

# Obama Doesn't Plan to Reopen Nafta Talks

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WASHINGTON — The administration has no present plans to reopen negotiations on the North American Free Trade Agreement to add labor and environmental protections, as President Obama vowed to do during his campaign, the top trade official said on Monday.

“The president has said we will look at all of our options, but I think they can be addressed without having to reopen the agreement,” said the official, Ronald Kirk, the United States trade representative. It was perhaps the clearest indication yet of the administration’s thinking on whether to reopen the core agreement to add labor and environmental rules.

Mr. Kirk spoke in a conference call with reporters after returning from a regional summit meeting that Mr. Obama attended over the weekend in Trinidad. He said that Mr. Obama had conferred with the leaders of Mexico and Canada — the other parties to the trade agreement — and that “they are all of the mind we should look for opportunities to strengthen Nafta.”

But while he said that a formal review of the 1992 pact had yet to be completed, Mr. Kirk noted that both Mr. Obama and President Felipe Calderon of Mexico had said that “they don’t believe we have to reopen the agreement now.”

Mexico in particular, whose exports have exploded under Nafta, has little interest in such a renegotiation.

Not only Mr. Obama but also one of his rivals for the presidency, Hillary Rodham Clinton, had promised during their campaigns to renegotiate the accord — a politically popular position in some electorally important Midwestern states that have lost thousands of manufacturing jobs.

Thea Lee, the A.F.L.-C.I.O. policy director, said that the workers federation would have preferred “more definitive” language on addressing key labor concerns, but that it was understandable for a new administration to start its review with a less confrontational approach.

“We were obviously very encouraged by what Obama the candidate was saying on the campaign trail in terms of needing to recognize the deficiencies of Nafta and to strengthen it,” said Margrete Strand Rangnes, a labor and trade specialist with the Sierra Club.

Her group opposed Nafta from the start as lacking adequate environmental provisions, and contends that the side agreements added later have proved inadequate. “You have an environmental side agreement that doesn’t have as many teeth as the commercial provisions of

the agreement,” she said. “You have an investment chapter that allows companies to basically file suit against common-sense environmental and public health measures.”

But she said the Sierra Club recognized that change would not come easily, and added, “We’re eager to work with the administration in having that conversation.”

Since the election, neither the president nor Mrs. Clinton, now secretary of state, has said much about trying to move side agreements on labor and the environment — which are subject to limited enforcement — into the main part of the trade pact, a potentially tangled and protracted process. As candidates in the Democratic presidential primaries last year, both said they would renegotiate or even opt out of Nafta, citing flaws in its labor and environmental provisions, while trading accusations over past support for the agreement.

Mr. Kirk, who as mayor of Dallas was known as a strong advocate of free trade, also said the administration planned expeditious reviews of pending trade agreements with Colombia and Panama.

He said that Colombia had made “remarkable progress” in reducing violence — attacks against labor activists have been a key sticking point — but that other issues remained, and he vowed intensive consultation with Congress on the matter.

The Bush administration signed the agreement with Colombia in November 2006. But Congressional Democrats and United States labor groups have said the Uribe government must do more to stop the antilabor violence and hold perpetrators accountable, a position Mr. Obama supported during his campaign.

Regarding Panama, Mr. Kirk said that differences on labor standards, and the question of the country “possibly being a tax haven,” needed resolution.

Mr. Obama and Mr. Kirk met with leaders of both countries during the Trinidad meeting.