent of Afro-Colombians.

The case of Colombia is of extreme concern because of the longstanding, egregious human rights situation. Many current or former high ranking government officials are under indictment or have been forced to resign because their involvement with paramilitaries and drug trafficking has been publicly exposed. Four hundred union activists have been killed in Colombia since its current president took office in 2002. The Colombian government has consistently failed to investigate and charge those responsible for these murders and Colombia continues to be the most dangerous country in the world for union and labor organizers. The FTA will reward the Colombian government and business elites for their misconduct while deepening the economic disparity which is a root cause of the conflict, and diminish human rights.

Genuine political freedom does not exist in Colombia. During the most recent electoral period last fall, 23 candidates who were running for office were murdered. One former congressman who considered running for another term was advised that seeking re-election would likely result in his assassination; thus he decided against it.

In preparation for the FTA, the Colombian government is making sweeping legal changes to codes governing land use and specific resources, including forests and minerals. These pre-emptive legal changes dismantle the legal rights of Indigenous and Afro-Colombians.

Why the Colombia FTA Will Harm the United States

People in the United States would not be well served by the Colombia FTA. Labor and environmental provisions remain weak, which puts a downward pressure on standards here.

The FTA will likely worsen the problems of coca production and drug trafficking, if competition from artificially low-priced U.S. agricultural imports prevents small farmers in Colombia from earning a living producing legal crops.

We can also expect forced immigration to the U.S. to increase, if free trade continues to expand. Almost all people everywhere want to stay in their home country, but when economic conditions destroy their livelihoods, they move to where decent jobs are available. We need to view the larger immigration numbers in the context of the U.S. government's promotion of economic policies that are a critical factor in uprooting people from their homes.

Free trade agreements encourage export-driven agriculture. This ultimately benefits a relatively few U.S. agribusiness processors and traders and very large farms. This system accelerates agricultural consolidation, further undermining family farmers in the U.S. and developing countries.

The 'free trade' model is the antithesis of the policies needed to guarantee basic human rights and global human security. For these reasons, we stand together with church leaders, Afro-Colombians, unionists, indigenous leaders, human rights and environmental groups in Colombia who oppose the U.S.-Colombia Free Trade Agreement.

Signatures follow

This statement is endorsed by the following members of the Interfaith Working Group on Trade and Investment:

American Friends Service Committee
Brethren Witness/Washington Office, Church of the Brethren
Center of Concern
Church World Service
Columban Justice, Peace & Integrity of Creation Office (USA)
Conference of Major Superiors of Men (CMSM)
General Board of Church and Society of the United Methodist Church
Global Ministries of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) and United Church of Christ
Holy Cross International Justice Office
United Church of Christ Justice and Witness Ministries
Maryknoll Office of Global Concerns
Medical Mission Sisters, Alliance for Justice
Mennonite Central Committee U.S. Washington Office
Missionary Oblates, Justice Peace/Integrity of Creation Office
NETWORK: A National Catholic Social Justice Lobby
Presbyterian Church USA Washington Office
PLANT (Partners for the Land and Agricultural Needs of Traditional Peoples)
The SHARE Foundation Building a New El Salvador Today
Quixote Center/Quest for Peace
Witness for Peace