

# US Officials Say Panama Trade Deal May be in Jeopardy

By Brian Wagner  
Voice of America  
September 14, 2007

**U.S. officials are raising pressure on Panama after its National Assembly named as president a man who was indicted in the United States on murder charges. In Miami, VOA's Brian Wagner reports that officials say the issue may jeopardize approval of a free trade deal between the two nations.**

MIAMI -- The U.S. State Department spoke out earlier this month when Panamanian lawmakers selected Pedro Miguel Gonzalez to lead the country's National Assembly. A spokesman said the government was disappointed at his election, and noted there is an outstanding arrest warrant in the United States for Gonzalez because of his alleged role in the 1992 killing of a U.S. soldier in Panama.

Thursday, U.S. Commerce Secretary Carlos Gutierrez also raised the issue while leading a Congressional delegation to Panama City for talks with President Martin Torrijos about a pending free trade deal. Gutierrez said the Gonzalez election is a new problem that needs to be addressed, adding it was up to Panama's government to decide how to resolve it.

Some U.S. lawmakers said Gonzalez's role as top lawmaker could lead them to delay approval of the free trade deal or block it altogether.

Gonzalez has denied any role in the shooting of Army Sergeant Zak Hernandez Laporte and the alleged attempted murder of another U.S. soldier in Panama. The attack took place during a visit by former president George H.W. Bush to the Central American nation. A Panamanian court acquitted Gonzalez of similar charges 10 years ago.

Former State Department official Peter DeShazo, who was in Panama at the time of the killing, said the outstanding arrest warrant against Gonzalez has remained on the bilateral agenda for years.

"This is an issue that is important to the United States because Zak Hernandez was a member of the U.S. armed forces. And it's been a long-standing issue that has gone unresolved," he said.

DeShazo said there was strong support in Congress for the trade deal with Panama before Gonzalez was named to the National Assembly post.

U.S. lawmakers are considering the Panama trade deal, as well as similar agreements with Colombia and Peru. U.S. officials say the deals will help American exporters by

cutting duties on their products to the three nations. They say 90 percent of imports from Colombia, Panama and Peru already enter the United States duty-free.