

Trade pitch turns negative positive

In Portland promoting a pact with the U.S., Colombia's trade envoy says violence has lessened

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You know that a visiting diplomat faces hurdles when the first PowerPoint statistics he displays feature homicides and kidnappings for extortion.

But Eduardo Munoz presented the numbers proudly this week during meetings in Portland, Seattle and Houston. Munoz, Colombia's vice minister for foreign trade, was promoting a proposed trade agreement that he helped negotiate.

His pitch: The South American country has turned a corner under President Alvaro Uribe, reducing violence and boosting economic growth, meaning that Congress should pass the U.S.-Colombia Free Trade Agreement.

"Your country has suffered from the use of drugs, many of which are imported from countries like Colombia," Munoz said in Portland. "By supporting the free-trade agreement, you would support economic development and help us fight drug production and trafficking."

Colombia is one of four nations lobbying Congress as key votes approach on trade agreements. The next one expected by the U.S. Senate in mid-December on a pact with Peru has passed the House. Oregon House Democrats likely will split again on the trade accord votes, which are up-or-down propositions under the fast-track process.

President Bush plans to sign the Peru agreement if it passes the Senate. Congress is expected to consider the Colombian pact by spring, and proposed pacts with Panama and South Korea thereafter.

Proponents say the Nafta-like agreements help consumers and companies by cutting tariffs and other trade barriers. Opponents, who are mounting their biggest fight against the Colombian agreement, say the pacts wipe out U.S. jobs, undermine poor people abroad, damage the environment and fatten big corporations.

"We see these trade agreements as a means for large companies to shift jobs around the globe wherever labor and environmental standards are the weakest," said Arthur Stamoulis, director of the Oregon Fair Trade Campaign, a coalition of labor, environmental and human rights organizations.

"The Colombia agreement is particularly problematic," Stamoulis said, "because of the extreme human rights violations that are taking place on a regular basis."

Munoz, 50, is a U.S.-educated Colombian who headed his nation's team negotiating the environmental provisions of the proposed agreement. He spoke Thursday in a downtown Portland conference room at an event sponsored by the Pacific Northwest International Trade Association.

The audience was sparse -- about a dozen -- perhaps indicating limited local interest in a pact with a tiny, faraway country -- and the coffee was not Colombian. But Munoz, who had flown from Bogota, the capital, earlier in the week and delivered the same pitch in Seattle, flipped through 50 slides during a presentation in fluent English.

He began with homicides, which have fallen in the nation of 44 million, he said, from a high of 28,817 in 2002 to 17,479 in 2006 -- and fewer this year. His next graph showed "total extortive kidnappings," which dropped from 1,676 in 2002 to 282 last year.

Other charts were more typical of the information a vice trade minister might normally present. Graphs showed economic growth and investment rising, and inflation and external debt dropping.

"It's no secret that Colombia is a country that has suffered from high levels of violence for a long time," Munoz said. Now, "people feel the business environment is good, the economy is growing, and at the same time they are more secure."

During an interview, Munoz credited Uribe with boosting security by moving from conscripted to better-paid professional army troops deployed throughout the country. Uribe financed such measures by taxing wealthy citizens, who saw the increases, Munoz said, as investments in their safety. He said poverty levels, deforestation and coca production have all fallen under Uribe, now in his second term.

Munoz cited surveys showing public approval rates for the armed forces and the police exceeding the rate for the Roman Catholic Church.

"Over 60 percent of Colombians feel that this free-trade agreement is good for them," Munoz said. "There is no issue in Colombian history that has been as widely and as profoundly discussed as this trade-promotion agreement."

Some critics predict that inexpensive, subsidized U.S. farm goods will flood Colombia if the trade agreement takes effect. But Munoz said Colombia's tropical climate means that many of its farmers don't compete directly with U.S. crops -- other than rice and poultry, which would be protected for several years under the accord.

More than 30 members of Congress have visited Colombia recently, including U.S. Sen. Gordon Smith, R-Ore., who joined a delegation there this month. Munoz, who made his

pitch in Houston on Friday, planned to fly back to Bogota overnight, arriving in time for an event at his 5-year-old son's school.

"I want to be there," Munoz said, "in case he gets an award."

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