

## U.S. trade chief tries to allay lawmakers' worries

By Susan Cornwell

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Reuters

WASHINGTON - The chief U.S. trade negotiator signaled Wednesday he was in no hurry to rush pending trade pacts to Congress, saying it would not happen until the Obama administration was convinced the deals reflected its values on labor and the environment.

"We'll bring them up (for approval in Congress) when we get them to the point that they meet the criteria that the president has laid out for me of having trade deals that reflect our values on labor and the environment, that help us meet his objective, which is still getting America back to work and turning this economy around," U.S. Trade Representative Ron Kirk said.

Kirk spoke to reporters after he met for over an hour with about a half a dozen lawmakers who are deeply skeptical of proposed trade deals with Panama, Colombia and South Korea.

However, a U.S. trade official said Kirk was not suggesting reworking those deals, which were negotiated by the Bush administration.

### WORKING WITHIN NEGOTIATED TEXTS

U.S. officials are working within the existing texts of the pending trade pacts to strengthen the labor and environmental standards, the trade official told Reuters, saying that no renegotiation is necessary. The deals will not take effect until they are ratified by Congress.

Democratic critics of U.S. trade policy say they do not want any more agreements along the lines of North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) with Canada and Mexico, which they blame for a loss of manufacturing jobs in the United States.

"We've had enough," is what the group told Kirk on Wednesday, according to Rep. Louise Slaughter, the chairwoman of the powerful House Rules Committee.

The lawmakers told Kirk that if he tried to bring the pacts forward for congressional ratification without taking account of their concerns, "there'd be trouble," Slaughter said. She noted that she and over 100 other lawmakers had introduced legislation calling for a massive revamp of U.S. trade policy.

Kirk, who spoke separately to reporters, said he had a "good, honest, frank discussion" with the lawmakers, but admitted he could not allay all their concerns at once. "You are not going to do all of that in one meeting."

"I see both sides of it," he said, adding that he thought other countries also understood the Obama administration's emphasis on protecting labor and the environment. He declined to say when one of the trade deals might be brought to Congress for ratification.

Some business interests, Republicans and pro-trade Democrats fear the Obama administration is allowing itself to be sidetracked by trade skeptics and will lose opportunities to expand commerce with other countries.

The administration has moved slowly on trade issues while pushing more forcefully on domestic concerns like healthcare reform and climate change legislation. For some time now U.S. officials have been promising Obama will lay out his agenda on trade in a speech.

Another lawmaker who attended Wednesday's meeting with Kirk, Maine Democrat Michael Michaud, said it appeared Obama was delaying both the Panama and the Colombia deals.

"I applaud the Administration's recent decision to delay moving forward with the Panama Free Trade Agreement until after they address the nation on their broader trade agenda," Michaud said in a statement

"It also appears they are not willing to move forward on the Colombia deal until the continuing labor and human rights problems are resolved," Michaud said.

(Editing by Eric Walsh)