

Kirk to consult with Congress on Colombia trade

Reuters
April 20, 2009

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- * White House to push for Panama pact first
- * Panama delegation to Washington

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By Doug Palmer

WASHINGTON, April 20 (Reuters) - The Obama administration will consult closely with Congress as it begins talks with Colombia on anti-union violence that has blocked approval of a bilateral free trade pact for more than two years, the top U.S. trade official said on Monday.

"One of the commitments I made is we would consult with Congress early and we would consult with them often," U.S. Trade Representative Ron Kirk said.

"I think the Colombian free trade agreement is one that cries out for that type of consultation," Kirk told reporters in a conference call after returning to Washington from the Summit of the Americas in Trinidad.

Former President George W. Bush's administration signed the free trade agreement with Colombia in November 2006, over the strong objections of many congressional Democrats and U.S. labor groups who said Colombian President Alvaro Uribe had not done enough to stop killings of labor leaders and to make sure their murderers are brought to justice.

Obama raised the same concerns during last year's presidential campaign and took a strong position against the pact until more was done to stop anti-labor violence.

Kirk told reporters on Monday that Obama "is a great admirer of President Uribe and more significantly the very substantive work that he has done on issue of safety and protecting workers."

"Having said that, the president has asked me now to follow up and take the lead in meeting with the Colombian ambassadors and others to map out a strategy to identify what remaining issues we have," Kirk said.

That process is expected to begin soon. But Kirk said he was reluctant to predict when Congress could approve the Colombia agreement, even though Uribe and Obama believe that "would be a good thing for both economies."

PANAMA PACT

The White House is expected to push first to win approval of a less controversial trade agreement with Panama.

Kirk said a high-level Panamanian delegation would be in Washington this week to work on identifying and resolving remaining obstacles to approving that pact.

Democrats are pressing the Central American country to make certain labor law reforms and to address concerns about its status as a tax haven before they vote on the pact.

Obama and Uribe were photographed sitting next to one other during the regional summit, and Uribe later said he told the U.S. leader his government had made progress to stop the killings and get more convictions.

Uribe, a conservative and close ally of Bush, will visit Washington soon and told reporters Obama had proposed a Colombian stop on his next Latin American trip.

Representative Sander Levin, a Michigan Democrat who chairs a key House of Representatives trade subcommittee, was in Colombia last week on a fact-finding mission.