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SOUTH AMERICA

Andean nations reach consensus on U.S. trade

Andean bloc presidents agreed to chart a new course without Venezuela and urged the United States to extend trade preferences.

By Gonzalo Solano

Associated Press

QUITO, Ecuador - Presidents of the four-nation Andean trade alliance agreed Tuesday to chart a new course without Venezuela and to urge Washington to extend expiring trade preferences created to help counter the cocaine trade.

Bolivia's Evo Morales, Ecuador's Alfredo Palacio, Colombia's Alvaro Uribe and Peru's Alejandro Toledo signed an accord pledging to respect the rights of individual nations in the bloc to negotiate free-trade agreements with the United States.

The leaders also agreed to initiate regional free-trade talks with the European Union by July 20.

President Hugo Chávez of Venezuela, a fierce critic of U.S.-backed trade liberalization, announced in April that he was abandoning the Andean bloc, saying it had been "fatally wounded" when Colombia and Peru signed individual trade pacts with Washington. Those deals have yet to be ratified by those nations' legislatures.

Another focus of the summit was extending the preferences that Washington granted in 1991 to help Andean countries diversify their economies away from production of coca leaf.

The preferences, covering thousands of products, are scheduled to end later this year. U.S. lawmakers and diplomats have said that an extension, in lieu of formal trade deals, is not in the cards.

The leaders agreed Tuesday to urge Washington to extend the preferences.