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Colombian visitors oppose trade deal with Canada

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OTTAWA – A delegation from Colombia says a pending free-trade deal with Canada will only worsen already fragile labour and human rights conditions in the South American country.

Leaders of Colombian social movements flew north to Ottawa this week to warn the deal was signed with no regard for workers' rights or environmental standards, contrary to promises from the Harper government.

"There are no labour rights in Colombia," said Maria del Carmen Sanchez Burgos, national president of the country's health workers' union. "So workers in Colombia don't have any guarantees."

Canada says the trade agreement will improve market access and provide a more secure environment for investment, while parallel labour and environment agreements ensure progress on those other fronts.

But the delegation wants Canada to act on a Commons committee's call to carry out an independent human rights assessment before the deal comes to Parliament for ratification.

The tour was organized by Canadian church groups and human-rights and non-governmental organizations, including Amnesty International.

Amnesty has documented grave human rights abuses against indigenous peoples in Colombia, as well as threats and attacks against trade union leaders related to contract negotiations and opposition to multinational companies.

The human rights group says that since 1985 more than three million Colombians have been forced to flee their homes. More than 60 per cent of those displaced have been evicted from lands situated in areas of mineral, agricultural, or other economic interest.

The Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia, FARC, and the National Liberation Army, the ELN, continue to commit human rights abuses and to violate international humanitarian law, adds the human rights group.

It also cites mounting evidence of links between members of President Alvaro Uribe's political circle and illegal paramilitary organizations.

Omar Fernandez Obregon, a member of the Franciscan religious order in Bogota, says the deal Prime Minister Stephen Harper signed with Uribe last November lacked real input from civil society groups.

"The human rights situation is not improving at all," he said.

"They still kill people, they still displace people."

Critics say the side agreements are window-dressing with no real force.

While in Canada, the delegation is slated to meet with Canadian civil society groups, opposition politicians and Peter Kent, minister of state for foreign affairs.

Paul Moist of the Canadian Union of Public Employees said Tuesday that Canada should not sign any free trade agreement "if one of the countries has such gross violations of human rights."

MPs should "take a second look" at the deal when it comes before Parliament, he said.

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