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Colombia Trade Deal Division

The controversial Canada-Colombia free trade negotiations were again at the centre of intense debate last week as various parties offered their opinions of a possible deal to the Standing Committee on International Trade.

On June 2, Shirley-Ann George, vice-president of international operations at the Canadian Chamber of Commerce, voiced her organization's support for the deal. She warned that abandoning talks now would send the wrong message to other potential free trade partners.

"Now that we are seeking to negotiate and complete FTAs in a more timely fashion, we are having significant difficulties getting other countries to take us seriously and show interest in negotiating with us," she said. "Even some small countries are reluctant to engage. So we must not forget that how we approach the FTA with Colombia can have real consequences on our ability to negotiate FTAs with other larger partners, including, for example, the very important European Union."

That same day, the committee heard from Luis Hernán Correa Miranda, vice-president of the Unified Workers Confederation, a major union in Colombia.

Mr. Miranda said the union was convinced a free trade agreement would not help the union or average Colombians.

"The only ones who will benefit from that free trade agreement will be the multinational companies, in particular the U.S. companies," he said. "The employers are benefiting because the trade union movement is disappearing."

On June 4, Gilles-Philippe Pagé of Peace Brigades International said reports of extra-judicial killings of civilians is on the decline because Colombian security forces are hiding attacks by presenting dead civilians as FARC supporters.

"What is important to note here is that this situation gives the impression that the number of civilians killed or executed as a consequence of the conflict, is declining," he said. "But, in fact, the number is simply transferred to the number of guerilla members killed in combat."

Roger Falconer of the United Steelworkers, also opposed the agreement.

Mr. Falconer said other agreements, such as NAFTA and Canada's deals with Costa Rica and Chile have not "provided any enforceable legal mechanisms to pursue labour rights violations."

But Leigh Cruess, senior vice-president of Enbridge, and Vladimir Torres, trade and development project manager at the Canadian Foundation for the Americas (FOCAL), voiced their own support for the deal.

"We believe that Canada has the obligation to support the democratic government, and that the trade reasons are valid in and of themselves," Mr. Torres said, "but our concern for the well-being of Colombians and human rights in Colombia is definitely the most powerful argument for why we should indeed go ahead with this trade agreement."

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