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Concern For Colombia's 'Little Guy'

By Marcela Sanchez

WASHINGTON -- Teenagers and their parents know that shoes make the kid. The footwear of youth marks social standing or social aspirations, and the \$100 or more that parents shell out for a single pair testify to it.

For some of the poorest Colombians it's no different, albeit with a uniquely Colombian twist. Footwear has become a measure of upward mobility even for those waging a guerrilla war. As the Colombian Revolutionary Armed Forces (FARC) tap the lucrative illegal drug trade, young guerrilla fighters want more: the highest quality rubber boots money can buy.

A FARC defector known as Carlos Ploter, who testified before Congress last week, says that drug money is creating "false needs" among guerrilla fighters and distracting them from their initial objective of fighting for social justice. It seems you can't escape consumerism while hanging with your communist comrades these days. Some long for other war luxuries, such as a Toyota 4x4 to carry friends to battle and GPS watches used less for field operations than for showing off.

Sadly, those caught in the middle of a conflict that began 40 years ago, and that has become part of the war on drugs and terrorism, have achieved little else than a twisted sense of upward mobility. The obsession with such creature comforts as shoes and watches is more than a mere token of a senseless war by leftist insurgents. It is a reminder of the poor return on U.S. taxpayers' investment in a country that cannot create opportunities outside the confines of war for many of its poor.

Colombian and U.S. officials, who finished a second round of trade negotiations last week, are now betting that free trade will provide the real opportunities that war cannot. But accepting current U.S. conditions for "free trade" will likely exacerbate the problems of the poor, making their lives more miserable and fueling the disenchantment at the heart of Colombia's conflicts.

The reason is simple: free trade today is distorted by subsidies within developed countries. Unless Colombia and the other Andean nations now negotiating are allowed to maintain import tariffs as a way to counter U.S. subsidies, producers and farmers of the same goods and crops in the Andes will lose their livelihood. The fact is that if the agreement is not wedded to a substantive commitment to the disadvantaged, the much-touted benefits of trade will end up mostly with the rich.

Concern for the little guy is not revolutionary thinking. It is very American. Washington spends billions of dollars each year (\$22.4 billion in 2003) to protect U.S. rural areas and small family-owned farms from the effects of unfair global trade practices.

A small rice farmer with competitive production costs in the eastern Meta province of Colombia

won't stand a chance. Under the proposed free trade agreement, subsidized U.S. rice would enter Colombia's market with prices 20 percent lower, according to a confidential Colombian study. Without any safeguards, that farmer would quickly lose his business in one of Colombia's most volatile provinces.

Still, U.S. trade negotiators want Andean safeguards gone. They argue that a free trade agreement with such measures won't pass the U.S. Congress.

But that may not be the case. Since 2000, Congress has approved more than \$3 billion in assistance to Colombia. The main purpose of this, the third-largest outlay of foreign aid in the world, has been to aid Colombia's anti-drug and anti-insurgency efforts, primarily through military aid and training.

Supporters in Congress of this assistance like to point to Colombia's recent gains -- in coca- and poppy-crop reductions and military victories over insurgents -- as proof of the aid's efficacy. If free trade is supposed to complement that progress, those members would most likely support the agreement even if it retains certain safeguards.

On the other hand, there are those members who have opposed U.S. aid to Colombia, contending that the United States has concentrated too heavily on the drug war and not enough on the social challenges. For them, only an agreement that promises to protect the most vulnerable would be entertained.

Even with a more flexible Congress, a fairer trade deal may not be in Colombia's future. If so, it won't come as a surprise but rather as an extension of the kind of drug-war logic that rationalizes punishing producers for what the U.S. consumes. Now Washington calls on others to eliminate trade barriers, even if that means others' producers will pay the price.

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