

Posted on Tue, May. 10, 2005

DR-CAFTA

## Latin American leaders push for free trade

Three Central American presidents say DR-CAFTA will help solve problems such as poverty and immigration and will help strengthen democracy.

BY JANE BUSSEY

[jbussey@herald.com](mailto:jbussey@herald.com)

Three Central American presidents kicked off a barnstorming tour of America on Monday in Miami, urging support for a trade agreement they say will boost economic growth, reduce poverty, halt the flow of immigrants and strengthen democracy in the struggling region.

"We have been -- for 500 years -- poor countries," said Guatemalan President Oscar Berger as he stood shoulder to shoulder with his counterparts, Ricardo Maduro of Honduras and Enrique Bolaños of Nicaragua at an event at the Port of Miami.

Also attending the afternoon event to push for passage of the Central American Free Trade Agreement was Gov. Jeb. Bush, who emphasized that the potential members of the pact -- the Dominican Republic, Costa Rica, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras and Nicaragua -- were key trading partners for South Florida.

The 10-city tour by the presidents from the Dominican Republic and Central America is the latest effort by the Bush administration and the business community to build support for CAFTA on Capitol Hill. FedEx, Coca Cola, Microsoft, and Citigroup are sponsoring the tour.

Earlier in the day, John Murphy, vice president for international trade at the U.S. Chamber of Commerce, told a luncheon gathering of local business executives, lawyers and government officials at The Biltmore Hotel in Coral Gables: "Thank you all for coming. Thank you for working with us. We need your help."

The DR-CAFTA accord faces an uncertain future in Congress. Concerns over the soaring trade deficit and China's growing economic might have diminished U.S. enthusiasm for free trade pacts.

Lawmakers also have been overwhelmed with specific opposition from textile groups, the sugar industry, labor and environmental groups. Under an earlier schedule, the House was to have voted on the pact by Memorial Day, but implementing legislation has yet to be introduced.

Murphy announced that CAFTA had received a boost Monday with an endorsement by the National Council of Textile Organizations.

But in a sign of how divisive the CAFTA debate has been, another leading group, the National Textile Association, immediately issued a statement opposing the trade pact and calling support for it short sighted.

The meeting at the port was held under tight security.

Several dozen steel workers, retirees, Hispanic group representatives and others carrying placards stood on the corner outside the port to protest DR-CAFTA, but their presence was obscured by a line of 18-wheelers waiting to enter the port.

"It was hard to do interviews because all the trucks were honking [in support]," said Eric Rubin, the state director of the Florida Fair Trade Coalition. "I think we got our message across."

Bolaños told the luncheon audience he was confident that President Bush would gain CAFTA passage and also pledged that his own Congress would approve the accord, despite resistance in Nicaragua.

"CAFTA is going to bring progress to our country," said the Nicaraguan president, forecasting that economic growth would hit 8 percent annually for the first four years, a rate the country has not achieved in more than two decades.

"This free trade agreement with the United States will provide tools for democracy," Bolaños said.

Maduro recalled how he was recently in an airplane accident when his small plane lost power and crashed into the water near a crowded beach. His unfinished agenda went through his mind at that time, Maduro said, adding that passing CAFTA was at the top of the agenda.

The three Central American presidents will fan out across the United States, with Bolaños heading to Tampa; Maduro to Birmingham, Ala., and Berger to Memphis before they regroup with the Dominican, Salvadoran and Costa Rican presidents in Washington for a meeting with President Bush on Thursday.

Chuck Cobb, chairman of Florida FTAA, Inc., which is lobbying to have Miami named as the headquarters of the proposed Free Trade Area of the Americas, called CAFTA approval critical to that effort.

"There will not be an FTAA and there will not be a headquarters in Miami if CAFTA does not pass," Cobb told the luncheon, which included many supporters of the FTAA effort.



CARL JUSTE/HERALD STAFF

**PROMOTERS:** Guatemalan president Oscar Berger, left, Miami-Dade mayor Carlos Alvarez, Honduran president Ricardo Maduro, and Florida Governor Jeb Bush.



TIM CHAPMAN/HERALD STAFF

OPPOSITION: Representatives of The Florida Free Trade Coalition protest DR-CAFTA with signs and shouts at the entrance to the Port of Miami-Dade.