

Colombia eyes early 2008 vote on US trade deal

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WASHINGTON - Colombia sees a window of opportunity early next year for the U.S. Congress to approve a free-trade agreement strongly opposed by U.S. labor groups, a senior Colombian official said on Thursday.

Colombian Trade Minister Luis Guillermo Plata told reporters that officials expect to use the next several months to persuade at least 15 more Democrats in the House of Representatives to vote for the pact, boosting the total to 35.

"We have seen the climate improving for Colombia (in Congress) in the last few months," he said.

He said that based on lobbying so far, Colombian officials believe about 20 Democrats in the House support the pact. Congressional Republicans already overwhelmingly support it.

"That means that from here to February or March we would need to get 15 (votes)," Plata told journalists after a Council of the Americas event to promote the trade deal in Congress.

"How are we going to do that? One on one, we are visiting one on one, explaining, taking them to Colombia," he added.

A recent vote in the House on a free-trade pact with Peru, however, suggests Colombia could actually need 41 Democratic votes to get to the 217 needed for approval.

That is because 176 Republicans voted for the Peru agreement, with only 16 against it. Similar support from Republicans would leave a deficit of 41 votes.

Many Democrats oppose the Colombian trade deal because they believe President Alvaro Uribe has not done enough to stop murders of trade unionists and track down the killers.

Colombian officials say they are making great strides in reducing violence and murders of trade unionists have declined from 196 in 2002 to 24 this year.