

New Movement on Colombia Trade Pact

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PORT-OF-SPAIN, Trinidad -- President Barack Obama discussed a pending free-trade agreement with his Colombian counterpart Saturday and dispatched his trade representative to discuss U.S. concerns over Colombia's treatment of labor leaders.

At the Summit of the Americas in Port-of-Spain, Mr. Obama asked to be seated next to Colombian President Alvaro Uribe, and the pair discussed the deal, U.S. officials said. During his presidential campaign, Mr. Obama had voiced opposition to the pact, citing violence toward labor organizers in Colombia. The deal, which would allow free trade between the two nations, is awaiting ratification in the U.S. Senate and has already been approved by Colombia's congress.

Since taking office, Mr. Obama has struck a more-positive tone on free trade than he often did during the campaign. He and aides have spoken out against protectionism, and in Mexico last week he declined to raise the question of renegotiating the North American Free Trade Agreement, despite a pledge to do so last year.

In October, then-Sen. Obama expressed deep concerns over the Colombian pact. "The history in Colombia right now is that labor leaders have been targeted for assassination on a fairly consistent basis and there have not been prosecutions," he said during a presidential debate.

Saturday's lunch conversation with Mr. Uribe was "fruitful," said Denis McDonough, director of strategic communications for the National Security Council.

Mr. Obama sent U.S. Trade Representative Ron Kirk to meet with Mr. Uribe Friday and with the Colombian finance minister Saturday to discuss the pending agreement.

Luis Guillermo Plata, Colombia's trade, industry and tourism minister, said the U.S. doesn't plan to renegotiate the entire treaty but rather examine certain points that raise concerns, according to the Colombian government news service.

U.S. officials also were optimistic about a pending agreement with Panama. They said the recent jailing of a Panamanian leader convicted of murdering an American improves the prospects for that pact. Minor labor issues seem resolvable, an administration official said.