

Murder case could be obstacle to free trade agreement

Man elected in Panama poses threat to accord, a U.S. official says

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U.S. Commerce Secretary Carlos Gutierrez has suggested that Panama's appointment of a man indicted in the U.S. for killing an American soldier as the president of its National Assembly may jeopardize congressional approval of a free trade agreement.

"This is a problem that did not exist before and needs to be addressed," Gutierrez told reporters after touring the Panama Canal on Thursday. Gutierrez said it was up to Panamanian President Martin Torrijos and the assembly to resolve the issue and never said explicitly that the man, Pedro Miguel Gonzalez, must leave office.

The appointment of Gonzalez as the assembly president is the latest hurdle for the pending trade agreement with Panama, a country with historical ties to the U.S. Negotiations on the agreement stalled last year as the Torrijos administration concentrated on winning a referendum to expand the almost 100-year-old Panama Canal. Then, after the Democratic takeover of Congress this year, the U.S. was forced to negotiate new provisions regarding labor rights.

Congress began consideration this week of a pending free trade agreement with Peru. The Panama deal won't get a hearing in Congress until at least after that agreement is approved, scheduled for next month.

Gonzalez was acquitted in Panama of the 1992 murder of U.S. Army Sgt. Zak Hernandez-Laporte and the attempted murder of another soldier in an attack in Panama. There is an outstanding arrest warrant for Gonzalez in the U.S., and the American Embassy has asked that he be extradited to the U.S.

Instead, Torrijos's political party in Panama's National Assembly elected Gonzalez as the body's president two weeks ago. The U.S. State Department protested, and Thursday Gutierrez implied the free trade agreement may be in jeopardy.

"This problem could cause the FTA to be delayed," said U.S. Rep. Ruben Hinojosa, D-Mercedes.

Gonzalez has denied involvement in the killing and said, "The era in which the U.S. had the last word in determining who governed our nation and how they did so is over," the Associated Press reported.

Still, he held open the prospect that he would leave office if his selection led to problems getting the trade accord approved, according to the AP.