

Rep. Rangel urges patience on U.S.-Colombia trade deal

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WASHINGTON - It would be better to build more support in Congress first for a free trade agreement with Colombia, than risk an embarrassing defeat by moving too quickly to a vote on the deal, a senior Democrat in the U.S. House of Representatives said on Wednesday.

"Colombia comes with heavy political weight and those issues have to be resolved," House Ways and Means Committee Chairman Charles Rangel, a New York Democrat, told reporters shortly after his panel voted 39-0 to approve a free trade deal with Colombia's neighbor, Peru.

Many members of Congress are strongly opposed to the Colombia agreement because they feel the South American country has not done enough to stop the murders of trade unionists and bring their killers to justice.

However, Rangel praised steps Colombian President Alvaro Uribe has taken to end decades of civil war and said he wanted to work to win approval of the agreement.

"Colombia is still being studied by the members and as I told the ambassador who was here this morning ... that we would want to work harder in getting votes for Colombia rather than bring the bill up and having it defeated, which we think would be a rebuff to a great president and to great country and a great ally," Rangel said.

He told reporters he had a responsibility as chairman of the Ways and Means Committee not to move too quickly even though the Bush administration was pushing for action.

"I have to make sure I don't embarrass my government by pushing a bill that doesn't have enough support to win," Rangel said.

As a practical matter, the crowded legislative calendar makes it unlikely Congress will have time to vote on the trade pact with Colombia or a separate deal with Panama this year, Rangel said.

"This is the first time I'm saying publicly that we have to look at next year, but it's not because we both don't want it considered," Rangel said, standing next to the Ways and Means Committee's top Republican, Rep. Jim McCrery of Louisiana, who indicated his agreement.