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## FREE TRADE

# Free-trade effort gets Bush support

President Bush joined the leaders of six Latin American countries and promised to aggressively push for the passage of a free-trade bill.

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**WASHINGTON** - Bringing the full weight of the presidency to bear on efforts to approve a contentious free trade bill with six small Latin American countries, President Bush Thursday promised for the first time to personally lobby in favor of the pact before Congress.

"I assured them I will join in the efforts to get this bill passed," Bush said in the White House Rose Garden, flanked by the visiting presidents of Guatemala, El Salvador, Costa Rica, Nicaragua, Honduras and the Dominican Republic.

The announcement staked an increasing portion of Bush's pro-trade agenda on the future of a Central American-Dominican Republic Free Trade Agreement that some trade experts have been predicting would not be passed by Congress.

## URGING SUPPORT

In recent weeks, several Bush Cabinet officials have been urging support for DR-CAFTA, and Bush himself mentioned the pact in a news conference last month, saying he expected a vote "soon." But this is the first time Bush has said he is prepared to step personally into the congressional fray.

"I am much more optimistic," Salvadoran President Tony Saca said after meeting with Bush. Added Honduran President Ricardo Maduro, "What we have heard from President Bush is his desire to immediately go to Congress and the Senate to get the approval."

## REDUCE BARRIERS

The pact to reduce barriers to free trade was signed almost a year ago but its required ratification by the U.S. Congress has languished amid concerns that the administration was short on votes.

Democrats say it does too little to safeguard labor standards, and some Republicans have expressed concerns it will hurt Florida and other sugar farmers.

In his Rose Garden statement, Bush equated DR-CAFTA with his administration's effort to spread democracy and freedom around the globe.

"The United States was built on freedom -- and the more of it we have in our backyard, the freer and safer and more prosperous all of the Americas will be," he said.

Trade observers say that if the regional trade pact is approved, its passage is likely to be the closest vote on trade since the U.S. House passed a special trade promotion authority for Bush by a single vote in 2002.

## SOURD THE MOOD

"It's going to need a lot more presidential participation and direct involvement with members," said Sherman

Katz, with the Center for Strategic and International Studies, adding that the big U.S. trade deficits with China have soured the mood for trade in Congress.

The legislatures of Honduras, Guatemala and El Salvador have already ratified the treaty, but the Costa Rican government in recent weeks appeared to have been dragging its heels, apparently concerned about anti-CAFTA street protests.

Earlier in the week, each president traveled to different parts of the country to push DR-CAFTA. Maduro and Nicaraguan President Enrique Bolaños launched their swings Monday after a gathering in Miami.

#### **CLINTON WILL LOBBY**

Saca visited Los Angeles, which has a large Salvadoran community, while Dominican President Leonel Fernández went to New York, home to many Dominicans and former President Bill Clinton, who was reported to have promised to lobby key members of Congress for passage of DR-CAFTA.

Earlier this month the New Democratic Coalition, a centrist group that has supported free trade in the past, said it would oppose DR-CAFTA. And four key Democrats on the House Ways and Means Committee sent Bush a letter Wednesday urging him to reopen negotiations on DR-CAFTA to improve labor standards.