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## U.S. and Colombia Near Trade Pact

By HELENE COOPER and STEVEN GREENHOUSE

With the announcement on Wednesday that it has extracted labor rights concessions from Colombia to advance a trade deal, the Obama administration is now two-thirds of the way toward meeting Republican demands that three languishing trade agreements be sent to Congress for approval.

Senior administration officials hailed what they called an action plan in which Colombia promised to expand its protection program for labor union leaders, to enforce its labor laws more vigorously and to hire 480 more labor inspectors over four years. The White House announced that Colombia's president, [Juan Manuel Santos](#), would travel to Washington on Thursday to formally announce the agreement with [President Obama](#).

[Ron Kirk](#), the United States trade representative, said he believed the plan would set the stage for a "very strong vote" in Congress on the trade deal. But neither he nor [Michael Froman](#), the White House international economic affairs adviser, would say when that vote might happen, partly because Republicans want to see another trade pact with Panama completed before taking up any more votes on trade. That holdup also includes action on confirming a successor to Gary F. Locke as commerce secretary. Mr. Locke was nominated last month by the president to become ambassador to China.

This is the second time that the United States has reached a trade agreement with Colombia. The Bush administration did so in 2007, but Democrats in Congress, backed by labor unions, opposed that agreement, along with the Panama and South Korea pacts, arguing that American jobs could be lost and that the deals did not provide enough access for American companies.

The Obama administration did not move on the trade pacts until late last year, when it renegotiated the deal with South Korea and extracted a few additional concessions. But Republicans, angry that the administration had taken so long to push forward what they viewed as completed trade agreements, demanded that all three be sent to Congress before they voted on any. They also said they would not approve Mr. Locke's successor.

"Any further delay of these agreements is unnecessary and inexcusable," Senate Republicans wrote in a March 14 letter to the majority leader, Senator [Harry Reid](#) of Nevada. "So important are these deals to our economy and our relations with these key allies in Latin America that, until the president submits both agreements to Congress for approval and commits to signing implementing legislation into law, we will use all the tools at our disposal to force action, including withholding support for any nominee for commerce secretary and any trade-related nominees."

Mr. Kirk, during a conference call with reporters, insisted that the administration would not be beholden to Republican demands and timetables. But he also expressed optimism that the third pending trade deal, the one with Panama, might be done soon.

"There are some signs today that the administration is beginning to take seriously a pending trade agreement with Colombia," the Senate Republican leader, [Mitch McConnell](#) of Kentucky, said in a statement. Mr. McConnell urged the administration to send Panama, South Korea and Colombia to Congress "soon."

But even if he gets Republicans on board, Mr. Obama still must navigate a tricky road with his own party, which has long been more wary of free-trade pacts. The reason for the delays in the pacts has been to try to assuage concern among Democrats and their labor backers.

Unions in the United States have long fought to block approval of the free-trade agreement with Colombia, asserting that the country has done too little to protect union leaders and activists, more than 3,000 of whom have been killed in the last three decades. Colombian officials said they had significantly reduced the killings in recent years.

Administration officials voiced confidence that the trade pact with Colombia would increase United States exports to that country, now \$12 billion a year, by \$1 billion annually.

Mr. Kirk said that the Santos government had adopted the action plan after intense talks with the Obama administration. "The plan significantly expands the protections of labor leaders and organizers," he said. "It bolsters efforts to punish those who have perpetrated violence against union members, and we think substantially strengthens their laws and enforcement."

Under the deal, the Colombian government said it would provide more protection to labor advocates, including shop stewards, union organizers and bargaining committee members. It also agreed to eliminate its current backlog of risk assessments of union leaders and members who have requested government protection. It also said it would revise its plan to relocate and protect teachers who were considered at high risk of violence.

Colombia said it would enact, by June 15, tougher measures to criminalize actions that affected workers' rights, including threats. The government also will direct the national police to assign 95 investigators, no later than this December, to support prosecutors handling cases of crimes against union members.

But in a sign that opposition would not be easily overcome, [A.F.L.-C.I.O.](#) said in a statement that it remained "strongly opposed" to the Colombia trade agreement, although it said it would consult with the Obama administration and unions in Colombia about the deal.

The labor federation noted that 51 trade unionists were murdered in Colombia last year. "We have no doubt that if 51 C.E.O.s had been murdered in Colombia last year, this deal would be on a very slow track indeed," the statement said adding, "The situation in Colombia remains unacceptably violent for trade unionists."

Representative [Louise Slaughter](#), Democrat of New York, said she also would continue to oppose the Colombia trade deal, which she said "turns a blind eye to rampant human rights violations and antilabor practices of Colombia."

Under the agreement, more than 80 percent of American consumer and industrial goods shipped to Colombia would become duty-free immediately, with the remainder having duties phased out over 10 years. On agricultural goods, more than half would become duty-free, with duties ending for the remaining goods over 15 years.

Administration officials say that they expect that completing the Colombia deal could increase pressure on the Panamanian government to address outstanding issues in those negotiations. In Panama, the Obama administration has been pushing the government to adopt more transparent tax laws. One administration official said that the United States hoped that Panama would soon agree to a tax-information exchange that would break the impasse by the end of the month.

The [United States Chamber of Commerce](#) hailed the Colombia deal, saying chamber officials would work with the White House and Congress to secure approval of the three pending free trade agreements.

"Presidents Obama and Santos showed courage and pragmatism in striking this accord," said Thomas J. Donohue, the chamber's president. "This proves the United States can still lead on trade."