

CAFTA likely to hurt poor Central Americans

Trade agreement won passage because of threats, manipulations and payoffs

By Álvaro Ramazzini
National Catholic Reporter
November 11, 2005

The recent passage of the Central America Free Trade Agreement by the U.S. Congress is a source of grave concern to my diocese and to citizens of my country, Guatemala. A good agreement might have been a tool to ease the grinding poverty that plagues the daily lives of too many Guatemalans. Instead, this agreement not only fails to address the needs of Central Americas poor, sick and vulnerable but may well make conditions here worse.

CAFTA's U.S. passage, made possible by political threats, payoff promises and procedural manipulations, resembled the tactics employed in March to pass CAFTA in Guatemala's Congress. The juxtaposition of certain politicians claims that CAFTA would promote democracy with the process that was required to pass it is one of CAFTA's cruel ironies.

In my country, when thousands of protesters raised their voices against CAFTA, President Oscar Berger responded by calling on the Guatemalan military to suppress them, thereby violating the fragile Peace Accords that ended decades of bloody civil war. The military used water cannons, rubber bullets and armored vehicles in the capital. In the countryside, military police attacked a march of Mayan peasant farmers, murdering two civilians.

People who wonder why there is such passionate opposition to CAFTA -- an expansion of the 1993 North American Free Trade Agreement to six more nations -- need look no further than the results of NAFTA in Mexico during the last decade. NAFTA displaced 1.5 million Mexican peasant farmers. Many of these displaced farmers sought industrial jobs, causing Mexican wages to drop by 20 percent. Communities and families were torn asunder as those who lost their livelihoods undertook the perilous journey to the United States in hopes of finding some way to support their family.

CAFTA, like NAFTA, is designed to complement and lock into place the neoliberal structural adjustments imposed on Central American nations, with disastrous results, by the International Monetary Fund and World Bank. Formerly pro-NAFTA development economists, such as Professor Riordan Roett of Johns Hopkins School of Advanced International Studies, warned that CAFTA is based on a logic that favors profit over human rights and sustainability.

What benefits can come for Guatemalan workers when CAFTA will roll back the stronger labor rights requirements existing under current U.S.-Central America trade law? What will become of the 60 percent of Guatemala's population that lives in small farming communities when CAFTA allows the dumping of subsidized food exports into our countries? And what can a priest say to the family of a person ill with HIV-AIDS for whom the generic antiretroviral medicines forbidden by CAFTA's rules are the only hope? The Bush administration demanded that before the U.S. Congress would even consider CAFTA, our

nation had to revoke a law that helped ensure access to these medicines for the more than 78,000 Guatemalans living with HIV-AIDS. Is this a good neighbor policy?

CAFTA did not come down from God. It is the flawed work of man, and only one of many versions of how our nations could be linked. I thank those members of the U.S. Congress who voted against CAFTA. They desire trade with fairness, justice and morality. They rise against the Bush administrations threats to cut off our existing trade preferences so as to force Central American approval of this trade agreement. They yearn for a country that cooperates with, not presides over, its neighbors in the Western hemisphere.

I hope and pray that the valiant efforts of those opposing CAFTA both in Central America and the United States will prove lasting in confronting the challenges of CAFTAs implementation.

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