

U.S. Sends Delegation to Jordan to Discuss Labor Issues

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WASHINGTON — The Obama administration is stepping up scrutiny of the labor practices of U.S. trading partners, and sent a delegation to meet with Jordanian officials in Amman Wednesday.

The delegation, including officials from the U.S. Trade Representative's office and the Labor and State Departments, convened a meeting of the labor subcommittee of the U.S.-Jordan Free Trade Agreement to discuss a broad range of labor issues. Enforcement of the rules written into existing agreements has been touted as a central component of the Obama administration's emerging trade policy.

Following the meeting in Amman, the U.S. delegation was scheduled to visit garment factories to gather information about working conditions, as well as meet with private industry and labor unions. The delegation is expected to travel to the Persian Gulf nations of Bahrain and Oman to hold similar meetings on Friday.

Jordan has come under a great deal of scrutiny for alleged labor violations over the years, most recently being cited by the Labor Department's Bureau of International Labor Affairs last month for alleged use of child and forced labor in the apparel industry. A study released by the International Labor Organization in May said forced labor and trafficking of migrant workers from Asia was a problem in the apparel export zones in Jordan.

"This trip is part of the Obama administration's commitment to engage our FTA partners on their compliance with labor obligations," said a USTR spokeswoman. "As part of that commitment, we regularly review and assess the operation of our trade agreements with Jordan and other countries. Among our goals with Jordan has been to use our reviews to improve labor conditions in that country. We established a Labor Subcommittee under the FTA Joint Committee in 2006. The release of DOL lists was coincidental, but provided timely opportunity to include in discussion."

According to a spokeswoman for the Jordanian embassy in Washington, the U.S. delegation met with Labor Minister Ghazi Shbeikat and other officials from Jordan's department of labor. The spokeswoman said the meetings included a discussion of how to establish a formal framework for cooperation between the U.S. and Jordan on labor issues.

In February 2008, the Jordanian government outlined a five-year monitoring program aimed at eliminating labor violations in the garment industry. The announcement followed an investigation in 2006 by the National Labor Committee that revealed working conditions at factories used by major apparel brands did not meet the country's labor standards.

Despite all the increased attention on Jordan, many felt previous U.S. administrations did not take decisive steps to address labor problems in the region.

“The Bush administration did a horrible job enforcing the labor rights included in free trade agreements,” said Thea Lee, policy director for the AFL-CIO. “They gave it a low priority. We are happy to see the Obama administration putting some attention on this.”

It is still too early to say if the Obama administration will do more to enforce the provisions in trade agreements, Lee said, but it is evident the Labor Department and USTR are committing more resources to labor issues.

Erik Autor, vice president and international trade counsel for the National Retail Federation, said the increased attention on labor practices in Jordan shouldn’t raise any red flags for importers.

“There’s no reason to believe at this point that these talks might lead to more drastic action that may affect trade,” Autor said.