

Bush presses Congress to pass Latam trade agreements

By Doug Palmer
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WASHINGTON - Failure to pass free trade agreements with Colombia and Panama would damage U.S. standing in Latin America, President George W. Bush said on Tuesday as he urged Congress to approve both pacts soon.

"Champions of false populism in the region are watching Congress. They will use any failure to approve these trade agreements as evidence that America will never treat democracies in the region as full partners," Bush said in an apparent swipe at Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez, a foe of the United States.

The House of Representatives is expected to approve a free trade agreement with Peru on Wednesday, setting the stage for the Senate to give final congressional approval in coming weeks.

However, the trade pact with Colombia has faced strong opposition because of Democratic party concerns about that country's history of violence against trade unionists and their belief that Colombian President Alvaro Uribe hasn't done enough to put the killers of trade unionists in jail.

The Panama pact has run into trouble after that country's National Assembly chose as its leader a lawmaker wanted in the United States on charges he murdered a U.S. soldier in 1992.

U.S. officials have stopped short of publicly demanding that lawmaker, Pedro Miguel Gonzalez, step down but have repeatedly expressed disappointment he was elected.

Bush urged both Democratic and Republican lawmakers to solidly back the Peru agreement, and then turn to votes on the Panama and Colombia agreement "as soon as possible."

"It's not acceptable to pass one trade agreement and let the others languish. It's not fair to pick out one country and not support the trade agreement with the other two," Bush said.

Although the Peru agreement appears headed for victory, House Democrats in charge of trade legislation say that took a huge amount of work. Many party members, especially those elected to the House for the first time last year, are wary of trade deals, which they believe depress wages and cost American jobs.

Bush also called on Congress to pass a free trade agreement with South Korea, which many senior Democrats oppose. They say its auto trade provisions are too heavily weighted in favor of South Korea, a major auto exporter.

The White House has defended the deal and points to a broad array of farm, manufacturing and service industry groups that hope to see it ratified before Bush leaves office in early 2009.

Bush also repeated his support for reforming and improving federal trade adjustment assistance to help workers who have lost their jobs due to imports or a factory moving overseas, despite his threat to veto a bill passed last week by the House.

The House proposal would extend the program to the service sector -- which accounts for about 80 percent of U.S. employment -- for the first time and also allow public sector employees to apply for the aid.

"If a job goes overseas, some family hurts in America and I understand that. We can help and that's why I believe in trade adjustment assistance," Bush said. "I want the program to focus on those who have lost jobs as a result of trade."