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Colombia's Uribe urges congressmen on trade deal

REUTERS 

By Patrick Markey | September 15, 2007

LLANOGRANDE, Colombia (Reuters) - Colombia's President Alvaro Uribe told visiting U.S. lawmakers on Saturday his government's record illustrated it was addressing Democrats' concerns over anti-union violence and impunity that have stymied their approval of a free trade deal.

After Democrats won control of the Congress in November, many doubted the future of U.S. trade deals with Andean countries. In Colombia U.S. lawmakers are particularly worried about attacks on union leaders, extrajudicial killings and a scandal tying some of Uribe's allies to illegal paramilitaries.

Uribe spoke after meeting with U.S. Commerce Secretary Carlos Gutierrez and a congressional delegation, who visited Medellin as part of a three-country tour meant to shore up support for free trade pacts in Colombia, Panama and Peru.

"The facts show what this government proposed from the beginning, that Colombia no longer tolerates impunity," Uribe told reporters after the meeting at a farm on the outskirts of Medellin, a city once notorious drug violence.

In a piece of political theater, Uribe climbed up on a white horse in front of a crowd, carrying a cup of Colombian coffee in his hand and raising a salute to the U.S. visitors.

"This is the coffee for the free trade agreement," he said as the horse trotted past the U.S. delegation. "I toast our two countries."

Uribe, a key White House ally in South America, has lobbied hard for Congress to approve the trade pact, saying a solid friend to Washington should not be treated like a pariah if Democrats intend to approve similar deals with Peru and Panama.

Hoping to head off opposition, U.S. trade representatives negotiated with a deal with House Ways and Means Committee Chairman Charles Rangel to strengthen labor and environmental provisions on the three Latin American trade agreements.

Rep. Joseph Crowley, a New York Democrat still undecided on whether to back the pact, sounded cautiously positive on the possibility of a trade accord should Uribe show a "sustained level of progress."

"It is still a work in progress. I have noticed some members who are known to have voiced their support for the Colombian free trade agreement. It is certainly not dead by any means. That needs to be stressed," Crowley told Reuters.

Violence from Colombia's four-decade conflict has ebbed under Uribe, who has received billions of dollars from the United States to fight leftist guerrillas, disarm illegal paramilitaries and combat the huge cocaine trade.

"There is a lot of work still that has to be done, and what we got out of this meeting is that President Uribe and his administration are ready to do that work," said New York Democrat Gregory Meeks said. "The distinct possibility it will get done is there, but will it get done? I don't think there are any guarantees." ■