

# US business chiefs urge Congress on Colombia trade

By Doug Palmer

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WASHINGTON - Chief executives from some of the biggest U.S. companies urged Congress on Tuesday to quickly pass a free trade agreement with Colombia that U.S. labor groups strongly oppose.

Chief executives from Wal-Mart (WMT.N), Microsoft (MSFT.O), General Motors (GM.N), Coca-Cola (KO.N) and more than a dozen other top U.S. companies made the appeal to Democratic and Republican leaders of Congress.

It came one week after the Senate gave final congressional approval to a free trade pact with Colombia's neighbor, Peru.

U.S. House of Representatives Speaker Nancy Pelosi of California and other senior Democrats have ignored the Bush administration's repeated requests to set a date for a vote on the Colombian agreement, which is largely similar to the one with Peru.

They argue Colombian President Alvaro Uribe has not taken strong enough action to end decades of deadly violence against trade unionists and put their murderers in jail.

In a letter to Pelosi and other congressional leaders, the business executives said the Colombia agreement was a good deal for U.S. exporters that would strengthen political ties with one of the United States' strongest allies in Latin America.

"Improving the rule of law in Colombia is vital but delaying approval of the U.S.-Colombia TPA (Trade Promotion Agreement) is not the answer ... Delaying approval will undermine the U.S.-Colombia relationship, which has been a significant factor in promoting Colombia's progress," the business chiefs said.

The AFL-CIO labor federation has urged Congress to wait at least one more year to vote on the agreement to give Colombia more time to prove it is serious about ending violence.

Democratic presidential candidates, including Sen. Hillary Clinton of New York and former Sen. John Edwards, have echoed the labor group's strong opposition.

The White House argues Uribe has done a remarkable job in stabilizing a country once on the brink of collapse because of narco-trafficking and decades of civil war.

A few Democrats such as Reps. Gregory Meeks of New York and James Moran of Virginia openly support the pact, which they say makes sense from both a foreign policy and economic perspective.

But at a news conference with the Emergency Committee for American Trade, the business group that organized the letter, both lawmakers said winning approval would be tough.

"This is not low-hanging fruit by any means," unlike the Peru trade agreement, Moran said. "But we're going to try because its the right thing to do."

The White House has been debating whether to just submit the pact to Congress for a vote, as it could still legally do under U.S. trade legislation that expires in June, said Rep. Wally Herger, a California Republican.

"That's certainly always an option ... But it's the last option" because it likely would anger Democratic leaders and make it harder to round up votes, Herger said.

A wiser path is to try to build up support in hopes of persuading Democratic leaders to agree to a vote, Herger said. (Reporting by Doug Palmer; editing by Mohammad Zargham)