

Colombia doing all it can for trade pact: official

By Doug Palmer

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WASHINGTON -- Colombia already is working as hard as it can to cut violence against trade unionists, a top Colombian official said on Tuesday in response to demands by U.S. Democrats that it do even more before Congress approves a trade pact.

"We're (fighting violence) as hard as we can," Colombian Trade Minister Luis Guillermo Plata told reporters.

"That what's a country ought to be doing, any country in the world -- fighting violence, fighting criminals and prosecuting those who commit crimes, against union leaders, against anybody in society."

Colombia has even changed the free trade agreement to incorporate tougher labor and environmental provisions requested by Democrats.

"I don't see what else we can do right now," Plata said, ruling out a new initiative to win Democratic support.

Plata spoke to reporters after the release of a new report by the Center for Strategic and International Studies evaluating how Colombia -- with considerable help from the United States -- has pulled itself "back from the brink" of collapse eight years ago.

"The influence of illegal armed groups has been rolled back, the presence of the state broadly expanded, levels of violence and criminality sharply reduced, the observance of human rights improved and the economy set in a very positive direction," the report concluded, while noting major challenges remain.

The Bush administration hopes the report will help persuade members of Congress to vote for the free trade agreement, which has been stalled for more than a year because of strong opposition from the AFL-CIO labor federation, which calls Colombia the most dangerous country in the world for trade unionists.

Although murders of trade unionists have declined under Colombian President Alvaro Uribe, they still remain too high and many more trade unionists live in fear for their lives, AFL-CIO President John Sweeney said in a letter last week that urged lawmakers not to vote on the pact in 2008.

Plata said Colombia was making great strides to overcome what he called its "terrible history."

"When we came in 2002, we had 196 murders of trade union leaders in that year. This year, so far we're at 24 ... I'm not saying 24 is great. I'm just saying we're making a big effort," Plata said. Over the same period, homicides have declined from 28,000 per year to 13,000, he said.

Last week, Democratic presidential front-runner Sen. Hillary Clinton said she opposed the Colombia free trade agreement because of that country's "history of violence against trade unionists."

But Thomas "Mack" McLarty, who was Clinton's husband's first White House chief of staff, said approving the agreement would bolster human rights in Colombia, as well as creating a more favorable environment for U.S. business.

"I think we're making progress on both the economic and civil society front with the passage of the FTA, and I do think it would be a pretty serious step backward if we're not able to do so," the former top aide to former President Bill Clinton said.

(Editing by Eric Walsh)