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## COLOMBIA

### Trade minister seeks gradual free trade

BY DAN MOLINSKI

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**BOGOTA, Colombia** - Colombia's trade minister said Tuesday that any free trade agreement with the United States should allow for a gradual lifting of trade barriers rather than imposing a tariff-free rule on all products at once.

"Each product should have its own timetable," said Jorge Humberto Botero, who is in the coastal city of Cartagena where negotiators from Colombia, the United States, Ecuador and Peru are discussing a possible free-trade deal.

Botero also said Colombian products should have tariff-free access to the United States when -- or even before -- American products are granted such privileges to enter Colombia, according to a statement from the government.

The weeklong Cartagena talks are the seventh since free-trade negotiations began last May. If everything goes according to plan, a four-country free trade agreement will be signed in March in Washington. Lawmakers from each country would then have to separately approve the deal. Implementation could begin by the end of this year.

But huge disagreements remain among the 1,500 negotiators, politicians and businessmen from the four countries participating in the discussions. The Andean nations are concerned about allowing entry into their countries of cheap imports of food produced by farmers in the United States who receive huge government subsidies.

There also are worries that any intellectual property clauses could cause medicine costs in Colombia and the other South American nations to soar because it could make local production of generic drugs illegal.

Colombia, Ecuador and Peru would like to iron out these problems so its exporters can gain free access to the world's largest economy. Only six countries currently have a free-trade deal with the United States.