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TRADE

Leaders lobby for CAFTA

Leaders from Central America embark on a journey to Capitol Hill to lobby in favor of the DR-CAFTA free-trade agreement.

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WASHINGTON - (AP) -- Lobbyists for a day, six Latin American presidents are making a rare joint trek to the Capitol, trying to convince U.S. lawmakers that a free-trade agreement linking the United States with their countries is in everyone's best interest.

President Bush's call for reinforcements from overseas still might not carry the day. There is heavy opposition to the Central American Free Trade Agreement from U.S. labor unions, sugar farmers and groups upset with America's soaring trade deficits.

U.S. Trade Representative Rob Portman said Tuesday that the Latin American leaders have been asked to come to Washington so U.S. lawmakers can hear first hand what a free-trade agreement could do in terms of promoting economic growth in their nations.

The presidents of the Dominican Republic and the five Central American countries of Costa Rica, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras and Nicaragua, are expected to expend plenty of shoe leather walking the halls of Congress, with meetings scheduled throughout the day Wednesday in an effort to generate support.

Meetings have been set up with Senate Republican Leader Bill Frist and House Speaker Dennis Hastert as well as key members of both chambers on trade issues.

No one could remember a similar approach to Congress by so many foreign leaders at the same time.

"It is unusual for any head of state to lobby Congress, but even more unusual for a half-dozen to do it," said Senate historian Donald Ritchie.

The foreign leaders' visits will be capped off with a meeting with President Bush on Thursday at the White House, an event the administration is hoping will demonstrate the president's strong involvement in the upcoming legislative battle.

Even before the presidents arrived in Washington, the administration had them hop-scotching the country talking to governors in key states, participating in rallies and meeting with newspaper editorial boards.

Three leaders -- presidents Enrique Bolanos of Nicaragua, Ricardo Maduro of Honduras and Oscar Berger of Guatemala -- participated in an event Monday at the Port of Miami-Dade with Gov. Jeb Bush.

Salvadoran President Tony Saca, one of America's strongest allies in Central America, touched down in Los Angeles, San Diego and Santa Fe, New Mexico, on his way to Washington.

All the administration's activity underscores that at the moment it is still searching for the votes to pass the measure.

The battle is shaping up to be the most ferocious free-trade fight since the North American Free Trade

Agreement linking the United States, Canada and Mexico was approved more than a decade ago.

Associated Press reporters Jim Abrams and Jennifer Kay contributed to this report.