

from US/LEAP & International Labor Rights Fund

## HUMAN RIGHTS, LABOR GROUPS BLAST USTR for NEW TRADE INITIATIVE

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Washington, DC - Human rights groups yesterday and today blasted the Bush Administration's plans to negotiate new trade agreements with Colombia and Ecuador, arguing that doing so makes meaningless Administration claims to support worker rights in trade agreements. In a two-day hearing on a proposed Andean free trade initiative held before an interagency committee chaired by USTR, the U.S./Labor Education in the Americas Project (US/LEAP), Human Rights Watch, the AFL-CIO, and the International Labor Rights Fund led a drum-beat of opposition to initiating trade agreements with countries who grossly violate worker rights and have failed to demonstrate progress in addressing worker rights concerns.

"Initiating trade negotiations with Colombia, the world's leading killer of trade unionists where 99% of murders are not prosecuted, is appalling," said Stephen Coats, Executive Director of US/LEAP, an independent non-profit organization that supports worker rights in the Americas. "Making progress on impunity should be a necessary, although not sufficient, condition for entering into trade negotiations with Colombia."

Jeffrey S. Vogt, Assistant General Counsel for the International Labor Rights Fund, added, "The failure to adequately investigate crimes against trade unionists is not surprising given the fact that the perpetrators of many of these crimes, the paramilitaries, act with the tacit, and at times, open support of the Colombian government. Until the Colombian government severs all ties with illegal armed groups, and prosecutes those responsible for the thousands of murders of trade unionists, the U.S. government should not enter into negotiations with Colombia for the purpose of reaching a free trade agreement." Ecuador came under sharp attack for failing to comply with commitments made to the U.S. government when it was declared eligible for the ATPDEA in fall 2002.

Carol Pier, Human Rights Watch's Labor Rights and Trade Researcher who wrote a report on Ecuador's deficient labor law and child labor violations in 2002, urged the administration to "require Ecuador to take meaningful steps to fulfill each of its fall 2002 commitments to improve respect for workers' human rights before free trade agreement negotiations with that country commence and to uphold these commitments fully before such an accord is completed and signed." Commitments include labor law reform, enforcement of child labor laws, and prosecution for May 2002 violence against striking banana workers. Stan Gacek, Assistant Director for the International Affairs Department of the AFL-CIO, pointed to the violence against trade

unionists in Colombia, the failure of Peru and Bolivia to enforce labor law, and the broken promises of the Ecuadorian government in arguing that, "Any agreement with the region must oblige the signatories to reform labor laws to meet international standards and require continued compliance with these standards...."

Witnesses also included leaders of the trade union movement in Ecuador and Colombia who voiced opposition to the proposed trade agreements, Jamie Arciniega, President of the Ecuadorian Confederation of Free Trade Union Organizations (CEOSL) and Carlos Rodriguez, President of the Unified Confederation of Workers of Colombia (CUT). In November 2003, USTR Robert Zoellick notified Congress of its intent to negotiate a free trade agreement with the Andean countries of Colombia, Ecuador, Peru and Bolivia. The March 16-17 hearings were held in compliance with Federal regulations as USTR prepares for trade negotiations.