

# Democrats stymie Uribe on trade

## The Colombian president failed to secure U.S. Democrats' backing for a free-trade deal.

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**WASHINGTON** - President Alvaro Uribe of Colombia, on a visit hastily arranged after Democrats took control of the U.S. Congress, failed to secure promises from American lawmakers that they would back passage of a much-scrutinized trade deal.

Democratic Rep. Charles Rangel, in line to be the next chairman of the House Ways and Means Committee, would not comment on his meeting Tuesday with Uribe. With a visibly tense Uribe looking on, Rangel said it was up to the new Congress to "review" the Bush administration's trade deal with Colombia. "Everything is possible," he said.

Uribe arrived Monday to press for the deal, Washington's biggest in the hemisphere since the North American Free Trade Agreement of 1994, amid speculation it could be scuttled once Democrats take control of Congress in January.

In what could be a sign of a fiery legislative battle over trade, Bush administration officials insisted they would push for swift passage of trade deals reached this year with Peru and Colombia.

Under fast-track trade legislation that expires in July, and which Democrats are unlikely to renew, Congress cannot modify -- only ratify or reject -- trade deals negotiated by the White House.

House and Senate staff members say Democrats are concerned the Bush administration's thirst for free trade could be jeopardizing American jobs. The conservative Uribe government has also drawn criticism from Democrats for not doing enough to protect trade unionists from violence by the country's illegal armed groups.

Rangel said he raised the issue of Colombia's labor record with Uribe, but he declined to provide further details. The International Labor Organization has called Colombia the world's deadliest country for labor organizers.

Instead of a trade deal that would permanently remove tariffs on \$14.3 billion in annual trade, Colombia may have to settle for unilateral trade preferences.