

Deal With Colombia

A trade pact that can stand on its own merits

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COLOMBIA IS plagued by drug trafficking, guerrilla war and common crime. But violent as it is, [Colombia](#) is much less dangerous than it was five years ago. Since President Álvaro Uribe's first election in 2002, the murder rate has dropped by half, and kidnappings are down 75 percent. For the first time, some of those guilty of massacres have been brought to justice, and, though controversial, the Uribe government's demobilization policy has put some right-wing paramilitary leaders in jail and thousands of their foot soldiers out of action. Left-wing guerrillas are increasingly marginal.

This progress, fragile and incomplete as it may be, is attributable not only to Mr. Uribe but also to a bipartisan U.S. policy, begun under President [Bill Clinton](#) and continued under the Bush administration, of economic and military aid for Colombia. The question now is whether Colombia deserves congressional approval of a trade promotion agreement (TPA). The administration says yes. Colombia's exports already enjoy preferential access to the U.S. market under periodically renewable trade preferences. The TPA would expand them and make them permanent -- while U.S. producers would gain duty-free access to Colombia's market for the first time. But congressional Democrats say no, citing [Bogota's](#) alleged failure to stem the murders of trade unionists, which have made the country, in the words of the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions, "the most perilous place in the world for union activity."

The issue dramatically links human rights concerns with concerns about globalization's impact on workers. But is it really a good argument against this agreement? Among the tens of thousands of people killed in Colombia since 1991, 2,245 were labor union members, according to the country's National Labor College, known by its Spanish initials, ENS. (Of these victims, about 500 were union "leaders.") This sounds like a lot of people -- and it is, in the sense that even one murder is too many. Lately, though, labor union members have been *less* likely to be murdered than other Colombians. In 2006, union members made up 4.8 percent of the labor force, or just under 2 percent of the total population, of 43.5 million, according to ENS. Yet of the 17,206 murder victims in Colombia that year, only 70 -- or 0.4 percent -- were union members. There have been 26 killings of unionists in 2007.

To the extent any perpetrator can be identified, right-wing paramilitary units appear to be the most culpable -- but the murders are not always connected to the victims' political or union activism. On June 6, for example, a group of armed men killed the son of Hernando Melan Cardona, leader of a textile workers union. At the time, Mr. Melan's union was involved in contract talks, and nongovernmental organizations around the world suggested that the murder might be related to the bargaining. Subsequent investigations have shown that it was not, according to human rights activists.

Mr. Uribe has offered protection for unionists and set up a special prosecution team to try those accused of killing them. His critics argue that he shouldn't get the TPA until his prosecutors win some convictions. The issue of "impunity" for such killings is real, but Mr. Uribe's critics are rarely specific about how many past cases must be cleared before they'll drop their objections.

Ratification of the trade promotion agreement would help consolidate Colombia's progress by bringing jobs and income to its people. To make them wait indefinitely while Colombian authorities go through cold-case files would be to substitute some Americans' priorities for those of the Colombian voters who reelected Mr. Uribe last year with over 60 percent of the vote. The United States should not write Mr. Uribe a blank check, but the appropriate means of pressuring him already exist in human rights conditions Congress has attached to Colombia's military aid packages. It's time for Democrats to drop their strained human rights objections to the Colombia trade promotion agreement and deal with it on its merits.