

# US sees Colombia trade deal on track amid concerns

By Patrick Markey

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BOGOTA - U.S. lawmakers are likely to pass a trade agreement for Colombia despite concerns by some Democrats because they need to show support for an important U.S. ally in Latin America, a top U.S. trade official said.

Colombia, a Washington supporter in a region where leaders antagonistic to U.S. policies have gained ground, lobbied hard for a trade accord after critics in Democratic ranks demanded more progress on rights and justice before approving the deal.

"I believe the majority of them will understand that it will send a very bad signal for Congress to not stand with a country like Colombia," Deputy U.S. Trade Representative John Veroneau told Reuters by telephone late on Thursday during a visit to Colombian coastal city Cartagena.

President Alvaro Uribe has been a staunch White House ally in South America, where left-wing leaders such as Venezuela's President Hugo Chavez and Ecuador's Rafael Correa have promoted their socialist ideas as an alternative to U.S. policies.

Some Democrats have demanded Colombia do more to tackle illegal paramilitary influence, improve human rights and push investigations into the murder of labor activists before they agree to support any free trade deal for the Andean country.

Veroneau said the U.S. administration has worked with Congress and with Uribe on addressing the concerns of Democrats before the Colombian trade bill is presented to Congress again in September or October.

Helped by billions in U.S. aid, Uribe has pushed back Marxist rebels and reduced violence from his country's insurgency. But critics say Uribe has not done enough to curb former paramilitary death squads who battled the rebels before reaching a peace deal with his government.

Some Democrats want a vote on Colombia's deal delayed by two years so lawmakers can see whether the country has made progress in reducing violence against unions.

But Senate Finance Committee Chairman Max Baucus, a Montana Democrat, said last month he is seeking to overcome opposition in his own party to get the Colombian deal approved.

"As members of Congress focus on the Colombian free trade agreement they will become convinced that there is an impressive trendline underway and that the best way to

maintain that trendline and improve on that trend-line is by supporting this free trade agreement," Veroneau said.

The trade representative said Peru's free trade agreement will be the first sent to Congress and the length of the debate over Colombia's accord will depend on how much time lawmakers are in session for the rest of the year.