



Democrats settle on bill without a war deadline

BY ALEX DANIELS ARKANSAS DEMOCRAT-GAZETTE

WASHINGTON — Acknowledging they do not wield a vetoproof majority in Congress, Democratic leaders on Tuesday said they would send President Bush an Iraq spending bill without requiring a troop withdrawal.

Congress and the White House had been deadlocked on whether to attach timelines for a pullout to a supplemental spending bill to fund the war. Bush used his veto power for just the second time in his presidency earlier this month to strike down a bill that would have required a pullout by the end of March 2008, at the latest.

Now, with an apparent agreement on the matter, "it appears we could achieve what we've wanted all along," said Sen. Trent Lott of Mississippi, the Republican whip.

The compromise bill is expected to call for about \$120 billion in spending, including as much as \$8 billion for Democratic domestic priorities, notably relief for Hurricane Katrina victims.

The House is likely to vote on a bill today. Democratic leaders said they would attempt to clear it through the Senate by the end of the day Friday, before Congress' Memorial Day recess.

The bill, still being drafted Tuesday, likely will follow the form of a proposal by Sen. John Warner, a Virginia Republican, to require the Iraqi government and military to meet certain benchmarks in order to receive U.S. funds.

Though he considers Warner's approach "weak," and despite the lack of a withdrawal date in the proposed legislation, Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid of Nevada declared victory.

Reid said the Warner provision is still "a lot more than the president ever expected he'd have to agree to."

The Warner proposal gained a majority of the Senate in a 52-44 vote but lacked the 60 votes necessary for passage when it was attached as an amendment to an unrelated bill last week. Sens. Blanche Lincoln and Mark Pryor of Arkansas were among the seven Democrats who voted for it.

The amendment would suspend foreign aid to Iraq if Bush could not demonstrate progress in July and September reports to Congress. However, Bush could waive that requirement if he deemed it necessary.

While some Democrats have characterized the measure with the waiver provision as a set of benchmarks without teeth, Bush "is still going to have to explain why he waived them if we demand it of him," Lincoln said.

Lincoln, who said she was "frustrated" that the withdrawal language had been tossed aside, stressed that the issue is not dead. Redeployment, she said, will likely be taken up again in the next several months as debate continues on both the defense spending and authorization bills.

Pryor, who opposed a public timetable for troop withdrawal, said Congress had "come full circle" in coalescing around the Warner amendment. He said he has been meeting, on the phone and informally on the Senate floor, with a bipartisan group of five other senators to discuss Iraq policy.

He said the partisan atmosphere was too intense to make much progress but the group will be reaching out to others "once we get the supplemental behind us."

Rep. Marion Berry, a Democrat from Arkansas, said he's heard a clear message about the U.S. soldiers in Iraq from people in his district: "Just get them out." But he figures enough time has been spent jousting with the White House.

"Our leadership recognizes we need to get this out of the way," Berry said.

Democrats have struggled to keep the right and left wings of their caucus together on the issue. Late Tuesday afternoon, House Democrats met to chart a position.

The bill would also include the first increase in the federal minimum wage in more than a decade. Both the House and Senate have passed measures raising the current level of \$5.15 an hour to \$7.25 an hour in three separate 70-cent increases over 26 months.

Rep. Jim Moran, a Virginia Democrat and a member of the Out of Iraq Caucus, said he expects substantial unity.

However, he said, he is supporting the bill "under the assumption we're going to have stronger, more definitive language" calling for an exit strategy in coming debate on the fiscal 2008 defense spending bill.

"By September, I suspect there will be at least a dozen Republicans who will be voting with us consistently."

Rep. Mike Ross of Arkansas, a Democrat who favored setting a timeline for withdrawal, conceded that the approach now being considered does not represent a change in direction in Iraq.

However, he said, the bill ultimately would only fund the war through either July or September and would require the administration to report to Congress on progress or lack thereof.

"This is not a blank check," he said. "This is not long-term funding."

Information for this article was contributed by The Associated Press.



AP/MAYA ALLERUZZO U.S. troops look for clues Tuesday on farmland near Quarghuli, Iraq, in the May 12 abduction of three soldiers. As violence persisted, U.S. personnel in Iraq prepared a new strategy to quell strife. Article, 8A