

Congress may move quickly on Peru trade: aides

By Doug Palmer
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WASHINGTON - Congress could move quickly to approve a free trade agreement with Peru after lawmakers return next week from a break, Democratic aides said on Thursday, raising Bush administration hopes for more controversial pacts with Colombia and South Korea.

"I have every hope and expectation" the House of Representatives Ways and Means Committee will approve the agreement before the end of September, a House Democratic aide said, speaking on condition he not be identified.

That is expected to lead to full House approval and similar action in the Senate, aides said, handing the Bush administration its first legislative trade victory since the Democrats took control of Congress this year.

The White House also wants to win approval of trade pacts with Panama, Colombia and South Korea before President George W. Bush leaves office in January 2009.

Administration officials acknowledge they have their work cut out for them, but hope they can build on a bipartisan trade policy deal reached in May with House leaders.

"The conventional wisdom has been wrong on the trade agenda," starting with last year's Democratic election victory, an administration official said, speaking on condition he not be identified. "I think we've got a process in place to work on a bipartisan basis to get all these agreements approved."

That means working closely with key lawmakers such House Ways and Means Committee Chairman Charles Rangel, a New York Democrat, and isolating "on an agreement-by-agreement basis other areas that need to be addressed," the official said.

Rangel, a veteran lawmaker eager to restore bipartisan support in Congress for trade, already has been instrumental in clearing the way for the Peru pact.

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After visiting Peru earlier this month, he announced that Peruvian President Alan Garcia had agreed to take a number of actions to strengthen the country's labor laws in line with new U.S. requirements under the May 10 deal reached between the Bush administration and House leaders.

The Panama agreement also appears "on track to a successful resolution," but the outlooks for Colombia and the South Korea agreements are much more challenging, the House aide said.

Democrats want Colombia to reduce violence against union members, bring murderers to justice and resolve concerns about a paramilitary scandal that has touched members of President Alvaro Uribe's own party.

The Bush administration believes Colombia will be able to demonstrate improvement in those areas when the time comes, and it also plans to stress the importance of the agreement to U.S. relations in Latin America.

U.S. Commerce Secretary Carlos Gutierrez is expected to lead a bipartisan group of lawmakers on a trip to Peru, Panama and Colombia in September to highlight the need for Congress to approve all three pacts soon.

The South Korea agreement faces an uphill battle because many Democrats, including several vying for the party's presidential nomination, believes it does too little to tear down South Korean barriers to auto imports.

So far, the Bush administration has refused to renegotiate the pact despite Democratic demands. It hopes broad support from other business and farm groups can overcome opposition primarily from Ford Motor Co to the pact.

Key lawmakers also insist South Korea fully re-open its market to U.S. beef could before Congress votes on the pact.