

COLOMBIAN REBELS WANT PEACE TALKS

The Miami Herald
May. 22, 2007

HAVANA --

Colombia's second-largest rebel group is calling for peace talks with the government to include a cease-fire and a freeze in efforts to reach a free trade deal with the United States.

The leftist National Liberation Army made the declaration on Tuesday during talks with the Colombian government being held in Cuba. Action on the trade pact is stalled in the U.S. Congress amid concerns about Colombia's human rights record and allegations linking the government to murderous right-wing militias.

Under the cease-fire, the rebels "will suspend offensive military actions, sabotage and actions of force to obtain finances," the National Liberation Army, or ELN, said in a statement sent to news media.

But the rebels said the government must end its own "hostilities," by "freezing the process for approval" of a free trade pact with Washington.

Colombian President Alvaro Uribe, Washington's staunchest ally in Latin America, last week lashed out at U.S. lawmakers for treating Colombia like a "pariah" by refusing to pass the agreement while moving forward on similar pacts with Panama and Peru.

U.S. lawmakers have expressed worries about allegations of ties between Uribe allies and the illegal militias, which are accused of some of the worst atrocities in a half-century of civil conflict.

In recent months, 13 pro-government Colombian congressmen have been arrested for allegedly having ties to the paramilitaries. Dozens more lawmakers and officials - including Uribe's former domestic spy chief - face criminal investigations.

Uribe has taken credit for creating a climate that has allowed the truth about Colombia's violent past to be aired, and the hardline leader remains hugely popular at home.

The talks in Havana, attended by government peace envoy Luis Carlos Restrepo and ELN leader Pablo Beltran, are the latest round in meetings that began in December 2005 in hopes of reaching a peace settlement.