

Democrats protest Bush pressure on Guatemala.

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WASHINGTON, Jan 26 (Reuters) - Congressional Democrats urged the Bush administration on Wednesday to stop pressuring Guatemala to reverse recent changes in its drug patent laws.

In a letter to U.S. Trade Representative Robert Zoellick, they also asked the administration to drop a related provision in a free trade agreement with the Dominican Republic and five Central American countries, including Guatemala.

The issue goes to a complaint raised by critics of free trade agreements, who say the pacts make it harder for citizens of poor countries to obtain inexpensive life-saving drugs. The Guatemala Congress recently repealed an 18-month-old pharmaceutical "test data" secrecy law that the Democrats said was passed because of pressure from U.S. trade officials during negotiations on the DR-CAFTA pact.

"The Pan-American Health Organization and UNICEF (United Nations Children's Fund) both publicly supported repeal of that law," the Democrats said. "We request that you immediately cease pressure on Guatemala to adopt test data secrecy/market exclusivity and instead agree to remove this provision from the DR-CAFTA."

The letter was signed by 11 Democrats, including Rep. Henry Waxman of California and Rep. Charles Rangel of New York, two of the party's most senior lawmakers in the House of Representatives.

"Guatemala's new law clearly violates the FTA. Guatemala's law provided this protection until last month. The United States fully supports countries, especially poor countries, having the flexibility to take necessary measures to combat pandemics like HIV AIDS," USTR spokesperson Neena Moorjani said.

House Republicans have expressed concern about Guatemala's recent action, which is seen as a threat to the patent rights of pharmaceutical companies and inconsistent with the recent free trade agreement.

The Bush administration hopes to win congressional approval of CAFTA this year. However, the agreement is opposed by a number of groups, including organized labor, and House leaders have not yet scheduled a vote on the pact.