

US, S.Korea trade chiefs to mull trade vote options

By Doug Palmer

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WASHINGTON - Top U.S. and South Korean trade officials will discuss prospects for each other's legislature to approve a free trade trade pact when they meet early next week in Singapore, a U.S. trade official said on Friday.

U.S. Trade Representative Susan Schwab and South Korean Trade Minister Kim Jong-hoon "will exchange updates on legislative developments" related to agreement, said Gretchen Hamel, a spokeswoman for the U.S. Trade Representative's office.

The pact, which the two countries signed on June 30, faces stiff opposition in Congress because of its auto provisions and Seoul's delay in fully reopening its market to U.S. beef.

Schwab and Kim are attending a meeting of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations in Singapore on Sunday and Monday.

The Bush administration hopes to win approval of the pact before it leaves office in January 2009, but senior Democrats in Congress have expressed concern about the pact.

Many U.S. supporters want South Korea's legislature to vote first in order to create momentum in the U.S. Congress for the pact.

Troy Stangarone, director of congressional affairs and trade at the Korea Economic Institute, said there is probably only a narrow opportunity for U.S. lawmakers to approve the pact next year.

"I think that the reality is that if beef (market reopening) doesn't happen very soon, the chances diminish. You need that to happen, so you can build support," Stangarone said.

Many members of Congress have insisted Seoul fully reopen its market to U.S. beef before they vote on the pact.

South Korea, like many other countries, closed its market to U.S. beef nearly four years ago when the first case of mad cow disease was found in the United States and has taken its time to completely lift the ban.

Assuming the beef issue can be resolved, supporters would still have to overcome opposition from lawmakers who believe the automobile provisions favor South Korea too much.

Those critics include Democratic presidential candidate Sen. Hillary Clinton and House Speaker Nancy Pelosi, in addition to other senior Democrats.

But in one positive sign for the agreement, a group of ten Democrats urged Pelosi and other senior Democrats in a letter last week to consider the "geopolitical" benefits of approving the agreement, which they said "acts a balance to the emerging economic and political dominance of China" in Asia.

U.S. supporters have hoped that Korea's legislature would approve the agreement before President Roh Moo-hyun leaves office early next year. But Stangarone said he did not expect a vote until at least April, after National Assembly elections.

A U.S. vote probably won't occur until around May or June at the earliest, Stangarone said.

(Reporting by Doug Palmer, Editing by Jackie Frank)