

Central America takes spotlight with trade deal, presidential conference

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Trade with Central America takes center stage this week, as Washington seeks to wrap up a five-nation Central American Free Trade Agreement and presidents from the isthmus headline an annual conference on the Caribbean Basin in Miami Beach.

U.S. negotiators have set Friday as a target date to finish yearlong talks on CAFTA, a free trade pact with Guatemala, Costa Rica, Nicaragua, El Salvador and Honduras -- all small, developing nations with a combined economic output equal to about 1 percent of the U.S. economy.

Central American leaders are hot on CAFTA to boost sales of their nations' products in the huge U.S. market and to lure more U.S. investment, but critics charge the free trade pact will send U.S. jobs overseas and hurt the poor.

Three Central American presidents -- Francisco Flores of El Salvador, Enrique Bolaños of Nicaragua and Abel Pacheco of Costa Rica -- will discuss CAFTA and other business-related issues at the annual Miami Conference on the Caribbean Basin that began Monday night at the Loews Hotel in Miami Beach.

Bahamas Prime Minister Perry Christie and Gov. Jeb Bush also are among top speakers at the three-day event that focuses on business challenges facing the Caribbean and Central America, which comprise the U.S. "Third Border" after Canada and Mexico, conference organizers said.

Yet as the final round in CAFTA negotiations began Monday in Washington, it was free trade critics who took the offensive with the media -- not CAFTA proponents.

San Francisco-based Health Gap, which seeks greater access to generic drugs to fight HIV-AIDS, conducted a conference call Monday afternoon to denounce the proposed pact as a "threat to public health."

"CAFTA will lock countries into tough new patent rules that will drive the cost of lifesaving drugs up and delay or obstruct generic [drug] competition," said Asia Russell, Health Gap's director of international policy.

The Women's Edge Coalition of Washington, D.C., urged a study on how CAFTA will affect women in Central America, noting its own research has found that U.S.-Mexico free trade has significantly boosted poverty among households headed by women in Mexico.

The left-leaning Council on Hemispheric Affairs in Washington, D.C., meanwhile, issued a statement charging CAFTA would hurt Central American farmers, as highly subsidized U.S. farm products would flood their markets.

Plus, Human Rights Watch of Washington, D.C. voiced concern that CAFTA will do little to boost labor standards if the pact calls only for governments to

enforce existing laws and if Central America remains lax in its enforcement.

Roughly 525 people were registered as of Monday for the Miami Conference on the Caribbean Basin that will discuss CAFTA, tourism, food security and other business-related issues, said Anton Edmunds, deputy director of the Washington-based business advocacy group organizing the event.

The group, formerly Caribbean/Latin American Action, switched its name back to its original title of Caribbean-Central American Action effective Monday to reflect its priority on the Third Border nations.

One question sure to surface at the Miami Beach event: Should negotiators finalize a CAFTA draft this week, will the accord pass Congress in an election year in 2004?

"Chances look about 50-50 now, especially because of so many sensitive agricultural products," said Tony Villamil of the Washington Economics Group in Coral Gables and a conference panelist.

For information on the Miami Conference, check the Internet at [www.claa.org](http://www.claa.org).

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