

House to begin work on Oman trade deal

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By Doug Palmer

WASHINGTON - Congressional Republicans announced plans on Monday to begin work on legislation to enact a free trade deal with Oman, despite Democratic demands that the Gulf kingdom first provide stronger assurances it will bring its labor laws in line with international standards.

The House of Representatives Ways and Means Committee will meet on Wednesday to consider the agreement, which is governed by a law barring changes in the pact once the Bush administration formally submits it to Congress.

The informal work session on Wednesday, and another not yet scheduled in the Senate Finance Committee, are the only opportunities lawmakers have to shape the implementing bill for the U.S.-Oman Free Trade Agreement.

Congress last year approved a free trade pact with another Gulf country, Bahrain, by the widest margin of any since the White House won expedited negotiating power in 2002.

The Bush administration has hoped the Oman agreement would be approved by an equally impressive margin and wants to avoid the divisive battle that marked debate on a free trade pact with Central America that was barely approved in mid-2005.

Seventy-five percent of Oman's private sector work force is foreign, and Ways and Means Democrats have expressed concern over issues such as the absence of U.S.-style labor unions that can be formed without employers' approval.

Omani Commerce and Industry Minister Makboul bin Ali bin Sultan outlined several actions in a March 26 letter to House Ways and Means Committee Chairman Bill Thomas that the Omani government planned by October 31 to bring its labor laws in line with International Labor Organization standards.

Ways and Means Democrats say Bahrain made far stronger commitments and they want the same from Oman.

Committee Republicans and the Bush administration both believe Oman has already made significant labor commitments.

The U.S. Trade Representative's office is "working closely with both sides of the committee to get broad bipartisan support," a U.S. trade official said.

U.S. trade negotiators have also resumed efforts to reach a similar pact with the United Arab Emirates.

The two countries are holding talks this week for the first time since a congressional furor forced state-owned Dubai Ports World to give up plans to take over the operations of some U.S. port facilities.

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