

House leader offers some hope on trade deals

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WASHINGTON - A top congressional Democrat offered the Bush administration and a leading U.S. business group on Tuesday some hope of winning approval of free trade agreements with Panama, Colombia and South Korea if they can help find solutions to problems blocking the pacts.

"If you want that outcome, you'll have to be willing to do the work," House of Representatives Majority Leader Steny Hoyer said in a speech to the National Foreign Trade Council, which represents major U.S. corporations.

The Maryland Democrat said he expected the House of Representatives to approve a free trade agreement with Peru "in coming weeks" in conjunction with legislation to expand federal aid for workers who have lost their job because of trade.

Hoyer urged the business group and members of the Bush administration in the audience to "take a lesson from the Peru FTA (free trade agreement)" and work with Democrats to find solutions for problems facing the three other trade pacts.

Hoyer acknowledged the process leading to approval of the Peru free trade pact has taken longer than U.S. business would have liked. "But it has worked," he said.

The Peru agreement is headed toward passage in Congress after Peru's government agreed to implement a number of labor reforms stemming from a May 10 deal between the White House and members of Congress.

The Bush administration had hoped the same deal would pave the way for quick approval of trade pacts with Colombia, Panama and South Korea, but those agreements "pose their own challenges," Hoyer said.

In the case of Colombia, Democrats want to see that country make more progress in reducing violence and bringing murderers of trade unionists to justice.

Senior Democrats have also demanded changes in the auto provisions of the South Korea free trade pact, which they see as too heavily weighted in favor of Seoul.

The recent decision of Panama's National Assembly to elect as its leader a man wanted in the 1992 killing of a U.S. soldier presents a "very serious" problem for that pact, Senate Finance Committee Chairman Max Baucus said earlier on Tuesday.

At the very least, Panama needs to "give some comfort that they're sufficiently taking this incident seriously. And that's not been shown yet," the Montana Democrat said.