

Rights group wants Ecuador reform before U.S. deal

Reuters

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QUITO, Ecuador (Reuters) - The United States should not negotiate a free-trade deal with Ecuador until the Andean nation clamps down on child labor and boosts other labor protections, a U.S.-based rights group said Wednesday.

"Ecuador has been making promises and commitments about what it is going to do to improve labor rights but we have hardly seen anything," Human Rights Watch labor analyst Carol Pier told Reuters in a telephone interview from Washington.

"So a treaty with the United States would be a reward for the country's noncompliance," she said. "It should take significant steps before the negotiations begin and follow through on these before any treaty is signed."

Ecuador wants to negotiate a trade deal with Washington this year, as do neighboring Peru and Colombia. Ecuador would like talks to start in the second quarter.

But a group of U.S. lawmakers has criticized Ecuador for failing to follow through on vows to make it easier to form labor unions and to reduce child labor on banana plantations in the world's biggest exporter of the fruit.

About 30,000 children work on some 6,000 banana plantations along Ecuador's tropical Pacific coast. Many children in Ecuador work alongside their parents to help make ends meet in a nation where 60 percent of the population is poor.

The country of 12 million people says it is making progress on the child labor issue, which has become a potential obstacle to a trade deal. The issue complicated talks to expand U.S. trade preferences for the nation in 2002.

"Ecuador can make many promises but if it doesn't follow through on them, they mean nothing," Pier said.

Next week, the U.S. trade representative will start receiving feedback on Ecuadorean labor and business issues from investors and nongovernmental organizations as a step toward negotiating a deal.

Pier said Human Rights Watch planned to file a complaint with the U.S. trade representative over Ecuador's lack of progress on plans to hire 22 inspectors to control child labor.

She said that with just three inspectors hired so far, Ecuador could not ensure minors were kept from dangerous tasks, attend school and work no more than six hours a day.