

U.S. urges reciprocity in Doha talks on farming

By Patrick Markey
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LLANOGRANDE, COLOMBIA -- Developing nations that want deeper cuts in U.S. farm subsidies must show more willingness to open their own markets if the Doha round of trade talks is to progress, a top U.S. trade official said.

Other countries need to do more in response to U.S. offers, U.S. Secretary of Commerce Carlos Gutierrez told Reuters during a visit to Colombia on Saturday.

"We have not seen enough reciprocity even for what we have put on the table from developing countries," he said at Llanogrande farm outside Medellin.

"... We are waiting for these countries to come back and at least give us a sense that they are willing to reciprocate," he said.

U.S. officials say Washington has already offered substantial farm subsidy cuts, and is prepared to do more if advanced developing countries like Brazil, India and Argentina agree to deeper tariffs on both farm and industrial goods.

Gutierrez was visiting Medellin with a congressional delegation for talks with Colombian President Alvaro Uribe, a close ally of Republican U.S. President George W. Bush, on the Andean country's free trade accord. U.S. Democrats are resisting the deal because of concerns over extrajudicial killings and violence against union leaders.

Trade representatives went back to Geneva this month to resume farm talks in the World Trade Organization negotiations but it remains unclear how successful efforts will be to reach a deal on cutting subsidies and reducing barriers.

"We feel like we have put a great offer out but others need to show leadership as well and this is the time for that," Gutierrez said.

STRATEGIC TRADE PACT

Since they took control of Congress in November, Democrats have taken a tougher line on free trade pacts with Peru and Panama and particularly with Colombia, where some feel Uribe has done too little to protect labor leaders and curb the influence of far-right paramilitary death squads.

Funded by U.S. military and counter-narcotics aid, Uribe has led a security crackdown on left-wing rebels, disarmed paramilitary gangs and taken on drug lords. Kidnapping has plummeted and urban areas and highways are safer.

But Uribe is fending off a scandal tying some of his lawmaker allies to paramilitary warlords accused of drug-trafficking and massacres. Rights groups say attacks and threats on labor leaders are still a concern.

Gutierrez said the Medellin trip had provided the visiting U.S. lawmakers with information they could take back to their Democratic colleagues to illustrate how Uribe's government is addressing their concerns.

Some analysts expect Peru's free trade accord to get ratified this year, but say Colombia's pact may not be debated in Congress until after the November 2008 U.S. presidential election.

Colombian officials say Congress needs to approve the deal for an important Washington ally in Latin America, where leftist leaders like Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez are trying to counter U.S. trade and foreign policy initiatives.

"We expect to communicate to enough members the importance economically, strategically from a national security standpoint and from a geopolitical standpoint, of this free trade agreement and how critical it is that we pass it," Gutierrez said.