

Colombia trade deal a work in progress: U.S. lawmaker

By Patrick Markey
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MEDELLIN, COLOMBIA -- Colombia's free trade accord with the United States is still a "work in progress" and President Alvaro Uribe could persuade U.S. Democrats to approve the deal by showing sustained success in tackling violence, a U.S. lawmaker said on Saturday.

The comments by Rep. Joseph Crowley, a New York Democrat still undecided on whether to back the pact, came during a congressional visit to Medellin with U.S. Commerce Secretary Carlos Gutierrez to back Colombia's efforts to lobby Capitol Hill.

After Democrats won control of Congress in November, many doubted the future of U.S. trade deals with Andean countries, in particular Colombia where U.S. lawmakers are worried about attacks on union leaders, extrajudicial killings and a scandal tying some of Uribe's allies to paramilitaries.

"It is still a work in progress. I have noticed some members who are known to have voiced their support for the Colombian free trade agreement. It is certainly not dead by any means. That needs to be stressed," Crowley told Reuters before touring the city once known for its drug violence.

Uribe, a key White House ally in South America, has lobbied hard for Congress to approve the free trade pact, saying a good friend to Washington should not be treated like a pariah especially if Democrats intend to approve similar deals with Peru and Panama.

Hoping to head off opposition, U.S. trade representatives negotiated a deal with House of Representatives Ways and Means Committee Chairman Charles Rangel to strengthen labor and environmental provisions on the three Latin American deals.

But while Peru's agreement could get approved shortly, Colombia's still faces opposition.

Violence from Colombia's four-decade conflict has ebbed under Uribe, who has received billions of dollars in U.S. funds to fight leftist guerrillas, disarm illegal paramilitaries and combat the huge cocaine trade.

Some Democrats have targeted Colombia's rights record, criticizing a lack of protection for labor union leaders and slow progress in bringing killers to justice.

But this month, some Democrats said support was growing for the Latin American free trade accords, including the one for Colombia.

"I think what needs to be demonstrated to Democrats is a sustained level of non-violence as well as a sustained level of progress," Crowley said. "As difficult as this has been for the president and the Colombian government, they are working hard and they are not giving up."