

UAE, Oman must make new move for FTA, says US

Reuters

16 January 2005

WASHINGTON - The United Arab Emirates and Oman must make new efforts to qualify for proposed free trade pacts with the United States, a US official said on Friday in response to objections raised by labour groups.

“They need to have an ILO (International Labour Organisation)-consistent labour law,” Assistant US Trade Representative Cathy Novelli said after a hearing on Oman trade issues.

“They have told us — both the UAE and Oman — that they are going to revise their labour laws and we intend to continue to work with them so they will have ILO-consistent labour laws,” Novelli said. In an interview with Reuters, Omani Ambassador to the United States Mohammed Al Khusaiby said the Gulf sultanate of 2.9 million people was going through an “evolutionary process” with regard to workers rights. “Oman is doing what it can to bring our laws into line with the ILO standards,” he said, noting a US trade official is currently in Oman for discussions on the issue. The ILO core standards include such basic worker rights as the freedom of association and collective bargaining.

Novelli defended the Bush administration’s decision to proceed with talks with both nations before they finish labour law reforms. A recent trade pact with Morocco had prompted that country to “pass what everyone agrees is a world-class labour law”, she said.

“I don’t see, frankly, how not engaging is a helpful thing,” Novelli said.

Meanwhile, Al-Khusaiby said Oman would not let concerns that might be raised by Saudi Arabia keep it from pursuing a free trade pact with the United States. Riyadh claims that a recent free trade pact between fellow Gulf Cooperation Council member Bahrain and the United States is at odds with Bahrain’s obligations as a member of the GCC.

“It’s a regional issue that we’ll discuss with our regional partners,” he said.

”All the GCC (Gulf Cooperation Council) members attach great importance to our economic relations with the United States.”

The GCC includes Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, Oman, Qatar, the United Arab Emirates and Kuwait.