

Morocco's parliament approves FTA with US

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RABAT - Morocco's bicameral parliament approved a free-trade accord (FTA) with the United States paving the way for its implementation in two months, a spokesman said yesterday.

The approval brings Washington closer to its goal of sealing a free trade agreement covering most of the Middle East and North Africa by 2013.

Morocco, a staunch US ally, is the second Arab state after Jordan to reach such a deal. Bahrain is about to adopt a similar accord.

Despite strong opposition, mainly by farmers and drug firms, the bill was approved without amendments. "Under the terms of the constitution, international accords are either approved as they are presented or rejected," said a spokesman for the parliament's upper house.

"The accord will be implemented in two months," he added.

The approval followed a vote late on Tuesday in the 275-member upper house of parliament, the equivalent of the US Senate, with 45 for it, none against and six abstentions. The US Congress and Senate approved the deal in July, 2004.

The accord "will diversify our partnership, serve our interests and...make the kingdom's a regional platform for investment inflows," Minister Delegate to Foreign Affairs and Cooperation Taûeb Fassi Fihri told legislators before the vote.

Two-way trade between the two countries totals less than \$1.0 billion, with an almost-equal trade balance.

US farm groups strongly support the pact, which the American Farm Bureau Federation estimates will generate \$260 million in increased exports by 2015. Those gains are expected in wheat, feedstuffs, beef and poultry.

Abdelkader Amara, a member of parliament of the main opposition Justice and Development Party (PJD), said the deal puts Moroccan and US economies on an equal footing.

"They get what we get and vice versa, so no special treatment like our accord with the EU. In addition to this, the US accord covers all economic sectors, even cultural and social ones," Amara said.