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FREE-TRADE AGREEMENT

Bush makes plea to lawmakers for trade agreement passage

Speaking before the Organization of American States, President Bush praised CAFTA-DR's pro-democracy attributes. In Congress, deals were offered on China and Haiti.

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WASHINGTON - With a House vote on the CAFTA-DR free-trade pact still too close to call, President Bush Thursday made a personal plea for its passage as lawmakers scraped for votes by offering deals on China and Haiti.

"This bill is a commitment of freedom-loving nations to advance peace and prosperity throughout the Western hemisphere. And that's important for members of Congress to understand," Bush told an audience in one of the chandeliered halls of the Organization of American States.

It was the second time Bush has used the OAS as a stage to push a trade deal with five Central American nations and the Dominican Republic. Bush also spoke about CAFTA-DR at a June 6 OAS meeting in Fort Lauderdale.

The agreement faces an uphill ratification vote in the House next week.

The treaty reduces trade barriers between six nations whose combined economies equal only the size of a mid-sized U.S. city. But failure to win congressional approval would be a blow to the Bush administration's ability to lead more ambitious negotiations like the Free Trade Area of the Americas (FTAA).

The Senate has already approved the treaty, but with dozens of House members still undecided, the vote is too close to predict. According to the publication Congress Daily, only five Democrats support the pact and 25 are undecided.

"You're going to see a lot of people decide on the floor of the actual vote," said Eric Eikenberg, chief of staff for Rep. Clay Shaw, a Fort Lauderdale Republican who has been working to pass CAFTA-DR.

The treaty is opposed by most Democrats, who say its labor enforcement provisions are too weak. The sugar industry has also lobbied hard against it and made some inroads among Republican lawmakers, usually reliable pro-trade voters.

Florida Republican Mark Foley, whose district includes sugar farmers around Lake Okeechobee, is leaning against the pact, said spokesman Jason Kello.

Foley wants a stronger government commitment that it will use sugar to produce ethanol fuel, among other concessions.

The Congressional Budget Office said Thursday it estimates that the treaty's sugar provisions will cost U.S. taxpayers \$500 million over 10 years through payments for loan forfeitures by sugar farmers.

Even China has now been thrown into the lobbying mix. Rep. Bill Thomas, a California Republican who heads the powerful Ways and Means Committee, agreed to support a bill on China by Rep. Phil English, R-Pa., who has opposed the CAFTA-DR treaty.

Shaw has launched an effort to reach out to members of the Democratic Black Caucus by offering to move

ahead on a Haiti aid bill, known as HOPE, that allows the Caribbean country to export textiles to the United States with components imported from Asia.

Bush told the OAS audience that the free-trade pact was "a job program" because it promoted more U.S. exports. He said the administration would spend \$180 million over five years to ensure that labor laws are enforced, addressing a key concern by Democrats.

But Bush also portrayed CAFTA-DR as part of his administration's campaign to promote freedom worldwide.

"We cannot, and should not, reject these young democracies," he said. "We must support democracy in our neighborhood. And CAFTA will strengthen democracies."