

Obama Nominee Says U.S.-Colombia FTA Still Being Held Up Over Labor Violence

By Gary G. Yerkey
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President Obama's nominee for a senior position at the State Department said Sept. 9 that the Colombian government still needs to do more to crack down on violence against the country's labor leaders before the administration will be in a position to send the U.S.-Colombia free trade agreement to Congress for its approval.

Robert D. Hormats, nominated to be undersecretary of state for economic, energy, and agricultural affairs, said that the administration, including U.S. Trade Representative Ron Kirk, was seeking to "work out a solution" that would enable the administration to move the FTA.

But he said that a number of U.S. concerns still need to be addressed. "There's still a way to go," he said.

Hormats, testifying at a confirmation hearing of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, said that the level of violence against Colombia's labor leaders was still too high and that the country's judicial system was not responding promptly and effectively to the issue (see related report in this section).

Sen. Bob Corker (R-Tenn.), a member of the committee, urged Hormats to press the administration to move the FTA, which was signed in 2006, calling the need to enact the agreement "self-evident."

But Hormats, while underscoring that President Obama has expressed support for the agreement in principle, said that "there are still a number of areas where progress is needed [and that need] to be resolved and dealt with."

Hormats has held a number of positions in past Democratic and Republican administrations, including deputy U.S. trade representative during the Carter administration. He has been a senior executive with Goldman Sachs for the past 27 years.

Last year, President Bush attempted to force a congressional vote on the pact under trade promotion authority procedures but was rebuffed by the House Democratic leadership, which argued that the Colombian government had to do more to reduce violence against trade unionists (70 DER A-30, 4/11/08).

As a candidate for president, then-Sen. Obama (D-Ill.) endorsed that position, but more recently he has expressed confidence that the issues that have sidelined the FTA can be resolved.

Colombia's ambassador to the United States, Carolina Barco, told BNA in late July that the government has been making progress in addressing the issue of violence and the impunity

surrounding it, citing a sharp reduction in the number of homicides and kidnapping (141 DER A-8, 7/27/09).

She said that Colombia is still exchanging information with the Office of the U.S. Trade Representative in an effort to understand exactly what the remaining U.S. concerns are and to consider what steps need to be taken.

“Our hope is that, by the end of this year, once the domestic agenda is addressed, that [Congress] can address the issue of the pending free trade agreement,” Barco said.