

Colombia connections;
A U.S. trade pact is desperately needed by our South American ally. But it needs to do its part.

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Colombia, one of our staunchest allies in South America, needs us to fulfill our commitment to the Andean region's economic development. President Bush has called on Congress to ratify the free trade agreement with Colombia negotiated by his administration, and we too want to see a pact approved. But it's not just Congress that must act with haste.

Colombia has a terrible record of labor violence and abuses. Labor organizers there don't just get fired, they get fired on; more organizers are killed in Colombia in one year than in the entire world. President Alvaro Uribe has created a special department to prosecute crimes against unionists, but the statistics are still dreadful. According to the International Trade Union Confederation, in the last 12 years, only 14 people have been sentenced in more than 1,100 cases of documented union murders.

Premature ratification of the trade agreement could eliminate the best leverage the United States has to encourage Colombia to root out the anti-labor forces linked to paramilitary groups and even to some members of the Colombian Congress. Also, labor groups say U.S. workers will not be able to compete with Colombia's terrorized and unorganized workforce, resulting in an exodus of jobs. Uribe's government, however, argues that the economic opportunities provided by the trade pact will result in greater social stability. It's a thorny issue. The human rights concerns are pressing and valid. It's also true that failing to ratify the agreement would be tantamount to abandoning a neighbor in its time of greatest need.

Colombia is beset with crises. The Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia, or FARC, holds hundreds of people hostage, including three American military contractors and former Colombian presidential candidate Ingrid Betancourt. Uribe upped the ante last weekend, ordering troops to surround the rebels' jungle encampments. That strategy could work, and the rebels could agree to negotiate. But it's a huge risk. They also could respond as they have in the past, by executing hostages.

At the same time, Colombia's relationship with Venezuela has chilled to freezing. The Venezuelan Congress voted to recognize FARC as legitimate combatants -- not the kidnapping, drug-trafficking terrorists they are -- and President Hugo Chavez claims that Colombia and the United States are conspiring to attack his country. Coincidentally,

Venezuelan troops are engaging in exercises along the 1,300-mile border between the two countries.

In this climate of bluster and bravado from next door and a hostage crisis in its most sensitive stage -- and with Americans we fervently want freed -- we desire nothing more than to give Colombia a pledge of economic trust and friendship. But Colombia has to give us reason to believe that a free trade pact will not just make matters worse.