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Antigua Leader, US Lawmakers Talk Gaming

By ANIKA KENTISH 11.12.07, 11:54 AM ET

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ST. JOHN'S, ANTIGUA - Antigua and Barbuda's prime minister says he is hopeful that weekend meetings with members of the U.S. Congress would help resolve an ongoing trade battle with the United States over Internet gambling.

Prime Minister Baldwin Spencer discussed the dispute with New York Democrat Rep. Charles Rangel, chairman of the House Ways and Means Committee, and three other members of the Congressional Black Caucus Sunday on the sidelines of a regional business conference.

Antigua accuses the U.S. of crippling its gaming industry by effectively banning Americans from placing online bets with gambling operators in the Caribbean nation.

"We're hoping that coming out of this dialogue here, Charlie Rangel would have a better and greater appreciation of Antigua and Barbuda's position," Spencer said.

The U.S. Congress last year barred American banks and credit card companies from processing payments made to online and offshore gambling operators, denying the international gaming industry access to a lucrative U.S. market.

Antigua, which has promoted online gambling to ease its dependency on tourism, filed a complaint with the World Trade Organization and is seeking to impose \$3.4 billion in trade sanctions against the U.S.

Rangel, who oversees tax legislation as chair of the Ways and Means Committee, said he worries Washington may have overstepped its authority in the long-running dispute.

"I think my country is wrong in trying to change the rules of the WTO," Rangel told local reporters. "Your great nation and ours will have to negotiate those differences in terms of equity and fairness."

The WTO last December upheld Washington's right to prevent offshore gambling, but said the U.S. could not target offshore and online casinos without applying the same rules to American operators of off-track horse and dog race betting.

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