

# Democrats press labor ahead of Bahrain FTA vote

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**WASHINGTON** - U.S. Democrats pressed Bahrain on Thursday to change its labor laws before an expected vote in Congress this year on a bilateral free trade pact with the tiny kingdom known as the Gulf's banking hub.

"It is our hope that these changes will be submitted by the Bahraini government to the parliament within a matter of weeks and that it will be successfully enacted by the parliament before we complete consideration here of the Bahraini agreement," said Rep. Ben Cardin, a Maryland Democrat.

Cardin praised Bahrain, which is home to the U.S. Fifth Fleet, for legalizing labor unions and approving other labor reforms in 2002. But more changes are needed to bring Bahrain's labor laws up to international standards, he said.

Cardin cited a ban on workers in the same company forming more than one union, vague laws regarding penalties for anti-union discrimination, the ability of companies to withhold foreign workers' salaries for up to three months, and onerous requirements on unions for calling strikes.

The Bush administration hopes to win approval of the U.S.-Bahrain Free Trade Agreement in coming months. It is anxious to avoid a replay of the bruising battle with Democrats in the House of Representatives earlier this year over a free trade agreement with Central America.

Two-way trade between the United States and Bahrain totaled nearly \$900 million in 2003. The pact is expected to boost U.S. agricultural and manufactured goods exports to the island nation near Saudi Arabia, and provide even bigger opportunities for U.S. banks and other service industry companies.

Shaun Donnelly, assistant U.S. trade representative for Europe and the Mediterranean, told the House Ways and Means Committee that the United States was working with Bahrain on improvements to its labor laws ahead of the vote.

The AFL-CIO labor federation urged Congress to reject the agreement, which it said was too weak in the labor area to ensure workers rights were protected.

Despite the concerns raised by Cardin and other Democrats, the Ways and Means Committee hearing provided little other indication that the fight over the Bahrain agreement would be as fierce as the one over the U.S.-Central American Free Trade Agreement, which barely cleared the House.

New York Rep. Charles Rangel, the top Democrat on the panel, praised Bahrain for its willingness to address labor concerns and its recent commitment to completely end its participation in the Arab League boycott of Israel.

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