

Obama expresses optimism about Colombia free trade

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WASHINGTON — President Barack Obama said Monday he is confident the U.S. and Colombia can ultimately reach a deal on a stalled trade agreement, despite continuing concern about the killings of labor leaders in Colombia.

"It is important that Colombia pursue a path of rule of law," Obama said after White House meetings with Colombian President Alvaro Uribe.

Obama said more progress is needed in the world's most dangerous country for union organizing, but noted that the number of labor deaths is on a "downward trajectory" while the number of those prosecuted for the "blatant human rights offenses" has gone up.

Of the bilateral trade agreements with Colombia, Panama and South Korea concluded by the Bush administration but never approved by Congress, Colombia may be the most controversial.

Supporters of the agreement, including business groups and most Republicans, argue that the Andean nation is one of America's strongest allies in the Western Hemisphere, leading the fight against narco-terrorists, and deserves a stronger economic relationship that would also benefit American exporters.

Opponents, led by Democrats, labor groups and human rights organizations, say Colombia has yet to show that it has ended violence against labor leaders and violations of worker rights. Obama himself opposed the deal as a presidential candidate.

The International Trade Union Confederation said in a report this month that Colombia remains the world's deadliest country for labor organizers, with 49 killed last year, up from 39 in 2007 but down from 78 in 2006.

It is unlikely that Congress will take up the agreement any time soon.

"There are obvious difficulties involved in the process," Obama said, with Uribe at his side. "But I am confident that ultimately we can strike a deal."

Obama says he has instructed U.S. trade representative Ron Kirk to work with Uribe's team on how to best proceed.

Colombia is the largest recipient of U.S. aid in the region, getting about \$6 billion in mostly military aid connected to the war on drugs from Washington since 2000. But the country is girding for an expected reduction in assistance due mainly to the global economic crisis.

Obama praised Uribe for leading "admirably on a whole range of fronts," including reducing the influence of drug cartels and improving Colombia's economic situation.

"He has performed with diligence and courage," Obama said.

Obama said he has no "strict timetable" for getting the trade deal through Congress, citing higher priorities like health care and energy. But he said the U.S. has an obligation to do its part to make the agreement a reality.

"The burden is not simply on Colombia," he said. "Colombia has done some excellent work."