

Commerce chief presses for trade deals passage

By Doug Palmer

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WASHINGTON - Congress should vote on pending free-trade agreements with Colombia, Panama and South Korea "as soon as possible" to help keep U.S. exports -- and the economy -- growing, Commerce Secretary Carlos Gutierrez said on Thursday.

"These agreements make sense, first and foremost, from a standpoint of economics," Gutierrez told reporters in a briefing on how the administration hopes to overcome opposition from Democrats -- including presidential candidates Sen. Hillary Clinton and Sen. Barack Obama -- to the trade pacts.

Exports have been a bright spot in the U.S. economy. Their robust growth in 2007 helped offset the negative impact of a housing market downturn that continues to reverberate and has raised concerns recently about a possible recession.

So Congress should be pushing ahead to approve the trade agreements instead of putting off action, Gutierrez said.

"What we'd like to see is a vote on all three agreements as soon as possible. There is no reason to wait beyond this year. Especially now, when our exports are enabling us to offset the impact of the housing correction," he said.

Clinton and other senior Democrats say Congress should wait for Colombia to make more progress on reducing violence against trade unionists before Congress votes on the pact.

Many Democrats and some Republicans also believe the Korea agreement will cause more job losses in the hard-hit U.S. auto sector and want changes in that part of the pact.

But Gutierrez said it was realistic to believe Congress will approve the Colombia and the South Korean agreements, and said the White House wants to work with Congress in a bipartisan fashion to get the deals done.

PANAMA PACT PROBLEMS

The Panama pact faces problems because the president of that country's legislature is wanted in the United States on charges of killing a U.S. soldier in 1992. That situation could resolve itself when the lawmaker's term as head of the National Assembly ends in September.

The Bush administration wants Congress to vote first on the Colombia agreement, then turn to the other pacts. It argues that country already has made tremendous progress in reducing violence, not only against union members but throughout its society.

Gutierrez cast the Colombia free trade agreement as a logical extension of the bipartisan Plan Colombia program begun by former President Bill Clinton that has pumped \$5 billion worth of U.S. aid into that country since 2000. The aid was aimed at quelling a guerrilla war fueled by an illegal drug trade.

Democrats who oppose the Colombia free trade agreement because of their concern about trade union violence should look closer at data showing sharp drops in homicides, kidnappings and "terrorist" acts in recent years, he said.

Gutierrez, White House Drug Czar John Walters and other top administration officials plan to lead a series of congressional delegations to Colombia over the next two months to try to build support for the pact.

The agreement is too important to a long-standing U.S. ally -- and the United States' standing in South America -- for lawmakers to vote against the agreement without seeing the situation in Colombia firsthand, he said.

(Reporting by Doug Palmer, editing by Vicki Allen)