

White House, Colombia press Democrats on FTA

By Kevin Bogardus
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The Bush administration and Colombian officials are working furiously to try to win over congressional Democrats in order to win support for a vote on a free trade agreement (FTA) signed between the two countries that is stalled in Congress.

Commerce Secretary Carlos Gutierrez on Saturday will head the fourth congressional delegation (codel) trip to Colombia led by Bush administration officials this fall. All of the trips are designed to build support, particularly among House Democrats, for the Colombia FTA.

Seven of the nine members making the latest trip are Democrats, including Rep. Stephanie Tubbs Jones (D-Ohio), who sits on the Ways and Means Committee, which has jurisdiction on trade. A total of 28 lawmakers have traveled to Colombia on the four administration-led codels, including 15 Democrats.

Commerce has hosted three codels, and officials from the Office of the U.S. Trade Representative (USTR) and the U.S. Department of Agriculture also co-hosted a codel to Colombia.

Colombian officials have also been coming to Washington to meet with members of Congress. For example, Colombian Trade, Industry and Tourism Minister Luis Guillermo Plata visited Washington this week for a series of meetings and gave a speech for the Council of Americas Thursday.

Plata said he has visited Washington five times this year — twice with President Alvaro Uribe. Colombia's vice president has also visited Washington recently.

“You have to go door to door,” said Plata in an interview with The Hill. “You have to see at least where Colombia is coming from. I have to explain that.”

Colombia has also turned to K Street for help in passing the pact. The country has signed contracts with public-relations giant Burson-Marsteller, the Glover Park Group and Johnson, Madigan, Peck, Boland & Stewart. So far, the Colombian government has paid at least \$308,000 to the groups this year, according to the most recent records filed with the Justice Department.

House Democratic leaders supported a similar trade deal with Peru approved by the House last week, although it failed to win support from a majority of the Democratic Caucus.

Speaker Nancy Pelosi (D-Calif.) and Ways and Means Chairman Charles Rangel (D-N.Y.), however, are not supporting the Colombia FTA, which is also opposed by the AFL-CIO and other unions. They argue that there has been a history of violence in Colombia against union organizers, and that until Colombia shows it is indicting and convicting people who have murdered labor organizers, the deal will not move forward.

“People should not underestimate the level of passion on this issue that runs through the labor movement,” said Thea Lee, the AFL-CIO’s policy director.

She said she has taken note of the visits to Colombia by lawmakers as the free trade debate has raged here in Washington. “We’re certainly not opposed to people taking trips. We just hope there will be due diligence to get both sides of the story,” Lee said. The AFL-CIO has encouraged members on the trips to contact a solidarity office in Colombia tied to the union to get more information.

The codels are intended to bolster the administration’s argument that the situation in Colombia is improving and that an FTA would provide more economic security to a vital U.S. ally in an important part of the world.

In the upcoming trip, members will meet with a prosecutor whom Commerce said would discuss the Uribe government’s efforts to prosecute the perpetrators of violence against union leaders. They’ll also visit a part of Medellin once so dangerous police officers would not visit it, to see how Uribe’s government has reduced violence.

The administration argues the deal would mostly help U.S. exporters, since more than 90 percent of Colombia’s imports entered the U.S. duty-free in 2006 due to a unilateral preference program renewed earlier this year.

Commerce officials argue the FTA would provide similar protections to U.S. goods going to Colombia, which is America’s third-largest export market for its farm products.

Plata argues the FTA would provide a more solid platform for future investment in Colombia than the current preference program, which could be rejected by a future Congress. He suggested some businesses might not place greater investments in his country with just the advantage of the trade preference program.

The AFL-CIO, however, has not softened its stance. In a letter to lawmakers last week noting that two trade union leaders were killed this month, AFL-CIO President John Sweeney wrote that his union still did not have confidence that Colombian workers can exercise their labor rights without fear of intimidation.

Plata said his government has been in touch with the union, including through a meeting between Uribe and Sweeney this year. The minister contended that murders of union leaders have declined over the last year.

One of this weekend's code attendees, Rep. Gregory Meeks (D-N.Y.) said the AFL-CIO and Colombia should work together.

"Let's sit down and figure out what needs to be done," said Meeks, one of 15 Democrats to vote for the Central American Free Trade Agreement in 2005. This weekend's visit will be Meeks's third congressional delegation stop this fall.

Meeks said he supports the agreement because he wants U.S. goods allowed the same protections that Colombian goods enjoy in America. "We don't have access to [their market]," said the lawmaker.