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Latino rights groups argue against CAFTA

Sun-Sentinel

by Doreen Hemlock

Business Writer

February 14, 2005

Latino civil rights activists in the United States are adding their voices to the growing debate over plans to slash trade barriers with five Central American nations and the Dominican Republic.

Leaders of four Latino groups, including the veteran League of United Latin American Citizens, spoke out last week against the so-called CAFTA agreement, arguing it would hurt Hispanic workers in the United States and abroad.

Their main concerns: inadequate attention to environmental and labor standards, potential damage to Central American farmers from subsidized U.S. farm goods, insufficient input from labor and indigenous groups into the accord, and oversized gains for multinationals at the expense of labor and the poor.

"Already 400 people a day migrate to the United States from Central America, and CAFTA will increase migration ... not improve conditions," said Angela Sanbrano of Los Angeles-based Central American Resource Center, a group founded by Salvadoran refugees, in a statement.

Ralph Nader's Public Citizen group, a longtime opponent of free trade, is helping organize the Latino groups. It moderated an anti-CAFTA news conference Tuesday in Washington, D.C. with LULAC, the Labor Council for Latin American Advancement, and two other groups made up mainly of Central American immigrants.

Their push comes as some U.S. and Central American officials advocate the U.S.-Central American Free Trade Agreement as a way to show solidarity with Central America and with Hispanics in the United States.

Some backers have suggested a vote against CAFTA would be anti-Latino, thereby representing a swipe against the largest U.S. minority, charged Raúl Islas of Public Citizen.

The Bush administration seeks congressional hearings on CAFTA soon.