

Bush lobbies for more free trade deals

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WASHINGTON — US President George W. Bush on Monday urged a conclusion to long-running talks on a Doha global trade deal and appealed for new free trade agreements to ensure America can compete in the world economy.

"Today, our economic growth increasingly depends on our ability to sell American goods, crops, and services all over the world. So we are working to break down barriers to trade and investment wherever we can," Bush said in his State of the Union speech.

"We are working for a successful Doha round of trade talks, and we must complete a good agreement this year," said Bush of the talks his administration launched in Doha, Qatar in 2001 and which repeatedly have stalled.

"At the same time, we are pursuing opportunities to open up new markets by passing free trade agreements."

World Trade Organization members in Switzerland earlier this month launched a new round of negotiations to agree a global trade deal to reduce trade barriers and subsidies.

The talks have been bogged down for the past six years because of disputes between developed and developing countries over agricultural subsidies and import tariffs on industrial goods.

Bush also thanked Congress for approving a recent trade agreement with Peru, and appealed to lawmakers to pass more such deals with Colombia, Panama, and South Korea.

"Many products from these nations now enter America duty-free, yet many of our products face steep tariffs in their markets," Bush said.

"These agreements will level the playing field. They will give us better access to nearly 100 million customers. And they will support good jobs for the finest workers in the world: those whose products say 'Made in the USA'."

Bush said Congress should first examine a deal with Colombia, a regional US ally that Bush hopes will counteract the influence of anti-US policies championed by oil giant Venezuela's Hugo Chavez.

"These agreements also promote America's strategic interests. The first agreement that will come before you is with Colombia, a friend of America that is confronting violence and terror and fighting drug traffickers," he said.

"If we fail to pass this agreement, we will embolden the purveyors of false populism in our hemisphere. So we must come together, pass this agreement, and show our neighbors in the region that democracy leads to a better life."

Bush already has begun negotiating the three deals, but his power to push them through Congress was curtailed when Democrats gained a majority in control of Congress last year and did not renew the president's "fast track" authority.

The US president faces skepticism from working class Americans on the issue of free trade, as many fear it will lead to further loss of jobs to cheaper overseas labor.

But Bush vowed to provide government-funded retraining assistance for workers who lose their jobs due to the migration of labor abroad.

"Trade brings better jobs, better choices, and better prices. Yet for some Americans, trade can mean losing a job, and the federal government has a responsibility to help," Bush said.

"I ask the Congress to reauthorize and reform trade adjustment assistance, so we can help these displaced workers learn new skills and find new jobs."