

Bush, Uribe action needed to save Colombia deal

By Doug Palmer
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WASHINGTON - A free trade agreement between Colombia and the United States could hinge on actions that Colombian President Alvaro Uribe and U.S. President George W. Bush take for workers in coming months, two U.S. lawmakers said in separate interviews on Tuesday.

Although Uribe has made impressive progress in reducing violence from a decades-old civil war, many Democrats want more evidence he is serious about bringing the murderers of trade unionists to justice, said Rep. Eliot Engel, a New York Democrat just returned from a trip to Colombia.

Engel, who chairs a Western Hemisphere foreign affairs subcommittee in the House of Representatives, said he told Uribe: "I thought Colombia really had to do something dramatic to show that it was serious (about ending impunity for murderers of trade unionists) -- that it was really going after these people and it wasn't just lip service."

The AFL-CIO labor federation has fiercely opposed the trade agreement with Colombia, which it has called the most dangerous country in the world for unions. It has accused Alvaro's government of failing to aggressively prosecute hundreds of cases of murdered trade unionists.

The Bush administration has been trying to persuade members of Congress to visit Colombia and judge for themselves the progress the country has made.

Engel, who voted against the North American Free Trade Agreement and a smaller free trade pact with Central American countries, said he was still undecided on the Colombian pact.

But recent changes to incorporate labor and environmental provisions long demanded by Democrats into the trade deal "makes me consider voting for it because these were things we've had asked for all these years."

"We were able to get them and I think that's a very positive step," Engel said.

U.S. WORKER RETRAINING

Rep. Jim McDermott, a Washington Democrat, said he also was undecided after visiting Colombia over the weekend on the same trip with Engel and U.S. Commerce Secretary Carlos Gutierrez.

"I'm not really opposed to it. I just think it's not timely to bring it up yet," McDermott said, adding that the real issue "is what we're going to do with trade adjustment assistance."

The decades-old program to retrain workers who have lost their jobs because of trade liberalization is projected to cost about \$5.3 billion over the next five years without any changes.

Democrats in the House and the Senate have proposed an expansion for service industry workers that could raise the cost of the program by \$4 billion over five years.

Democrats on the House Ways and Means Committee also unveiled a proposal late last week that would provide more generous health care benefits for workers under the program.

In a speech last week, Bush said he was a "big believer" in trade adjustment assistance.

The Labor Department did not respond to calls on Monday and Tuesday asking whether the Bush administration supported Democratic proposals for expanding the program.

McDermott said he was concerned Bush's recent veto of a bill to expand a popular children's health care program heralded a showdown over trade adjustment assistance that would resonate in congressional consideration of trade deals with Peru, Panama, Colombia and South Korea.

"If the president is going to treat the workers of this country the way he treats the children of this country, then maybe we've got to do some further thinking about this," McDermott said.