

Sen. Clinton opposes Colombia, Panama trade deals

By Doug Palmer
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WASHINGTON - Democratic presidential front-runner Sen. Hillary Clinton said on Thursday she opposes pending free trade agreements with Colombia, Panama and South Korea, but would vote for a pact with Peru.

The New York Democrat has previously said she opposed the South Korean agreement, but had not taken a position on the three Latin American trade pacts.

Her opposition to the Colombia and Panama agreements could make it much harder for the Bush administration to persuade Democrats to vote for those accords, particularly if she holds onto her lead in the race for the Democratic nomination.

The U.S. House of Representatives voted 285-132 earlier on Thursday to approve the trade deal with Peru. The Senate is expected to follow suit by the end of the year.

"I support the trade agreement with Peru. It has very strong labor and environmental protections," Clinton said in a statement. "This agreement makes meaningful progress on advancing workers' rights, and also levels the playing field for American workers."

"However, I will oppose the pending trade agreements with South Korea, Colombia and Panama," she said.

"The South Korean agreement does not create a level playing field for American carmakers. I am very concerned about the history of violence against trade unionists in Colombia. And as long as the head of Panama's National Assembly is a fugitive from justice in America, I cannot support that agreement."

While national polls show Clinton in the lead, she holds only a narrow advantage in Iowa over Illinois Sen. Barack Obama and former North Carolina Sen. John Edwards. Iowa holds the first of the state-by-state battles to choose the Democratic and Republican candidates for president on Jan. 3.

Edwards recently announced his opposition to all four trade agreements and has pressed Clinton to make her position clear.

Automakers Ford and Chrysler say the South Korean agreement is a one-sided pact that would boost that country's already large car exports to the United States without providing U.S. companies with meaningful new sales opportunities in Korea.

The Bush administration says the auto provisions would open South Korea's market, rejecting the automakers' complaints. They also point to strong industry support from other sectors and note that General Motors is neutral on the pact.

Many Democrats oppose the Colombian agreement because they believe Colombian President Alvaro Uribe has not done enough to bring the killers of trade unionists to justice.

The White House says Colombia has made a remarkable transformation under Uribe's rule and rejecting the agreement would damage U.S. standing in Latin America.

The Panama pact ran into trouble when that country's National Assembly elected Pedro Miguel Gonzalez to lead the legislature. Gonzalez is wanted in the United States on charges he killed a U.S. soldier in 1992.

The Bush administration has expressed deep disappointment with the National Assembly's decision, but still wants approval of the Panama pact. (Editing by Todd Eastham)