

US trade envoy to voice 'tough love' for Africa

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WASHINGTON — The top US trade diplomat said Friday he would have a message of "tough love" for African nations on an upcoming visit after some complained about extending export preferences to other poor regions.

US Trade Representative Ron Kirk plans to travel with Secretary of State Hillary Clinton to an economic meeting next week in Kenya. Kirk will then visit Ethiopia and Senegal, while Clinton will head to six other African nations.

The Kenya meeting involves countries covered by the African Growth and Opportunity Act (AGOA), a US law giving preferential access to the world's biggest market to African states with open markets and democratic governments.

Kirk acknowledged that some African nations were concerned at calls by US lawmakers to extend such benefits to impoverished nations in other regions -- notably Bangladesh and Cambodia, major producers of textiles.

"I think some of what we may respond with is a little bit of tough love," Kirk told reporters on a conference call.

"The reality of being involved in a globally interconnected world is that those countries... that invest in their people and their education, that reform their laws, that invest in their infrastructure are the ones that are the most successful," he said.

"The United States is absolutely committed to strengthen the successful relationship with AGOA, but that should in no way impair our relationships with other least-developing countries," he said.

Bangladesh and Cambodia both export more garments to the United States than all African nations combined.

But the Asian nations in turn have been seeking greater access since the end of a global quota system in 2005, fearing being swamped by giants China and India.

Kirk said the United States nonetheless firmly supported AGOA, signed in 2000 by then-president Bill Clinton.

The legislation transformed the US ties with Africa "from principally a paternalistic and sort of humanitarian relationship to one that frankly was more balanced around mutual interests," Kirk said.

Trade between US and sub-Saharan Africa has more than tripled since AGOA but critics say that the impact has been inflated by US demand for oil from energy producers such as Angola and Nigeria.