

U.S. Senate to vote next week on Peru trade deal

By Doug Palmer

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WASHINGTON - The U.S. Senate will vote next week on a free trade agreement the Bush administration negotiated with Peru, a spokesman for the Senate majority leader said on Friday.

"Sen. Reid intends to (begin debate) on Monday," Reid spokesman Jim Manley said in an email. However, a vote on the pact is not expected before Wednesday, he said.

The House voted 285-132 earlier this month to approve the agreement, which locks in Peru's duty-free access to the U.S. market while phasing out Peru's tariffs on U.S. agricultural and manufactured goods.

The Senate vote is the last step in the congressional approval process, setting the stage for President George W. Bush to sign the agreement into law by the end of the year.

Senate Finance Committee Chairman Max Baucus, a Montana Democrat, has told reporters he expects the Senate to approve the pact, giving the White House its first trade victory since Democrats took control of Congress this year.

Reid -- who voted against Bush administration free trade agreements with Chile and Central American countries -- is currently leading a bipartisan group of senators on a trip to Guatemala, Paraguay, Colombia and Mexico.

The purpose is to show the United States' commitment to strengthening ties with the region, Manley said.

The strong House vote for Peru came after the Bush administration renegotiated the agreement to include stronger labor and environmental provisions demanded by Democrats.

Reid "acknowledges the important advancements achieved in protecting internationally recognized workers rights in the Peru FTA but still has concerns about FTAs in general, particularly with countries that have poor records in protecting worker rights," Manley said.

The White House would like Congress to vote on a free trade agreement with Colombia after it finishes its work on the Peru pact. However, that agreement is much more controversial because many Democrats feel Colombian President Alvaro Uribe has not taken strong enough measures to stop murders of trade unionists and bring their killers to justice.

The Bush administration argues Uribe has already done much to improve the situation in Colombia and approving the free trade agreement would help consolidate those gains.

(Editing by Todd Eastham)