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Contact: Communications Office
(202) 224-4515

BAUCUS HAILS COLOMBIA'S COMPLIANCE WITH LABOR ACTION PLAN COMMITMENTS

Finance Committee Chairman Eager to Approve Colombia FTA after Agreement is Reached on Trade Adjustment Assistance

Washington, DC – Senate Finance Committee Chairman Max Baucus (D-Mont.) today hailed Colombia's early completion of the second stage of commitments required by the Colombian Labor Rights Action Plan as an important step forward showing Colombia's progress reducing labor violence and strengthening labor rights. Baucus reiterated his commitment to renewing and extending Trade Adjustment Assistance (TAA) and is eager to approve the U.S.-Colombia Free Trade Agreement (FTA) as soon as an agreement on TAA is reached.

"Today's labor action plan commitments are an important step forward in our efforts to pass the job-creating Colombia Free Trade Agreement and build on Colombia's progress strengthening labor rights and safety," said Baucus. **"These steps forward on the labor action plan will continue to enhance Colombia's work to improve labor rights, reduce violence and punish violent offenders. We're working together to move this trade agreement forward along with crucial assistance to help American workers meet the challenge of global competition."**

The Obama administration announced today that Colombia has completed the second stage of action items, which are due on June 15 as part of the Colombian Labor Rights Action Plan that President Obama and Colombian President Santos agreed to on April 7 to address concerns regarding worker rights and safety. The Action Plan committed Colombia to take a series of specific steps to strengthen enforcement of core labor rights, increase protection of labor activists from violence and reduce impunity for perpetrators of violence against union members. This Action Plan set forth steps that Colombia must take by April 22, June 15 and December 15, among others. The Administration notified Congress last month that Colombia had completed the April 22 action items, allowing Congress and the Administration to begin drafting the implementing bill for the free trade agreement.

As part of the second stage of action items, Colombia has enacted legislation to accelerate the effective date of legislation to crack down on cooperatives, which some Colombian employers have used to avoid forming direct employment relationships with their workers. Colombia has also issued new regulations to implement its cooperatives law, including stiff penalties for repeat offenders. In addition, Colombia has enacted legislation establishing criminal penalties for employers that undermine the right to organize and bargain collectively. Colombia also took steps beyond the commitments in the Action Plan, including signing the Victims and Land Restitution Law that compensates victims of violence and returns land to those displaced by the armed conflict and a tripartite agreement between government, labor and business in support of the Action Plan.

Earlier this year, Baucus met with Colombian labor leaders in Bogota to discuss how to further improve labor conditions in Colombia and called for a concrete plan to address labor issues so as to move forward with approval of the FTA. Once implemented, the FTA itself would help address many labor concerns. The FTA includes an enforceable obligation to adopt and maintain in law the five fundamental labor rights laid out by the International Labor Organization: freedom of association; the right to collective bargaining; the elimination of all forms of forced or compulsory labor; the effective abolition of child labor and a prohibition on the worst forms of child labor; and the elimination of workforce discrimination. Colombia already has made significant progress in reducing the level of violence against unionists and prosecuting the perpetrators.

Baucus led the fight in Congress urging the Administration to send the Colombia FTA to Congress and is working with his colleagues in the House and Senate to secure a path forward for extending TAA along with approving the pending free trade agreements with Colombia, Panama and Korea. Baucus has been a longtime champion of the TAA program, which expired on February 13, 2011, and has stressed that TAA must pass in tandem with the FTAs. In 2009, Baucus led the effort in Congress to pass the most significant expansion and reform of the TAA program since it was created in 1962. TAA provides extended income support and job training to workers, firms, ranchers, farmers and communities that experience job loss because of increased imports or factory shifts abroad and also helps prevent layoffs entirely by assisting trade-distressed companies retool and become more competitive.

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