Trade Ministers Enter Negotiations On Parallel Accords For North American Free Trade Agreement (nafta)

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The trade ministers of the US, Mexico, and Canada are scheduled to lead the latest round of negotiations on parallel accords for the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) in Washington on July 29-30. On July 21, US Trade Representative Mickey Kantor told reporters in Mexico City that "enough progress" had been made at recent negotiating sessions to warrant his direct participation, and that of his counterparts, Jaime Serra Puche of Mexico and Thomas Hockin of Canada. Kantor made the statement after meeting with Serra Puche and Mexican President Carlos Salinas de Gortari in the Mexican capital. Recent negotiations on the NAFTA parallel accords on issues regarding the environment, labor, and protection against an expected surge of imports once NAFTA takes effect have generally only included deputy trade ministers John Weekes of Canada, Herminio Blanco of Mexico, and Rufus Yerxa of the US. In the upcoming Washington talks, participation of the trade ministers themselves will give an added push to the negotiations. Anne Lazzatto, a spokesperson for the US Trade Representative's office in Washington, said on July 21 that Kantor's goal is to complete negotiations on the parallel accords during the upcoming meetings in Washington. However, it remains unclear what concessions the US, Canada and Mexico are willing to make at the Washington talks in order to reach a compromise. The US has been pushing for the use of trade sanctions, such as import duties or quotas, to penalize industrial establishments that violate environmental or labor standards. On the other hand, Mexico opposes the sanctions proposal as a potential breach of its sovereignty. Canada's main concern is that the use of such trade sanctions could result in barriers against legitimate exports. After the last round of meetings in Ottawa on July 21, Yerxa told reporters "we are not ready to announce that we've had breakthroughs or final decisions on any of these issues." For his part, Hockin urged the US to expedite the negotiations by abandoning its efforts to include trade sanctions in the parallel accords. On July 22, Mexico's Trade Secretariat (Secretaria de Comercio y Fomento Industrial, SECOFI) issued a statement suggesting that the negotiators were nearing conclusion of parallel agreements on the basis of a set of proposals which would have an equal effect on the US, Canada, and Mexico. In fact, acting on the supposition that the parallel accords will be completed shortly, the Mexican Senate has begun making plans for an emergency session of the legislature to ratify the treaty. Sen. Carlos Sales Gutierrez, who chairs the Senate's international trade committee, said the emergency session will be held either in August or in October, depending on the outcome of the negotiations on July 29-30. Meantime, on July 20 the US Justice Department submitted a 50-page brief appealing a ruling by US Federal District Court Judge Charles Richey requiring an environmental impact statement for NAFTA. In a press statement regarding the brief, acting assistant Attorney General Myles Flint described the ruling as an "intrusion on the US President's inherent authority to conduct foreign affairs and enter into international agreements." Despite the Clinton administration's efforts to fight the court ruling, many still have doubts as to whether or not the parallel accords will provide adequate enforcement mechanisms to protect the environment. In mid July, the US-based Natural Resources Defense Council wrote a letter to Kantor urging the Clinton administration to comply with Judge Richey's request for the environmental impact
statement. "We believe there is no fundamental conflict between the administration's commitments to environmental protection and trade liberalization," the organization said. Similarly, a group of Canadian and Mexican environmental activists who met in Ottawa on July 20 called on the governments of the three countries to conduct a comprehensive environmental impact study before proceeding further with negotiations on the parallel accords. Michelle Swenarchuk, a spokesperson for the Canadian Association for the Defense of the Environment, expressed doubt that any parallel accord, no matter how strong, would be able to overcome deficiencies in the original text of NAFTA. Carlos Sandoval, president of Mexico's National Council of Environmental Businesses (Consejo Nacional de Industriales Ecologistas, CONEICO), told the government news agency Notimex that his organization is opposed to giving a proposed trilateral commission the power to issue sanctions. He said that under such a scheme, the US would be in a position to dictate the terms under which sanctions would be imposed. Sandoval said CONEICO instead supports creation of a watchdog commission to identify violators of environmental regulations, which would then be subject to penalties imposed by the government in the host country. Nevertheless, many US, Mexican and Canadian environmental groups question whether Mexico would follow through and enforce its environmental laws under a scheme such as the one proposed by Sandoval. The Clinton administration and NAFTA supporters in the private sector continued efforts in July to promote the treaty among the US public and assure its passage in Congress. In fact, President Clinton reiterated during an interview with the Cable News Network (CNN) on July 20 that passage of NAFTA is one of the highest priorities of his administration. According to several news reports, Clinton plans to appoint William Daley, an attorney from Chicago, to coordinate pro-NAFTA lobbying efforts in Congress. On July 21, a group of large US and Mexican businesses took out a seven-page advertisement in the New York Times to promote the benefits of NAFTA. Mexican companies which contributed funds for the advertisement included Telmex, Aeromexico, and Bancomer. Several US labor union federations, led by the United Auto Workers (UAW), staged protests outside New York Times offices in New York and seven other cities to call attention to the newspaper's decision to refuse to sell advertising space to the UAW as part of the special section. Some members of the US agricultural sector have also launched their own campaign to support NAFTA. On July 26, the House Agriculture Committee announced creation of a coalition of farm organizations and agricultural businesses to rally congressional support for the treaty. The coalition's efforts are funded privately, but House Agriculture Committee Chairman Kika de la Garza (D-Texas) and ranking minority leader Pat Roberts (R-Kan.) have endorsed this effort. (Sources: La Jornada, 07/15/93; Notimex, 07/19/93, 07/20/93, 07/22/93; Agence France-Presse, 07/20/93; Associated Press, 07/21/93; New York Times, 07/21/93, 07/22/93; Washington Post, 07/22/93, 07/24/93; Reuter, 07/19/93, 07/20/93, 07/21/93, 07/25/93)

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