

Colombia Lobbies Without Success for Stalled Trade Pact

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To say the stalled U.S.-Colombia trade deal is important to the Colombian government is something of an understatement.

Colombian Ambassador Carolina Barco had no fewer than 630 meetings with U.S. lawmakers about the pact last year in an effort to get Congress to approve the deal, negotiated by the George W. Bush administration.

But it's an uphill battle, for the moment. With public attitudes toward trade becoming increasingly negative, job losses weighing down much of the United States and a presidential administration focusing on other priorities, Congress has been in no mood to approve new trade deals.

But given the deal's importance to the economy of the South American nation, and its role in internal politics, Barco and other Colombian officials continue their fight. They are working to persuade the Obama administration and lawmakers that Colombia has made great strides in addressing concerns raised by critics, particularly in its judicial system. The officials also are pushing for clarity on how to secure congressional approval, Barco said Wednesday.

"We hope that once health care reform is through, we can go back and look at the free trade agreements again," Barco said as she prepared to fly back to Bogota to host a visiting congressional delegation led by Rep. David E. Price, D-N.C.

The U.S.-Colombia relationship blossomed during the recent Bush administration, as Colombian President Alvaro Uribe aggressively targeted the country's huge drug trade and led an overhaul of the country's justice system, becoming a key American ally — and a key recipient of U.S. aid — in a region full of harsh critics of American policy.

Kidnappings and murders have dropped significantly in Colombia, a reality Barco is trying to impress upon U.S. lawmakers who visit the country. "Colombia has changed so much," says Barco. "The perception and the reality are totally different."

Trade advocates in the U.S. business community argue that critics of the Colombia deal are using labor and environmental concerns as a front for their deep-rooted opposition to any trade expansion, period.

The business community, led by exporters such as Caterpillar Inc., have pressed the new administration to send Congress the deal for approval, a message echoed by House Majority Leader Steny H. Hoyer, D-Md., and other allies.