



Posted on Tue, Sep. 29, 2009

U.S. trade representative: free trade agreements underway with Panama and Colombia

BY JARED GOYETTE

Assistant U.S. Trade Representative for the Americas Everett Eissenstat told a crowd at the Americas Conference that work was progressing on free trade agreements with both Panama and Colombia, though "less tangible" concerns about violence and impunity in Colombia have yet to be fully resolved.

"I don't think anyone even in Colombia is happy with the status quo," Eissenstat said in an interview with The Miami Herald following an address at the Americas Conference in Coral Gables. "The Colombian government is undertaking tremendous reforms on its own initiative and I think that is indicative that they feel there is additional work that can be done."

Eissenstat said that the negotiations were centered on solidifying the progress that had already been made.

"We're hoping to move those kinds of reforms through, and to make sure that those reforms are permanent, and not just temporary as part of an agenda."

The Colombian Free Trade Agreement has met with resistance from Democrats in congress who have raised concerns about Colombia's human rights record and the dangers faced by union organizers in that country. A democratically controlled congress did not approve a Colombia FTA proposed by President Bush in 2007. President Obama opposed the agreement during his campaign, though negotiations have continued in his administration.

Everett declined to go into detail about how a trade agreement could address issues of "violence and impunity," which he described as "very controversial" and less tangible than other areas of discussion, such as labor law.

He said that the agreement currently being negotiated with Panama did not face the same challenges, and that negotiations were focused on labor law reform and tax transparency.

"I think that the issues with Panama are more well defined, but it's really up to the congress as to which agreement is appropriate to take up," he said.

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