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Take Colombia to task for trade union murders

By Jeff Vogt

Trade experts are in Tucson for their sixth round of negotiations for an Andean Free Trade Agreement among Colombia, Ecuador, Peru and the United States.

In addition to rules on market access for goods and services, government procurement and intellectual property rights, U.S. negotiators also must obtain agreement to ensure the parties do not "fail to effectively enforce (their) own labor laws," as set forth in the Trade Promotion Act of 2002.

The labor rights practices of all parties merit substantial criticism.

But Colombia demands real attention by U.S. negotiators. There, thousands of trade unionists who exercised their labor rights have been murdered, tortured or forced into exile by state security forces and paramilitary groups.

Since 1992, at least 2,028 trade unionists were assassinated in Colombia, reports the National Labor School, in Medellin.

In the first eight months of this year, 47 trade unionists were murdered, and 276 were threatened with death. The government of Colombia has failed to prosecute and convict more than a handful of the perpetrators, or to take effective measures to prevent these crimes.

On Aug. 5, three trade unionists were murdered in the war-torn, eastern province of Arauca. Although the government initially claimed the victims were armed collaborators of a guerrilla organization in Arauca, witnesses reported that Colombian armed forces members executed the men as they knelt on the ground.

This occurred even as the government had been ordered by the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights, an organ of the

Organization of American States, to ensure the safety of two of these victims.

The Colombian government since has acknowledged the trade unionists were executed, and it arrested the soldiers involved.

The U.S. trade representative and the Colombian ambassador to the United States have acknowledged publicly that violence against trade unionists in Colombia is a serious issue.

But boiler-plate language in previous trade agreements merely requires countries to enforce their own labor laws.

That is wholly inadequate to address systematic violation of the rights enshrined in International Labor Organization conventions.

Those include the rights to freely associate, organize and bargain collectively - and the right to life.

The Office of the U.S. Trade Representative must demand that the Colombian government show significant progress on labor rights if a trade agreement is to be approved by Congress.

Colombia should prosecute to the fullest extent of the law those responsible for violating the human rights of trade unionists.

Colombia also must enact effective protection measures and fully comply with the ILO obligations it accepted by ratifying key labor rights conventions almost 30 years ago.

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