



Canada/Colombia Free Trade Deal: Meaningless Consultation Process Sells Human Rights Short

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Human rights, development, and labour groups have serious misgivings about the Canadian government's commitment to carry out a meaningful assessment of the human rights impact of its controversial free trade agreement with Colombia, as is legally stipulated by annual reporting requirements in the agreement.

Concerns were heightened when it came to light that government analysis for the 2014 report, due on or before May 15, would be based in part on an online consultation that lasts just six working days. A call for submissions by "interested parties" was quietly posted on a government webpage on March 19, 2014. The deadline given for submissions is six working days later on March 26, 2014. Canadian organizations with a long history of involvement with Colombia had been asking government officials for months to share information about the plans for consultation, including timelines, deadlines and how to participate. These details were not provided until after the unreasonably short consultation period had actually been launched.

The consultation process is so deeply flawed that a wide range of organizations and activists have agreed that they are unable to meet the impossibly short deadline and will therefore not make submissions.

"The government says it is seeking the input of interested parties yet our member organizations, who work closely with sectors of the population in Colombia who are experiencing grave human rights abuses, were not advised about this extremely time-limited opportunity for input ahead of time," states Stacey Gomez, Coordinator of the Americas Policy Group (APG). "Furthermore, there was no public announcement that the brief consultation had been launched. Organizations only found out after the fact and only thanks to repeatedly questioning government officials."

"Under these conditions, it is hard to see what meaningful input the government will receive. In fact, it raises serious questions about the intentions of the government," says Alex Neve, Secretary General of Amnesty International Canada. "It is of great concern that the government seems uninterested in hearing from people and organizations that have firsthand information about the scope of human rights violations on the ground, absolutely essential – in fact, central – input for any reliable human rights impact assessment."

"Time and time again, the Colombian and Canadian governments have assured us that the Canada-Colombia Free Trade Agreement (CCFTA) would help improve the human rights situation. Yet in 2013, there were 26 assassinations of trade union activists and leaders, 4 more than in 2012," states Robyn Benson, National President of the Public Service Alliance of Canada (PSAC). "We've also witnessed greater repression and violence perpetrated against those who are viewed as obstacles to the mega-development of Colombian oil, mining and agriculture resources, sectors that have been opened up to foreign investments through the free trade agreement."

Members of the APG continue to call for a credible, independent human rights impact assessment of the CCFTA to be carried out at regular intervals, as a mechanism of due diligence to ensure the agreement does not exacerbate an ongoing human rights crisis in Colombia. Furthermore, we expect a reasonable opportunity to contribute to this process for both Canadian and Colombian organizations that have been monitoring human rights in Colombia for decades. Consult [this report](#).

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Background

Amidst widespread concerns about an ongoing grave human rights crisis in Colombia, the CCFTA was passed with the addition of a requirement on both countries to place before their respective legislatures an annual report detailing the effects of the free trade agreement on human rights. The trade deal came into force in August, 2011.

In 2012, the Canadian government tabled an empty report, claiming lack of time and data. The government's 2013 report was also critiqued for its failure to report on or analyze deadly human rights realities in Colombia. Requests by civil society organizations in Canada to provide input were met with silence. The report stated that the government had issued a public call via a website nine days before the deadline for submission of the report "to ensure the ability of all interest (sic) parties to provide input". This mechanism generated no submissions, according to the government's report.

This raises troubling questions about what effort has been made to open the consultation in any meaningful way to communities, individuals and organizations in Colombia, who have direct, on the ground information about the human rights impact of the trade deal. This obscure announcement on a Canadian government webpage would not readily come to their attention, particularly since it does not appear to have been promoted or announced in any public way. Furthermore, the webpage is not available in Spanish.

The gravity of the human rights situation in Colombia was underscored at a Round Table on Parliament Hill on February 5 at which Indigenous rights defenders presented disturbing testimony to the All-Party Parliamentary Group for the Prevention of Genocide and Other Crimes against Humanity about threats, attacks and assassinations of Indigenous people in areas of Colombia earmarked for resource extraction, including regions where Canadian companies are present. Threats, attacks and assassinations of trade unionists in Colombia continue, as does a pattern of deadly violence against community members seeking the return of lands that have been misappropriated under cover of the ongoing internal armed conflict in Colombia, or who oppose use of land for economic megaprojects.

The Americas Policy Group (APG) brings together dozens of international development and humanitarian NGOs, human rights groups, labour unions, research institutions, church and solidarity groups in Canada, including Amnesty International and the PSAC, to work on policy issues related to development and social justice .

Amnesty International Canada is an impartial human rights organization that carefully monitors the human rights situation in Colombia and other countries around the world, and engages in advocacy to prevent and halt human rights abuses.

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