

A Dangerous Job in Colombia

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Editorial

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With President Álvaro Uribe of Colombia at his side at the White House last month, President Bush promised action, soon, on a bilateral trade agreement. We strongly support free trade, but before an agreement can be completed, Americans need reassurance that Mr. Uribe's government will do more to protect workers' rights, instead of standing aside as union leaders are systematically killed.

In the last 20 years, according to a recent report by the Solidarity Center of the A.F.L.-C.I.O., some 4,000 labor union organizers, leaders and activists have been assassinated. Human rights groups use lower numbers, but still in the thousands — far more than anywhere else in the world. The government has investigated fewer than 400 cases, and has produced just five convictions.

Mr. Uribe's government asserts that the murders are simply part of a larger picture of decades of civil war and drug-trafficking. That ignores a clear pattern of threats, deaths and disappearances targeting vocal worker leaders — many of them teachers — often while they are organizing or negotiating with management. The number of murders decreased to 70 last year, according to a Colombian monitor; the government puts the number at 40. That may say more about intimidation that has stopped union activity or sent leaders into hiding than about government action.

Having just won a second term, Mr. Uribe is now in a position to do more about this problem. His conservative and law-and-order profile makes him a darling of Washington. Colombia's government has received extraordinary American support: \$4 billion since 2000, mostly for military and counter narcotics use.

Colombia wants to further cement the special relationship with a free trade agreement. It can begin by treating workers' rights as human rights.