

US unionists alarmed by Colombia woes

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BOGOTA, Colombia --

A delegation of visiting U.S. union leaders expressed alarm Wednesday at what its members called a steady erosion of labor rights in the world's deadliest country for organized labor.

Citing continued killings and threats against trade unionists in Colombia, Democratic leaders in the U.S. Congress have refused to approve a free trade agreement that the Bush administration signed with Colombia in 2006.

"Colombia is the only country in this hemisphere where the rights of workers to negotiate with employers is even lower than in the U.S.," Larry Cohen, president of the Communications Workers of America, told reporters.

The delegation, including representatives of the AFL-CIO and United Steelworkers, emerged from an hours-long meeting with President Alvaro Uribe on Wednesday expressing skepticism that organized labor is safer under his administration.

Some 470 unionists have been assassinated since Uribe took office in August 2002, including five so far this year, said Dan Kovalik, a United Steelworkers lawyer.

About 97 percent of those murders are unsolved, he said.

An AFL-CIO statement denounced a continuing "climate of fear" for trade unionists whom delegates met on their two-day trip, and accused the Uribe government of refusing to protect organizers.

Uribe's supporters note that unionist murders have declined on his watch, and the chief prosecutor's office formed a new unit to prosecute labor killings last year.

His government has also proposed a law to promote union organizing, soon to be debated in congress, Labor Minister Diego Palacios said.

"I'm convinced that the situation in Colombia is improving," Palacios told reporters.

The percentage of union members in the work force has fallen to 4 percent from 6 percent under Uribe, leftist Sen. Alexander Lopez said, accounting now for just 831,000 of a 18.5 million strong labor force, according to the Escuela Nacional Sindical, a labor rights research group. Chief prosecutor Mario Iguaran told the AP his office is finally beginning to chip away at a backlog of 1,300 cases of murders, threats and intimidation involving trade unionists.

According to the International Labor Organization, 36 convictions were obtained last year in cases of murder or attempted murder against Colombian unionists - more than in the previous three years combined.

Associated Press writer Vivian Sequera contributed to this report.