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WASHINGTON — Sen. Bob Bennett, R-Utah, walked through the streets of Medellin, Colombia, on Saturday to see first-hand how the country's government has taken the city back from the drug cartels — and hear from local leaders how a free trade agreement with the United States could only help it move further ahead.

Bennett joined Secretary of Commerce Carlos M. Gutierrez, nine House members and Boston Mayor Thomas Menino on a three-day tour of Colombia, Peru and Panama as the countries try to educate lawmakers that free trade agreements with the United States need to be approved.

"Increased trade along with social and economic reform have helped Medellin and all of Colombia make extraordinary strides in reducing violence and promoting peace, justice and prosperity," Gutierrez said in a statement. "Violence is down, and hope is rising here in Medellin and in the Andean region. The Colombia trade agreement will help an important ally continue to improve stability in our hemisphere while removing barriers for U.S. business and agriculture. Passage of the Colombia agreement is an opportunity we must take to strengthen our bilateral relationship."

Progress on the drug cartels' activity in Medellin, which Bennett said was once deemed one of the most dangerous cities, was "astounding," he said. Bennett met with Colombian President Alvaro Uribe and his whole Cabinet for three hours during the trip as well as various local officials, business leaders and labor leaders.

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The countries want Congress to approve the free trade agreements to increase American exports to their countries. Gutierrez said current rules allow for 90 percent of imports from Panama, Peru and Colombia into the country duty-free so the free trade agreements will "level the playing field" for U.S. exports.

"I'm a very big believer in free trade agreements," Bennett said Monday, adding that they "bring hope" to these three countries, especially for employment. The administration has approved the agreements, but they must be ratified by the House and Senate.

Bennett and the U.S. officials met with Peruvian President Alan Garcia and President Martin Torrijos of Panama, where they toured the Panama Canal, which will offer commercial opportunities during a planned \$5.2 billion expansion, according to the Commerce Department.

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