

# Guatemala union heads killed despite US trade deal

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MORALES, Guatemala, Oct 17 - Masked gunmen dumped a Guatemalan banana picker's bullet-ridden corpse yards from fields of fruit bound for the United States, a grim reminder of the risks of organizing labor in the Central American country.

Marco Tulio Ramirez, killed last month, was the fifth Guatemalan labor leader murdered this year.

Activists say the deaths show promises to protect labor rights under a U.S. trade pact have changed little at a time President George W. Bush is pressing for similar deals in other Latin American nations with bad labor records.

The Central American Free Trade Agreement, or CAFTA, was approved by the U.S. Congress in 2005 after a tough battle with Democrats who argued that worker safeguards in the agreement were too weak.

CAFTA breaks down tariff barriers between Central American countries and the United States. It has increased Guatemala's export revenues and improved the investment climate in the country, the government says.

Guatemala, which began implementing the pact last year, was notorious for labor abuses during its 36-year long civil war and rights are still weak.

Opponents of CAFTA both in the United States and Central America complained that Washington should not encourage trade with countries like Guatemala without tougher rules to protect workers.

The U.S. Trade Representative gave \$40 million to spend in Guatemala on strengthening the labor ministry, resolving industrial disputes and monitoring work-related abuses. But little has changed.

"Organizing a union in Guatemala is life-threatening," said Noe Ramirez, Marco Tulio's brother and the head of the banana workers' union SITRABI.

"We know the Central American Free Trade Agreement has a chapter on labor protections, but it is not followed," he said, at the union's office in the town of Morales.

## FACTORIES CLOSED

Bush urged Congress on Friday to approve pending free trade pacts with Colombia,

Panama and Peru, saying failure to do so would reduce Washington's leadership in the region.

Critics fiercely oppose the agreement with Colombia, where rights group Human Rights Watch says 72 trade unionists were killed last year.

"I oppose continuing the same failed CAFTA-style trade model in other countries," said Rep. Linda Sanchez, a California Democrat. "Colombia is one of the most dangerous countries in the world for labor organizers, more so than even Guatemala."

Abuses are common across the Guatemalan economy, especially in textile factories known as maquilas, where workers put in long hours for little pay. Activists say companies often close factories when workers try form unions.

In January, Pedro Zamora, head of Guatemala's port workers' union, was murdered in front of his two sons in the middle of contentious negotiations between the union and company bosses. Two leaders of the municipal vendors' union were killed a month later.

In 1999, SITRABI leaders were forced to resign after 200 armed men threatened them ahead of a planned strike. Seven still live in exile in the United States.

In July, soldiers raided the SITRABI union's office asking to see information about members. The ministry of defense later said the action was unjustified.

Since Ramirez's death, suspicious cars have followed union members on and off the company's property, his brother said.

Such intolerance of labor unions has a long history.

Hundreds of union members were murdered or 'disappeared' by state security forces during the country's 1960-1996 civil war between the army and left-wing rebels.

The war began after a coup backed by banana company United Fruit, now known as Chiquita Brands International (CQB.N: Quote, Profile, Research). United Fruit sold many of its plantations, including the ones where Ramirez worked, to Fresh Del Monte Produce Inc (FDP.N: Quote, Profile, Research).

Representatives from the Fresh Del Monte Produce subsidiary Ramirez was employed by said they have nothing to do with his killing and urged authorities to conduct a full investigation.