

Colombia seen to deserve vote on trade pact

By Doug Palmer
Reuters
October 22, 2007

WASHINGTON - Congress should vote as soon as possible on a controversial free-trade pact with Colombia, despite concerns raised by labor groups, Commerce Secretary Carlos Gutierrez said on Monday.

"Colombia deserves a vote," Gutierrez told reporters. "It's not right to give a vote to Peru, give a vote to Panama and sort of let (Colombia) go away by not bringing it to a vote. Colombia should be voted on ... as soon as possible."

The Bush administration has been pushing hard for weeks to persuade Congress the time is right to vote on the Colombian agreement, which is fiercely opposed by the AFL-CIO labor federation, a core Democratic constituency group.

President George W. Bush and Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice have given speeches in recent weeks calling for votes on the Colombia pact and other pending trade agreements with Peru, Panama and South Korea.

The deal with Colombia is by far the most controversial of the three Latin American agreements because of Colombia's long history of deadly violence against trade unionists.

Trade unionists murders are usually blamed on outlawed paramilitary gangs that have targeted labor leaders for suspected guerrilla sympathies.

The Bush administration argues the country already has made a remarkable transformation under President Alvaro Uribe, with the help of billions of dollars of U.S. aid under the bipartisan Plan Colombia program.

However, there is little sign that House Speaker Nancy Pelosi and other senior Democrats have changed their view of the agreement since late June, when they put out a joint statement saying they could not support the pact "at this time" because of concerns about violence in Colombia against labor leaders and the failure to punish those who are responsible.

"GRAVE CONCERNS"

A spokesman for Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid, a Nevada Democrat, made similar points on Monday.

"Many Democrats oppose the FTA currently and Senator Reid continues to have grave concerns about serious labor and human rights issues that have not been addressed in the negotiations," Reid spokesman Jim Manley said.

Even Democrats, such as Senate Finance Committee Chairman Max Baucus, who support the Colombia agreement, say the Bush administration and the Uribe government face a steep uphill fight to win approval of the pact.

"Colombia is an important ally and a growing market for U.S. exports, but serious concerns remain about the level of violence in Colombia, especially as it affects labor leaders, and the low level of prosecutions of those responsible for such violence," a Baucus aide said.

The Bush administration wants to work with Congress in a bipartisan fashion to get the trade agreement approved but is frustrated Democrats have taken so long to schedule a vote, Gutierrez said.

"We don't think a strategy to run out the clock is the right thing to do with an ally," he said. "They deserve to be voted on the way others deserve to be voted on."

The Bush administration believes it can round up the votes needed for approval once Congress sets a date for action, Gutierrez said.