

PM announces free trade talks with Colombia, Peru

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[CBC News](#)

Prime Minister Stephen Harper and Colombian President Alvaro Uribe announced Monday the two countries would begin trilateral talks on a free trade agreement with Peru.

Harper, travelling through Latin America for six days this week to promote trade and investment in the region, said the free trade negotiations would begin in Lima on Tuesday. The PM added Canada and Colombia will also negotiate a deal to eliminate double taxation.



Prime Minister Stephen Harper, left, shakes hands with Colombian President Alvaro Uribe at the Presidential Palace in Bogota, Colombia. Harper is on a week-long state visit to Colombia, Chile, Barbados and Haiti to promote trade relations. (CP/Ryan Remiorz)

Answering reporters who quoted human-rights groups critical of such a deal, Harper said it would be "ridiculous" not to pursue a trade relationship with Colombia, especially while the country is making strides towards improving its human rights record.

"When we see a country like Colombia that has decided it has to address its social, political and economic problems, it wants to embrace economic freedom, it wants to embrace political democracy and human rights and social development, then we say we're in," he told reporters, with Uribe standing at his side.

The announcement in Bogota, the Colombian capital, comes as Harper is under pressure to make human rights a talking point in his meeting with Uribe.

The Colombian leader is embroiled in a scandal being investigated by Colombia's Supreme Court, in which it is alleged two senators in his party as well as one of his cousins are linked to right-wing death squads.

Last year, 687 people were kidnapped and more than 17,000 murdered in the country. Although Uribe's government has been credited with cutting crime, the scandal involving the paramilitary groups has received global attention.

'Ridiculous position'

Harper highlighted what he perceived as Colombia's efforts to embrace political and economic methods to reform itself. When a country makes that push to affect reforms, "We're not going to say, 'Fix all your social, political and human rights problems, and only then will we engage in trade relations with you,'" he said. "That's a ridiculous position."

Bill Fairbairn, a Toronto-based human rights activist who has monitored the situation in Latin America for more than two decades, said Canada should pull free trade off the table based on Colombia's dismal human-rights record.

"The most important message, really, for Prime Minister Harper on this visit should be a strong message of support to the human rights community in Colombia and a strong signal that it can't be business as usual in a country where there are gross and systematic human rights violations," he said.

But there may be an upside to a trade deal, countered Carlo Dade, the executive director for the Ottawa-based think tank the Canadian Foundation for the Americas. It may be an opportunity to draw the Colombian government's attention to Canadian concerns, he said.

"Human rights will be looked at very closely, labour conditions will be looked at very closely, environmental conditions will be looked at very closely," Dade said. "So if anything, this may be a chance to advance the rest of the agenda with the Colombians."

Harper's next stop is Santiago, Chile, where he will arrive Monday evening.

The prime minister's officials have described the six-day tour of South America and the Caribbean as a signal to the hemisphere that the region is a priority for Harper, and that he is more interested in economic talks than past Canadian leaders.

With files from the Canadian Press

<http://www.cbc.ca/canada/story/2007/07/16/harper-colombia.html>