

Canada dismisses US campaign talk of NAFTA change

By Doug Palmer
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WASHINGTON - Canadian Trade Minister David Emerson on Thursday dismissed calls by Democratic presidential candidates Sen. Barack Obama and Sen. Hillary Clinton for changes in the North American Free Trade Agreement as campaign rhetoric to rev up their political base.

"I do not see a reason to revisit NAFTA," Emerson said in a statement e-mailed in response to a question from Reuters.

"The rhetoric delivered in present day election primaries appears to appeal to the candidates' party roots. It is unlikely that the same kind of rhetoric will carry through into a general presidential election," Emerson said.

Both Obama and Clinton have said they would seek changes in NAFTA if elected president. That rhetoric has intensified ahead of the March 4 primary in Ohio, a state where NAFTA is often blamed for manufacturing job losses.

Obama has promised that one of the first things he would do as president would be to call the leaders of Canada and Mexico to ask to put stronger labor and environmental provisions into the pact, as well as to change investment provisions that critics say favor corporate interests too much.

The Illinois senator also has portrayed Clinton as opportunistically taking a more critical stance on the pact years after her husband, former President Bill Clinton, successfully pushed the agreement through Congress.

Emerson said it was hard to imagine Canada agreeing to any changes that would hamper the current trading relationship.

"When you consider how integrated whole industries and companies are across the Canada-U.S. border, the very thought that you would break that two-way flow of trade down is highly unlikely," Emerson said.

A spokesman for the Mexican Embassy in Washington said the trade pact, which has been in place since 1994, has been a success.

"NAFTA has been a success story for all three North American nations," embassy spokesman Ricardo Alday said.

"Mexico will continue working to ensure that economic prosperity and social well-being of our peoples continue to underpin trade relations between Mexico, the United States and Canada," Alday said. (Editing by Mohammad Zargham)