

McCain urges Colombia trade deal

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Republican presidential hopeful John McCain has used a visit to Colombia to urge the US Congress to pass a free trade deal between the two nations.

"Free trade is important for Colombia and the world," said Senator McCain.

The Democratic-led Congress has held up the trade pact amid concern over the loss of US jobs and violence against trade union leaders in Colombia.

The Democratic contender in November's US election, Barack Obama, has said it is not wrong to defend American jobs.

Speaking in Ohio, a state hit hard by unemployment, Senator Obama repeated his promise to renegotiate Nafta, the free trade agreement between the US, Canada and Mexico.

"The United States wanting to make sure that its... standards aren't being undermined isn't imperialist," he said.

Free trade has become a key issue in the presidential campaign and in the battle for control of Congress, against a backdrop of deepening economic woes and rising job losses in the US.

Courting the increasingly important Latino vote in the US - a potential nine million people - is also vital for the presidential contenders.

On his way to Colombia, Mr McCain told reporters that history showed the benefits of free trade.

"An overwhelming majority of historians will tell you that protectionism and isolationism were a major factor in one of the greatest depressions in the modern history for this country. I am not going to sit by and see that happen," the New York Times quoted him as saying.

Immigration

Speaking later in the coastal city of Cartagena, Mr McCain continued to voice his pro-free trade views.

"The free trade is an important issue, not only for Colombia but I believe for the economy of the world and, as you know, for the United States economy."

He also praised Colombia's efforts to tackle drug-trafficking and leftist rebels, saying Colombian President Alvaro Uribe had rescued the country from becoming a "failed state".

In response to questions about human rights, Mr McCain said: "I have been a supporter of human rights for my entire life and career. We have discussed this issue with President Uribe and will continue to urge progress in that direction."

Mr McCain was to meet Colombian officials and local business leaders later on Wednesday before travelling on to Mexico City for talks with President Felipe Calderon on Thursday.

There, he is expected to discuss trade but also address the highly charged issue of illegal immigration.