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Free trade delivers more immigrants, not jobs

By U.S. Rep. Raúl M. Grijalva

THIS week in Houston, trade negotiations are taking place between the Bush administration and the Central American governments for a Central American Free Trade Agreement.

When the U.S. public and Congress consider the results of these negotiations, it is important to consider the experience of my district with the promises and the reality of "free trade."

The southern boundary of the district I represent in Congress crosses more than 300 miles of the U.S./Mexico border.

Ten years ago, we heard promises and predictions about the North American Free Trade Agreement and how it would produce jobs and growth on both sides of the border, improve the environment in border towns, and reduce the flow of undocumented immigration across the border. Since New Year's Day 1994, when NAFTA took effect, we have seen exactly the opposite effects of what was promised, especially with regard to undocumented immigration.

This past summer, in fact, a new record was set on the border: 151 migrant workers died crossing the border to seek work and a better life in the United States; 47 deaths occurred in the month of August.

What would make someone leave their family and risk a painful death from heat and thirst? There is the pull from the north's demand for cheap and exploitable labor. There are also strong forces pushing from the south: poverty and hunger. The Economic Commission on Latin America and the Caribbean recently reported that the number of Latin Americans living in poverty increased to 220 million people in 2002, of which 95 million are destitute.

After NAFTA, 1 million small- and medium-size farmers in Mexico have been forced off their land because they were unable to compete with U.S. corn producers, threatening people's basic ability to feed and sustain themselves.

The farmers and agricultural workers of 10 years ago are today's undocumented immigrants. Border city populations have exploded with laborers, largely women, hoping to earn \$3-\$5 a day in the internationally owned maquiladoras, where they routinely endure sexual harassment and are forced to take pregnancy tests as a condition of employment. Industrial pollution on the border has increased and shanty-town colonias without basic services have multiplied.

NAFTA has not improved the quality of life of the majority of Mexicans. It has not improved the infrastructure so that small and medium producers can get their produce to markets. It has not provided better jobs at decent wages in the rural or urban sectors. And NAFTA has certainly not stemmed the flow of people risking their lives to seek work.

By any standard, including those of its proponents, NAFTA has been a failure.

The Economic Policy Institute found that NAFTA eliminated 766,030 actual and potential U.S. jobs between 1994 and 2000 and contributed to rising income inequality, undermined workers' right to organize and reduced benefits for workers in the U.S., Mexico and Canada.

A new set of priorities must guide our future trade policies. Improving living standards and working conditions, protecting the environment and building just and sustainable economies in developing nations should be the basic goals of our policy.

There must be substantial involvement in the process from campesino, labor and environmental advocates and others who have been marginalized by secrecy and a rushed negotiating time line, to produce an agreement consistent with these goals.

To prioritize the interests of people over corporations in trade policy, the CAFTA negotiators in Houston should include the following principles in their document:

1. Central American countries should not increase trade liberalization at the cost of fundamental development needs of people. The trade agreement should facilitate diverse development strategies, recognizing that the countries in this region are at different levels of development stages, not close to parity with the United States.
2. Increase developing countries' market access to industrial countries. Current U.S. tariffs and subsidies put developing countries at a severe disadvantage.
3. Guarantee the governments' authority to pursue agricultural tariffs and targeted subsidies that safeguard their nations' food security and boost crop diversification. Countries should be able to exclude staple crops such as corn, beans and rice from trade liberalization and should not be forced to accept genetically modified crops.
4. A labor standard consistent with the principles of the International Labor Organization must be an enforceable part of the agreement, The "enforce your own laws" standard of the recent FTA with Chile is not a realistic one for Central America, since the few labor protection laws that exist are often ignored and poorly enforced.
5. Environmental standards must be incorporated into the main text of the agreement and as enforceable as the commercial provisions.

An agreement reflecting these priorities would be a significant shift in trade policy, and that is exactly what is called for.

Fair trade, not "free trade," is what is needed to promote sustainable and just economic growth throughout the Americas. Without this policy change, more Central Americans will be forced to embark on a desperate journey of hope that for some will end in the Arizona desert.

Grijalva is a Democrat from Arizona.