

Murder charge against leader is ‘800-pound gorilla’ facing U.S.-Panama trade deal

By Ian Swanson
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Democratic and Republican leaders of the House Ways and Means Committee said Tuesday that Panama’s election of a man wanted for murdering a U.S. soldier as head of its legislative assembly could jeopardize a trade deal with that country.

“We were troubled that they would elect somebody for whom there’s a warrant for his arrest in the United States,” said Rep. Sandy Levin (D-Mich.), who chairs the panel’s trade subcommittee. Levin spoke after Ways and Means gave its unanimous approval to a trade agreement with Peru in an informal markup.

Levin said he and other Democrats, including Ways and Means Committee Chairman Charles Rangel (D-N.Y.), have raised the issue with the State Department, which previously had indicated the election of Pedro Miguel Gonzalez should not stand in the way of Congress approving a trade deal between the U.S. and Panama.

Gonzalez is wanted in the U.S. on charges of first-degree murder in the 1992 killing of U.S. Army Sgt. Zak Hernandez-Laporte, who died in an assault in Panama three years after the U.S. invasion of that country. In a 1997 trial in Panama, Gonzalez was acquitted of the charges, but the U.S. criticized the decision.

“There’s an 800-pound gorilla with Panama, right in the middle of the living room,” said Rangel, who described the administration’s position on the issue as “utterly confused.”

“The Republicans say, ‘You know, this guy murdered a U.S. soldier, you know, which kind of makes labor and environment look kind of small.’ We’re talking about soldiers,” Rangel said.

So far, the administration has not signaled whether it will move forward next with the Panama agreement or a similar deal with Colombia. The Colombia deal faces opposition from Democrats, including Levin and Rangel, who say Colombia must first show it is getting a handle on violence against the country’s labor organizers.

Rep. Jim McCrery (La.), the top Republican on Ways and Means, agreed the Gonzalez election is a problem. “The fact that the assembly elected as its president a man charged in the U.S. of murdering a U.S. serviceman is no small concern,” he said.

He said he understood Panama’s view that Gonzalez was already tried in Panama, but stated the election represented a problem. McCrery said he raised the issue during a trip

to Panama earlier this month with other members of Congress and Commerce Secretary Carlos Gutierrez.