

White House urges Colombia trade vote after Peru

By Doug Palmer

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WASHINGTON -- The Bush administration stepped up efforts on Monday to persuade Congress to approve a controversial free trade agreement with Colombia after an expected vote this fall on a trade deal with Peru.

"I think to deny Colombia a free trade agreement would go down as one of the biggest foreign policy mistakes in our hemisphere in our time," U.S. Commerce Secretary Carlos Gutierrez said in a speech at the U.S. Chamber of Commerce.

"I think we would confuse our friends (in the region) and make our enemies very happy," Gutierrez said.

Congress is expected to approve a free trade deal with Peru by mid-October. Many Democrats would prefer to vote next on a trade pact with Panama rather than turn to the Colombia agreement, which is fiercely opposed by U.S. labor groups.

House of Representatives Speaker Nancy Pelosi and other senior Democrats have said Colombia must show more progress in reducing violence against trade union members and addressing a paramilitary scandal before Congress will vote on the pact.

Both Gutierrez and U.S. Trade Representative Susan Schwab argued Colombia already has made tremendous progress. They warned that rejecting the agreement would intensify opposition to U.S.-style policies that is already evident in many countries in the region.

In the past, Congress has voted on agreements in the order they were negotiated. That means Congress should vote on Colombia before Panama unless there is a "very compelling reason" not to do that, Schwab said.

At the same time, the White House wants to work with Congress in a bipartisan fashion to win approval of the three Latin American free trade agreements and a fourth trade pact with South Korea before the end of next year, she said.

"The key is we have four FTAs (free trade agreements). We need to get them all enacted into law," Schwab said.