

# Congress Said Set to Back Mideast Trade

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**WASHINGTON** - Congress will vote as early as February on a free trade agreement with Bahrain and stands ready to consider agreements with other countries in the Middle East, the chairman of the House Ways and Means Committee said Wednesday.

Rep. Bill Thomas, R-Calif., was part of a congressional delegation that just returned from a trip to Egypt, Oman and Tunisia. Thomas said they were impressed with the desire of government officials to make the necessary economic reforms to qualify for free trade deals.

The congressional delegation stressed in all of their meetings that the trade deals would have to meet appropriate standards in such areas as enforcing the rule of law, Thomas said.

"We were simply trying to indicate, 'If you want a free trade agreement, these are the standards you will have to meet,'" Thomas said, indicating that Egypt and other nations would have to make more progress on economic reforms.

The United States already has free trade agreements with Jordan and Morocco. Thomas said he expects a vote on a just-completed agreement with Bahrain to occur in February.

The Bush administration announced Monday that it would begin negotiations next year on free trade deals with the United Arab Emirates and Oman.

The administration is hoping to strike these separate deals on the way to creation of a free trade area covering the entire Middle East over the next decade. President Bush sees the effort as a way to promote economic prosperity in the region.

Congress also has pending a Central American Free Trade Agreement with six countries of that region. However, the administration has said that a tax the Dominican Republic has imposed on imported corn syrup would violate the terms of that agreement.

Thomas said the administration was prepared to proceed with a free trade agreement that covered only five countries, leaving the Dominican Republic out. He indicated this issue would probably be resolved in time for Congress to debate the pact in the spring.

The United States currently has free trade agreements with eight countries: Canada, Mexico, Israel, Jordan, Chile, Singapore, Australia and Morocco.

Four of those deals have been negotiated by the Bush administration since Congress passed Trade Promotion Authority in 2002, giving the administration the power to strike new trade agreements.

Congress must review the trade authority in 2005. It will be extended for two years if Congress does not pass a motion of disapproval.

Thomas said the success the administration has had in reaching free trade deals around the world should help win support for the two-year extension.

But Rep. Phil English, R-Pa., said manufacturing job losses over the last four years have made votes on trade issues tough for many lawmakers.

"It is still a very difficult climate," English said.