

EDITORIAL

Getting to a Colombia Trade Deal

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Free trade agreements with Peru and Panama now seem headed toward Congressional approval, after the Bush administration agreed to incorporate the basic labor standards long insisted upon by House Democrats. But a separate trade pact with Colombia rightly remains in legislative limbo over a much starker labor problem. Colombia leads the world in the killing of labor activists.

Under pressure from Congress, President Álvaro Uribe's government has finally begun acknowledging the problem. But it has yet to demonstrate that it means to take effective steps to protect endangered workers and punish those who terrorize them. While the number of killings has declined somewhat over the past few years, it is still unacceptably high. Last year, an average of six union activists were murdered per month. And until now, far too few of these crimes have been energetically prosecuted. Of the 2,100 labor murders recorded since 1991, there have been convictions in only 37 cases.

Before Congress approves the Colombia trade agreement, the Uribe government must expand its investigative efforts, improve its conviction rate and send a clear message that this form of terrorism will no longer be tolerated.

That need not take long, particularly if Washington is prepared to provide some of the resources Colombian justice officials will need. A special unit devoted to prosecuting labor murders began operations this year and is already preparing indictments. Its investigators need armor-plated vehicles and helicopters to travel safely to some of the remote locations where murders were planned or carried out. Money for this equipment should be added to next year's appropriation for Plan Colombia, the antinarcotics partnership which also provides funds for social and economic development.

With a good-faith effort all around, approval of the Colombia Free Trade Agreement could be possible before the end of this year. That, in turn, would help Colombia provide jobs for some of those now recruited into the kind of paramilitary organizations suspected in many of the labor murders.