

# Labor urges no vote on Colombia trade deal in '08

By Doug Palmer  
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WASHINGTON - Congress should wait at least one year before voting on a free trade agreement with Colombia because of continuing violence in that country against trade unionists, the largest U.S. labor group said on Friday.

"In sum, the Colombian government needs to make considerable changes to fully address our concerns. This will no doubt take some time, and it appears to us highly unlikely that all of the needed changes can happen in the next 12 months," John Sweeney, president of the AFL-CIO labor federation, said in a letter to members of Congress.

The letter was another blow to Bush administration hopes of persuading Congress to approve the pact next year.

On Thursday, Democratic presidential front-runner Sen. Hillary Clinton announced she opposed the Colombia trade deal, joining an election rival, former North Carolina Sen. John Edwards, who also has come out against the pact.

Thea Lee, policy director at the AFL-CIO, said the group believed Congress should wait at least until 2009 to vote on the pact to see if Colombia has made needed reforms.

The House of Representatives voted 285-132 on Thursday to approve a free trade pact with Colombia's neighbor Peru.

The AFL-CIO, which traditionally has opposed trade agreements, took a neutral position on the Peru deal because changes that were made earlier this year to strengthen the agreement's labor and environmental provisions.

The same changes have been made to the Colombia agreement, but Sweeney said the AFL-CIO was "unalterably opposed" to that deal. Murders of trade union members remain too high even though they have declined in recent years, and hundreds of trade unionists still face death threats, Sweeney said.

"More troubling, the vast majority of those responsible for the over 2,200 murders of trade unionists since 1991 are still at large and face no criminal charges," Sweeney said.

Many of Colombia's labor laws do not comply with core international standards and the Colombian government often fails to enforce those it has on the books, Sweeney said.

"Passing the U.S.-Colombia Free Trade Agreement at this time would cost the United States considerable leverage over Colombia to encourage continued progress on human rights," Sweeney said in the letter.

The Bush administration has mounted a full-scale effort to persuade lawmakers to vote for the Colombia agreement, including taking them on trips to the country so they can judge for themselves the progress Colombia has made.

The White House says Colombian President Alvaro Uribe has done a remarkable job of reducing violence since taking office five years ago, and warns that rejecting the agreement would damage U.S. standing in Latin America.

(Editing by John Ruwitch and Vicki Allen)