

Support growing for trade pacts, U.S. Democrats say

By Doug Palmer

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WASHINGTON (Reuters) - Support is growing in Congress for free trade agreements with Peru, Panama and even Colombia because of a deal congressional leaders reached earlier this year with the Bush administration, several Democratic lawmakers said on Wednesday.

"I think we have an opportunity to move forward on Peru, Panama and I hope Colombia, perhaps in the future," Rep. Xavier Becerra, a California Democrat, said at a conference on U.S. trade and investment relations with Latin America.

Becerra, like most other Democrats in the U.S. House of Representatives, voted against a free trade agreement with the Dominican Republic and Central American countries in 2005.

The bitter fight over that agreement, known as DR-CAFTA, was one of the lowest points in President George W. Bush's relations with Democrats in Congress on trade.

After Democrats won control of Congress in last November's election, many doubted trade pacts with Peru, Panama and particularly Colombia -- with its history of violence against trade unionists and a scandal involving the country's paramilitary forces -- could be approved.

But responding to one of the biggest objections Democrats raised to DR-CAFTA, U.S. Trade Representative Susan Schwab negotiated a deal with House Ways and Means Committee Chairman Charles Rangel, a New York Democrat, to strengthen labor and environmental provisions of the three Latin American free trade agreements and future bilateral trade pacts.

That has given the White House and Congress a chance "to get back on the right track" on trade, Becerra said.

The Colombian agreement still faces bigger challenges than the other two pacts, but the government of Colombian President Alvaro Uribe has "done tremendous work" to answer concerns raised by Democrats, Becerra said.

Congress is scheduled to begin work next week on the Peru agreement and could approve the pact soon.

"I think that's a very important step and will provide confidence that there is a new bipartisan consensus on trade agreements in the U.S. Congress," Deputy U.S. Trade Representative John Veroneau told the same group.

He expressed optimism lawmakers would approve all three pacts before Bush leaves office in early 2009, and indicated the White House could push for a vote next on the Colombia agreement instead of the less controversial Panama pact.

Past practice has been for Congress to consider the agreements in the order they were negotiated and Colombia was finished before Panama, Veroneau said.

Reps. Henry Cuellar of Texas, Gregory Meeks of New York and Jim Matheson of Utah -- three of the 15 House Democrats who voted for DR-CAFTA -- voiced their strong support at the conference for all three free trade agreements.

"I think for the new (Democratic) majority it would be a mistake for us to turn our backs toward Latin America and toward trade," Cuellar said.

Colombian government efforts to address Democratic party concerns already have persuaded some lawmakers to consider supporting the pact, Meeks said.