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Guilt helps Vietnam deal in Congress: senator

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WASHINGTON (Reuters) - Guilty feelings about the U.S. war in Vietnam will help propel a trade pact with that country through Congress, but some obstacles remain, a top Republican senator said on Wednesday.

"There's always been a guilt feeling about Vietnam around here by some people and I think it's responding to that guilt feeling, as much as the economic advantages of it," that makes many lawmakers want to vote for the trade deal, Senate Finance Committee Chairman Charles Grassley told reporters.

The Iowa Republican said his committee would hold a hearing the second week of July on the agreement paving the way for Hanoi to join the World Trade Organization.

As its part of the deal, the United States must approve "permanent" normal trade relations with Vietnam instead of providing that on a renewable basis as it does now.

Whether the Senate will vote on the pact before the August congressional recess depends on the number of amendments that senators plan to offer, since there will be many competing demands for floor time next month, Grassley said.

The White House would like Congress to approve the pact before President George W. Bush goes to Vietnam in November to meet with Asia Pacific leaders. Hanoi's goal is to be a WTO member by the time its hosts the annual summit.

The White House "could probably smooth things out quite a bit" by encouraging lawmakers not to load down the Vietnam bill with amendments related to China trade or specific sectoral concerns, such as textiles, Grassley said.

The WTO accession deal requires Vietnam to lower tariffs and other barriers to U.S. goods and services. But Grassley said the legacy of the Vietnam War, which ended in 1975, would probably be a big reason that many lawmakers vote for it.

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