

# **Bush vows to help Panama clinch free trade agreement**

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WASHINGTON — President George W. Bush said Tuesday he would do his best to get Congress to approve a pending free trade agreement with Panama, after meeting with its President Martin Torrijos in the White House.

"The Panamanian free trade vote is a priority of this government. It should be a priority of the United States Congress," Bush told reporters after the meeting.

Bush said he and his administration would "do everything in our capacity to move the trade bills" not only with Panama, but with Colombia and South Korea as well.

The House of Representatives last month delayed a vote on the Colombian trade pact in a snub to the White House. Lawmakers link the agreement to Colombia's progress in human rights. The Panama and South Korean pacts are awaiting the vote on Colombia.

Bush said he congratulated Torrijos for carrying out the Panama Canal expansion plan, adding that the revamped waterway would help both countries "build a mutual future."

Other issues discussed at their meeting included the worldwide spiralling price of food, over which Bush said Torrijos was "deeply concerned" about how it was affecting his people, and the regional fight against drug trafficking.

Bush said the United States had to do "a better job" at curbing its local demand for drugs, and at helping "our friends in the neighborhood deal with the suppliers of drugs."

Torrijos, Bush added, "is committed to sharing intelligence and working closely ... together to prevent drugs from being transhipped through Panama, which is bad for his country and bad for ours."

The US president took the opportunity of urging Congress to pass his Merida Initiative that calls for 1.55 billion dollars in assistance over three years to Mexico and Central American nations to fight drug trafficking in their region.

Torrijos arrived is visiting the United States together with his Vicepresident and Foreign Minister, Samuel Lewis Navarro, and Trade and Industry Minister Carmen Gisela Vergara.