

House requests constraints on Pakistan bill

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WASHINGTON— The Obama administration is opposing attempts by House Democrats to attach strings to billions of dollars in new aid to Pakistan, even as some lawmakers question why American taxpayers should turn over large sums to a government that has shown reluctance to take on Islamist extremists.

As part of the strategy for Afghanistan and Pakistan he unveiled last month, President Obama requested that Congress approve billions in additional military and civilian assistance for the volatile U.S. ally.

The House's Pakistan aid bill would condition the military money on the president certifying that Pakistan's intelligence agencies are not supporting terrorist groups and have closed terrorist camps in tribal areas.

That bill, which would allow the president to waive the requirement in the interest of national security, is from Rep. Howard Berman, the California Democrat who chairs the House Foreign Affairs Committee.

The administration views Berman's approach as "too inflexible," Undersecretary of Defense Michele Flournoy told the House Armed Services Committee on Wednesday. It "would severely constrain the executive branch."

The Bush administration gave \$12 billion in mostly military aid to Pakistan in the years after the 9/11 attacks, with few strings attached. Elements within the intelligence agencies did not stop supporting the Taliban and other Islamist extremists groups, according to a 2006 report from the British Defense Ministry.

Pakistan also has refused to allow U.S. officials to interview A.Q. Khan, the founder of Pakistan's nuclear weapons program who was once held under house arrest for selling nuclear weapons plans to North Korea. Some lawmakers, including Rep. Jane Harman, D-Calif., want to withhold aid unless Khan is made available.

President Asif Ali Zardari's government has been criticized for cutting a peace deal with religious extremist militants in the Swat Valley in north Pakistan. The army did take action in recent days against militants who seized villages about 60 miles from Pakistan's capital, Islamabad. On Wednesday, the army said it has retaken the main town in Buner, the Associated Press reported.

Berman's bill calls for \$3 billion in military aid and \$7.5 billion in civilian aid over the next five years.

Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton told Congress last week that civilian aid is crucial to helping Pakistan fend off extremists. "There are humanitarian needs that we think serve our national security interests, which we have, in my view, never sufficiently built on," she said.

At the same hearing, Rep. Dave Obey, the Democratic chairman of the House Appropriations Committee, said he had "absolutely no confidence in the ability of the existing Pakistani government to do one blessed thing."

Pakistanis, however, find the House bill's benchmarks "insulting," said Democratic Sen. John Kerry, chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee.

Kerry's view is echoed by many Republicans, including Rep. John McHugh of New York. The ranking member of the House Armed Services Committee called the House bill "disrespectful of Pakistan's sovereignty."

Yet, Pakistan has failed to deliver on its promises, said David Kilcullen, a U.S. military adviser and author of a new book on counterinsurgency tactics. "I think American taxpayers and legislators are entitled to ask, you know, 'Why should we give more money, and keep throwing good money after bad to the same people, until we get a firm commitment to actually stop supporting the enemy, and start protecting the Pakistani population?'" he said.

Added Berman in a statement: "I get the impression that those criticizing my bill haven't actually read it. It doesn't include any 'rigid' or 'inflexible' conditions. We are simply asking the president to hold the Pakistanis accountable for their commitments to fight the terrorists."