

White House Fans Out For Trade Push, Aware of Skepticism

By Greg Hitt
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WASHINGTON - As global trade talks teeter toward another collapse, the White House is mounting a major push for what remains of the Bush trade agenda: a handful of bilateral deals with Latin American countries.

This weekend, Commerce Secretary Carlos Gutierrez is scheduled to lead a delegation of U.S. lawmakers to Colombia, in an effort to dispel congressional concerns about the Andean nation's history of drug-related and political violence, which are among the stumbling blocks to approval of a U.S. trade deal with that country.

In a rare foray into trade policy, Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice is arguing the proposed Colombia deal, along with pending pacts with Peru and Panama, makes good business sense and is of "critical strategic value" in the Western Hemisphere.

President Bush himself is stepping into the fray. Tomorrow, he is expected to travel to Miami, where he is expected to press reluctant lawmakers to approve the Latin American trade deals and resist election-year pressures to turn away from free trade.

The push for action on the bilateral agreements comes as the Doha Round of global trade talks appear to be sinking deeper into deadlock. The effort reflects concern among senior Bush officials over the growing sentiment among Americans against expanded free trade and globalization.

"We have to take it seriously," said Susan Schwab, Mr. Bush's trade envoy, of the deterioration in public support. Ms. Schwab has been lobbying Capitol Hill with one-on-one meetings aimed at building congressional support for the Latin American trade deals.

She said that rapid changes in the U.S. economy, such as the use of technology to improve business productivity, are as much to blame for worker unease as free trade. "Change is always threatening," she said, adding "it is easy to demagogue trade ... and blame imports for all manner of ills."

In last year's elections, skepticism toward trade and worries that the American worker isn't getting a fair shake in the global marketplace helped to propel Democrats to power in Congress. The same forces are already roiling the 2008 campaign.

"There's a lot of dissatisfaction with what's going on, in terms of globalization, with American workers," warned Washington Rep. Jim McDermott, a Democrat sympathetic

to the free-trade agenda. He said many members of Congress are "wary" of expanded trade.

Mr. McDermott suggested the outlook for Latin American trade deals may ultimately hinge on fledgling legislative efforts to beef up programs that aid workers who lose jobs as a result of global competition. "We're going to have to deal with that," he said.

The proposed deals with Colombia, Panama and Peru were concluded before Mr. Bush's fast-track negotiating authority expired in June. A fourth deal with South Korea is on ice because that market remains largely closed to American beef.

The administration's push has been building slowly since midyear. Behind the scenes, officials from the White House and several cabinet agencies, including the U.S. Trade Representative's office and Commerce Department, are holding twice-weekly meetings to coordinate strategy.

So far, the effort is having mixed success. The deal with Peru appears destined for approval at the moment. It has cleared the Senate Finance Committee, and is expected to be taken up soon by the House Ways and Means Committee. Final action is expected later this fall.

But the outlook for Panama and Colombia is cloudy. In the case of Panama, the U.S. has delayed action on the trade deal because of alarm in both Congress and the administration about the recently elected leader of the nation's legislature, who is wanted in the U.S. on charges of killing an American soldier in 1992. Ms. Rice called the lawmaker's election "a deeply troubling development, and we've made that very clear to the Panamanian government."

Also unclear is the fate of the deal with Colombia, where government officials have been accused of failing to protect labor organizers and others from violence. Bush aides say Colombia has made big strides in addressing congressional concerns about the situation, noting murders and kidnappings are down significantly. Mr. Gutierrez says the trade deal is a "logical extension" of longstanding U.S. efforts to strengthen Colombia's democracy.

But many Democrats are reticent to move forward. Mr. McDermott, who is traveling with Mr. Gutierrez this weekend, said approval of the Colombia deal at this point is "problematic."