

CONFERENCE ON THE CARIBBEAN

Caribbean nations hope to boost trade with U.S.

Caribbean leaders gathered in Washington hoping to reenergize a U.S. trade pact in a meeting today with President Bush.

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WASHINGTON --

After two years of uncertainty over whether some of their exports will continue to have duty-free access to U.S. markets, Caribbean nations are looking for some good news when they meet with President Bush today.

A draft resolution circulating among leaders from the 15-member Caribbean Community calls for Bush to push Congress to renew the Caribbean Basin Initiative, or CBI. The unilateral U.S. measure expired in December 2005. The United States is the Caribbean's largest trading partner.

"Our trade relationship with the United States is presently in a situation of limbo," Barbados Prime Minister Owen Arthur said as the three-day Conference on the Caribbean opened Tuesday.

Caribbean nations have been unable to get an extension of CBI because Paraguay has been blocking it in the World Trade Organization. Caribbean insiders say Paraguay is objecting to the region's nations receiving preferential treatment.

But even if Bush were to win the renewal, it would be for only five years -- a fact not lost on Caribbean nations still considering whether they want to pursue the bruising fight for a bilateral free-trade agreement with Washington.

"Our trade agreements are time bombs," Arthur said. He noted that despite criticism that CBI is outdated and limited, Caribbean nations can't afford to lose it because there are no other alternatives on the table.

Caribbean leaders also met with House Ways and Means Chairman Charles Rangel, D-N.Y., for a discussion. Caribbean nations outlined their challenges earlier in the day calling on their diaspora communities to become advocates for the region.

"Organize yourselves," Jamaican Prime Minister Portia Simpson Miller told more than 200 mostly Caribbean nationals who attended an afternoon diaspora forum.

Caribbean Americans, one of the fastest growing ethnic communities, were told the region needs their expertise and their investments.

Miramar City Commissioner Winston Barnes, a Jamaican American who is among several South Floridians at the conference, commended the Caribbean governments for reaching out to the diaspora.

"We never had this kind of governmental involvement before," he said.

With their stunning beaches and relatively small populations, Caribbean nations have significant potential for growth. But as drug traffickers increasingly target their open borders, and waning trade preferences make them less competitive, they also face challenges.

"We do not bring a laundry list of demands. And we come not in supplication but in genuine friendship," said Ralph Gonsalves, prime minister of St. Vincent and the Grenadines and outgoing chairman of CARICOM.

In addition to trade, leaders plan to bring up other concerns in their meeting with Bush, including the U.S. deportation of criminals and the drain of Caribbean healthcare professionals moving to the United States.

"The greatest challenge confronting the Caribbean is to find a way to address what is essentially the post-colonial economy," said Arthur, who is the incoming chairman of CARICOM. Tourism has replaced sugar and bananas, but the island-nations are still struggling to export their products.

U.S. Secretary of Commerce Carlos Gutierrez also addressed the group, as did the leaders of the Organization of the American States, the World Bank and the Inter-American Development Bank.

"The location . . . as a transshipment corridor for drugs and for weapons is hurting growth," said Graeme Wheeler, managing director of the World Bank. "These issues require an international response."