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## Last chance for Colombia trade pact; OUR OPINION: Obama, Democrats should support deal with close ally

Now that leaders of the European Union have expressed interest in moving ahead with free trade talks with Colombia, lawmakers in Congress should rethink their own refusal to finalize the pending trade agreement with the strongest U.S. ally in South America. When House Speaker Nancy Pelosi and her Democratic colleagues voted to put the deal on ice back in April, Rep. Rahm Emanuel suggested that a vote was still possible before the end of the year. Well, Mr. Emanuel, how about it?

The Illinois congressman is now President-elect Obama's designated chief of staff in the new White House. He should advise Speaker Pelosi to take this politically divisive issue off the president-elect's agenda by clearing it for an up-or-down floor vote in the lame-duck session of Congress. That would free the future president from having to deal with one more difficult issue when he takes office in January -- and it presents both countries with a win-win situation.

The advantage for the United States is that it levels the playing field. U.S. products sold in Colombia currently pay tariffs of up to 35 percent, while practically all of Colombia's goods enter this country duty-free, thanks to existing trade law.

The pact also carries economic benefits for Colombia. Just as important, it provides a palpable measure of political support for President Alvaro Uribe, who has staked his presidency on his alliance with the United States. He has been Colombia's most effective president when it comes to fighting both the scourge of drugs and an anti-American guerrilla movement that has been around for decades.

The main objection to the trade pact comes from U.S. labor unions. They contend that Colombia remains a dangerous place for union organizers. True, but it is unfair to blame Mr. Uribe. Progress during his tenure is undeniable. In the latest sign of his willingness to attack the problem, he ordered the biggest-ever purge of Colombia's military a few weeks ago in response to reports of human-rights abuses.

As a senator, Mr. Obama voted in favor of a free-trade deal with Peru last year after it was amended to deal with environmental and other objections. He has never said he opposes the Colombia FTA, *per se*. If human-rights issues are the problem that he and other Democrats have with Colombia, there is a solution -- the kind of human-rights and democracy clauses included in existing E.U. trade agreements with Latin American countries, including Chile and Mexico.

No doubt, the E.U. will insist on such clauses in its upcoming trade talks with Colombia. It would say a lot about protectionist sentiment in the U.S. Congress if the European

Union, which upholds high human-rights standards, could find a way to make a deal with Colombia while the United States fails to do the same.