

Antigua warns proposed U.S. crackdown on Internet gambling could further strain relations

A proposed U.S. law cracking down on Internet gambling could aggravate an already tense trade dispute with Antigua, which has become a worldwide center for the fast-growing industry, the Caribbean island's finance minister said.

The U.S. House of Representatives is scheduled to vote Tuesday on a bill that would ban the use of credit cards for paying online bets and could block U.S. access to gambling Web sites. The legislation would clarify existing law to spell out that it is illegal to gamble online.

„I'm very surprised and quite disappointed that the U.S. Congress would be pushing full-force ahead,“ Antigua Finance Minister Errol Cort said Monday.

Cort said the legislation could worsen a dispute between the United States and the two-island Caribbean nation over whether Washington should drop prohibitions on Americans placing bets in online casinos. The World Trade organisation ruled last year that some U.S. laws on the issue were in line with international commerce regulations, but others were not.

„We will be watching this matter very closely,“ Cort said. „The passage of those two bills will aggravate our trade relations regarding the U.S. with the WTO.“

Antigua has submitted written objections to the U.S. House Judicial Committee about the bills and was waiting on whether the WTO would convene a tribunal to see if Washington had complied with the trade group's ruling.

The U.S. government contends that Internet gambling should be prohibited because it violates some U.S. state laws. Antigua says the industry is an important source of revenue and generates hundreds of jobs.

Some experts have warned that Internet gambling could expose small Caribbean nations to organized crime, money laundering and other illegal activity, but Cort has said Antigua strictly regulates the industry.

The U.S. federal government does not have any law prohibiting gambling. Many states ban or restrict the practice.