

Bush, Congress seem headed for clash on trade deals

By Doug Palmer
Reuters
December 14 2007

WASHINGTON - The White House and Congress seem headed for a confrontation over trade deals with Colombia and South Korea next year, as the U.S. presidential campaign heats up and labor groups dig in their heels on the two pacts.

"I think if the alternative is that the deals just die quietly, the administration is not going to accept that. They're going to force the issue," said Edward Alden, a senior fellow at the Council on Foreign Relations.

President George W. Bush is savoring one trade victory by signing an agreement with Peru into law on Friday.

The Senate and the House of Representatives overwhelmingly approved that pact after it was revamped to include stronger labor and environmental provisions demanded by Democrats.

But senior Democrats like House Speaker Nancy Pelosi and many of the party's presidential candidates, oppose the trade deals with Colombia and South Korea, even though they were also amended to include the new labor and environmental provisions.

The Democrats want Colombia to do more to curb violence against trade unionists and are pressing for changes in the provisions on automobiles in the South Korea pact, which they think favor Seoul too heavily.

The Bush administration argues that Colombian President Alvaro Uribe has made good progress in reducing violence in his country, which has been wracked by decades of civil war.

It also has ruled out renegotiating the auto provisions of the South Korean trade deal, which it insists contains strong measures to level the playing field for U.S. carmakers.

A number of experts believe the Bush administration is prepared to force Congress to vote on both pacts if it cannot persuade Democratic leaders to take them up voluntarily.

TRADE AUTHORITY

That is an option because both agreements were signed -- although in the case of South Korea, just barely -- before the White House's trade promotion authority expired on June 30.

The legislation allows Bush to submit the agreements to Congress for votes within 90 days.

Bush administration officials say they want work out an agreement with Congress to bring up both pacts. But they also argue failure to approve the agreements would be a huge blunder and would damage relations with two important allies.

"We believe congressional leadership recognizes the geopolitical and economic importance of these agreements," said Gretchen Hamel, a spokeswoman for the U.S. Trade Representative's office. "We will continue that dialogue, and as we have said before, plan on working with Congress to pass all of the FTA's."

One trade lobbyist, who asked not to be identified, said he believed the administration was still debating whether it was worth the risk of failure to force a vote on the two pacts.

"If you can't envision them failing, you shouldn't do that" because it's likely the Colombia agreement at least would be defeated, the lobbyist said. "I just think (Congress) is 'no' on Korea, but 'hell no' on Colombia."

Thea Lee, policy director for the AFL-CIO, said Colombia's long history of violence against trade unionists has intensified the U.S. labor group's opposition to that pact.

"We'll make it a huge election issue," Lee said.

Despite Bush administration claims to the contrary, "it's much more of a foreign policy fiasco to force a vote, have a blistering, bloody battle where all of Colombia's dirty laundry is aired in the U.S. Congress ... and then fail," said Lee. "Talk about a kick in the face. That would be a real foreign policy failure."

A third agreement with Panama is relatively noncontroversial, but has run into trouble because Panama's National Assembly recently elected as its leader a lawmaker wanted in the United States on charges he killed a U.S. soldier.

The Bush administration hopes that problem will take care of itself when the Panamanian legislator's one-year leadership term ends in September. (Editing by Chris Wilson)