

Bush seeks Colombia trade vote as soon as possible

By Doug Palmer
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WASHINGTON - The Bush administration wants congressional Democratic leaders to schedule a vote "as soon as possible" on a controversial free trade agreement with Colombia, U.S. Trade Representative Susan Schwab said on Monday.

Colombia has made tremendous strides in reducing violence against trade unionists and addressing other concerns House Speaker Nancy Pelosi and other senior Democrats cited in June as reasons for opposing the free trade pact, Schwab said.

Scheduling a vote would force lawmakers to make up "their minds about what is the right thing to do," Schwab told reporters after a weekend trip to Colombia with members of Congress to persuade lawmakers to vote for the pact.

"There are significant numbers of Democrats who have said to us that they understand how important the Colombia trade promotion agreement is," she said.

But until a vote is scheduled, "you're not going to see people taking public stances because there's a lot of pressure on them not to," Schwab said.

One prominent lawmaker who has been silent on the agreement is Democratic presidential front-runner Sen. Hillary Clinton. Another Democratic presidential candidate, former North Carolina Sen. John Edwards, has said he is strongly opposed.

The AFL-CIO labor federation has called Colombia the most dangerous country in the world for trade unionists. Although murders have fallen in recent years, they still remain too high and the Colombian government has not put enough killers of trade unionists in jail, the AFL-CIO has said.

Schwab argued approval of the trade agreement would reinforce efforts President Alvaro Uribe is already making to reduce violence, bolster U.S. standing in the region and help the long-running war on drugs.

Acting U.S. Agriculture Secretary Chuck Conner said the agreement would boost farm exports by eliminating many of Colombia's tariffs on U.S. agricultural goods.

The U.S. House of Representatives is expected to pass a free trade agreement with Colombia's neighbor Peru on Wednesday, setting the stage for the Senate to give final congressional approval to that agreement in coming weeks.

Schwab said Congress should vote on the Colombia agreement "as soon as possible after Peru is done," but she refused to suggest a more specific date. "The most important answer to that question is a near-term date that we could work out with congressional leadership," Schwab said.

Last week, House Ways and Means Chairman Charles Rangel, a New York Democrat, said he did not expect any more trade votes this year because of the crowded legislative calendar.