

Democrat urges House vote on Korea, Colombia pacts

Reuters

By Doug Palmer

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WASHINGTON - Democratic leaders in the House of Representatives would make a big foreign policy blunder if they continued blocking a vote on a free trade agreement with Colombia and deny action on another pact with South Korea, a House Democrat said on Thursday.

"I think that is a huge mistake. It certainly is an insult to Colombia. I think it would be an insult to South Korea. If you want to vote it down ... that's fine. But to go through all the effort of negotiating an agreement and not vote on it, I have a hard time with that," Rep. Adam Smith, a Washington Democrat, said during a discussion on the Korean pact.

Smith, whose state exports about \$2.5 billion of goods to South Korea each year, said he was "leaning heavily" in favor of the South Korean agreement and would be making a final decision in coming weeks after consulting with constituents.

He also said he was leaning in favor of the Colombia pact after voting for a similar deal with Peru last year.

The fate of the Colombia free trade agreement has been up in the air since President George W. Bush submitted it to Congress last month against the advice of House Speaker Nancy Pelosi and Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid.

Rather than follow longstanding "fast track" procedures that guarantee a yes-or-no vote on trade agreements within 90 days, Pelosi pushed through a rule change that allowed her to indefinitely delay action on the Colombia pact. She and other House Democrats had been insisting Colombia do more to stop killings of trade unionists before Congress votes on the pact.

Bush has not submitted the Korea agreement to Congress yet. But administration aides say he told South Korean Lee Myung-bak he was committed to winning approval of the pact this year.

Lee's popularity has plummeted since his government agreed last month to resume beef imports from the United States -- a step the Bush administration insisted South Korea take before it would ask Congress to vote on the deal.

South Korean critics say Lee's government ignored food safety concerns, even though the United States insists its beef meets international safety standards four years after several cases of mad cow disease were found in the U.S. herd.

Public outrage prompted Lee to apologize on Thursday.

"I humbly accept the proposition that we neglected to heed the will of the people," Lee said in a nationally televised address. "I feel a sense of apology to the people," a grim-faced Lee said before bowing his head in contrition.

TALKS ON WORKER AID PROGRAM

Bush accuses Pelosi of effectively killing the Colombia agreement unless she agrees to schedule a vote. Pelosi, in response, has said Congress could still consider the agreement, but only after addressing domestic economic concerns.

The White House has resisted pressure for a second economic stimulus package, but is in talks with Senate Democrats on legislation to expand federal retraining and unemployment benefits for workers who have lost their jobs because of foreign competition.

Currently, that program covers only manufacturing workers. Democrats want to extend it to the huge U.S. services sector, double funding and make other changes to expand eligibility for workers who lose their jobs because of trade.

The outlook for both the Colombia and South Korea agreements is further clouded by U.S. election.

Democratic presidential candidates [Barack Obama](#) and [Hillary Clinton](#) oppose the Colombia pact because of the labor concerns. They also are against the Korean agreement because they say it favors South Korean automakers too much -- a charge the White House denies.

A House Democratic aide, speaking on condition that he not be identified, said it was unlikely Congress would vote on the either agreement before the August break, which is considered the most likely window for approving the pacts.

However, Senate Finance Committee Chairman Max Baucus, who is leading talks with the White House on expanding trade adjustment assistance (TAA), told reporters on Thursday he still saw a chance for approval of the Colombia deal

"If we get TAA enacted, then we're in a very good position to bring up the Colombia agreement," Baucus said.

(Additional reporting by Jack Kim in Seoul; Editing by Eric Walsh)