

Canada should not proceed with Colombia trade deal

The Harper government should scrap the Canada-Colombia Free Trade Agreement that it recently negotiated and signed with the government of President Alvaro Uribe. Here's why.

Colombia remains the most dangerous country in the world for unionized workers. More labour leaders are killed there every year than in the rest of the world combined. This keeps unions weak and wages miserably low. It makes Colombia attractive for foreign investment, which comes to a large degree from Canadian resource extraction companies. Few of the crimes against unionized workers and other civilians have been investigated and even fewer charges have been laid, resulting in a 97 per cent rate of impunity. Under circumstances such as these, workers will never benefit from the economic activity that might be generated by a trade deal.

Colombia's premier drug mafias are the infamous paramilitary organizations that are also responsible for heinous crimes against humanity in the countryside and the sprawling cities. These groups are supposed to have been demilitarized but the truth is that tens of thousands of individuals have regrouped into new vigilante squads under the name of the Black Eagles. They continue to control the drug trade, to threaten and murder Indigenous and Afrocolombian peasants for their resource-rich territories, and trade unionists for their demands for fairness and decent work.

Worse still, more than 60 members of President Uribe's coalition, a full 20 per cent of the Congress members, are being investigated for crimes such as collaboration with paramilitaries, profiting from drug trafficking and collusion in election fraud. Colombia's Supreme Court has issued charges against 33 of those members, many of them Uribe allies, for alleged collusion with far-right death squads. The courts have also issued charges against Jorge Noguera, an ex-director of the intelligence agency, who is in prison awaiting trial on charges of supplying the names of potential human targets to paramilitary groups.

Political scandals abound. The world was outraged to learn in November 2008 that members of the Colombian army were engaged in widespread and systematic killings of civilians, who they then dressed in FARC guerrilla fatigues, claiming they had been killed in combat. The press calls this practice "false positives." In February 2009, the Colombian intelligence agency DAS was discovered to be wiretapping opposition politicians, Supreme Court judges, prosecutors and journalists, and passing on the information gathered to criminal groups. *Semana*, a local magazine, wrote that the intelligence gathered was being sold to the highest bidder. How will economic integration with such a violent and corrupt system promote Canadian values such as democratic governance and the rule of law?

Human Rights Watch and other groups say that rewarding the Colombian government with the free trade deal that it so desperately wants would remove any incentive to make improvements in the enforcement of human rights. In another context Prime Minister Stephen Harper has said: "I think Canadians want us to promote our trade relations worldwide ... but I don't think Canadians want us to sell out our values, our belief in democracy, freedom and human rights. They don't want us to sell that out to the almighty dollar." It is true that Canadians don't want that, not in China, the country to which Mr. Harper was referring, nor in Colombia where human rights violations are arguably worse.

Parliament's standing Committee on International Trade (CIIT) recommended in 2008 that in the case of Colombia an "impartial human rights impact assessment should be carried out by a competent body, which is subject to independent levels of scrutiny and validation; the recommendations of this assessment should be addressed before Canada considers signing, ratifying and implementing an agreement with Colombia."

That has not happened but Mr. Harper has already signed the deal. Let's stop the train until Colombia demonstrates clear improvements in horrific record of human rights violations.