



## **A trade deal is good for Colombian human rights**

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Although the Harper government hasn't yet announced its successful negotiation of a free-trade agreement with Colombia, the domestic battle lines have been forming for half a year. Opponents urge Canada to mimic the U.S. Congress by rejecting an agreement on human-rights grounds; any agreement, they argue, is about Canadian business interests trumping human rights. But let's hold in abeyance the potential benefits to Canadian business and ask: What's the chance the agreement could foster better human-rights conditions in Colombia?

Colombia is living a protracted chapter of the political violence that has stained its democracy since Simon Bolivar's presidency. Faux revolutionaries and organized thugs masquerading as self-defence militias fight for control of the countryside. The revolutionaries murder landowners and business people; the militias hunt labour leaders and human-rights workers. Both sides are funded by the narcotics trade. As a result, Colombia ranks second behind Sudan in the number of internally displaced refugees.

When Alvaro Uribe was elected president in 2002, the revolutionaries lurked behind the first ridge of mountains circling Bogota. Besieged Colombians averted their eyes from the "collateral damage" to human rights as Mr. Uribe cleaned out city environs and the territorial triangle connecting Bogota, Medellin and Cali. A de facto division of zones of influence remains in the countryside. But the overall level of violence has declined, and Mr. Uribe was rewarded with a second term in 2006.

Mr. Uribe has made notable strides in decommissioning the militias and shown more interest lately in prosecuting their crimes. But his attacks on activists and judges who investigate links between militias and the military, government officials and Mr. Uribe's extended family reinforce long-standing concerns about his commitment to justice.

Mr. Uribe pursues free-trade agreements as critical pieces of his economic program and as an antidote to the populism of Hugo Chavez and other Andean cohorts. Latin America's fifth-largest economy is growing at 6.8 per cent. But Colombia suffers from the same income and land distribution problems that afflict the region. Having reached the limits of military effectiveness in fighting the revolutionaries and the "drug war," Colombia's economic progress will be stunted until it finds sustainable solutions to its social and political problems.

Studies suggest increased trade may help improve human- and labour-rights deficiencies. In their recent book *Trade Imbalance: The Struggle to Weigh Human Rights Concerns in Trade Policymaking*, Susan Aaronson and Jamie Zimmerman argue that increased trade brings about increased "integrity rights," such as freedom from arbitrary imprisonment, torture and killings. Studies by Kimberly Elliott and others at the Peterson Institute for International Economics indicate that labour rights that can be objectively measured (such as minimum wage increases) may improve in the short run. Improvements requiring strong regulatory and judicial oversight are longer range and work better with incentives.

There are no moral absolutes or objective criteria for determining when or how to engage countries with troublesome human-rights records. A good starting point would be to ask whether the country is committed to improvement and whether Canadian involvement has a reasonable likelihood of contributing to a successful outcome.

Mr. Uribe has shown meaningful, albeit incomplete, progress in addressing Colombia's human-rights issues. Having had a free-trade deal rejected by the U.S. Congress, he urgently wants this agreement with Canada. And he's bartered a slice of Colombia's sovereignty to get it: The proposed deal will require Colombia to enforce international labour standards under penalty of sanctions.

We have no guarantee that deeper engagement with Colombia will enhance human rights, but those who reject this deal on human-rights grounds ought to explain how Canada will have as great an opportunity as it would through this agreement. They should also explain how the Colombian human-rights cause will be better advanced if, on the heels of rejection by the U.S. and Canada, Colombia were to secure greater investment and trade from China, Russia and India. And if human-rights concerns are just a smokescreen for opposition to free-trade agreements, let's have that debate, too.