Posted on Thu, Oct. 26, 2006

FREE TRADE

Bush discusses CAFTA with Dominican leader

President Bush told President Leonel Fernandez of the Dominican Republic that the U.S. is working on legislation to implement the free-trade agreement.

By Deb Riechmann

Associated Press

WASHINGTON - President George W. Bush and the leader of the Dominican Republic agreed on Wednesday to jump-start a delayed free-trade agreement to remove barriers to commerce between the two nations.

In an Oval Office meeting, Bush told Leonel Fernandez, the president of the Caribbean nation, that the United States will implement the Central American Free Trade Agreement as soon as possible.

"To that end, I had my trade minister, Ambassador Susan Schwab, here to make sure that we both heard the message of the president -- that this was a very important piece of legislation," Bush said.

The Dominican Republic is one of six Latin American signatories to CAFTA, which is part of the Bush administration's push to strike free-trade deals with nations around the world as a way to boost U.S. exports. The free-trade agreement has taken effect in Guatemala, Honduras, Nicaragua and El Salvador, but not Costa Rica or the Dominican Republic.

The pact was supposed to take effect in the Dominican Republic on Jan. 1, but the country has not passed legislation needed to implement parts of the deal. Some of the delays stem from conflicts between U.S. and Dominican intellectual property law, including issues related to pharmaceutical manufacturing.

"We are now in the final phase," Fernandez said. "This is a bill now before our own congress in the Dominican Republic. We are dealing with some minor legal amendments, and our two teams have been working very hard to obtain a speedy implementation."

Associated Press writer Nestor Ikeda in Washington contributed to this report.