

Friction Likely as Panel Takes Up Unusual Foreign Affairs Authorization

By Adam Graham-Silverman
Congressional Quarterly
May 19, 2009

The House Foreign Affairs Committee will begin its official, and uphill, effort to renew and overhaul international assistance on Wednesday when it marks up legislation to authorize State Department programs.

Unlike the annual defense authorization, a comprehensive annual foreign affairs authorization bill has not been enacted since 1985, and Republicans are indicating they won't make this attempt easy for Chairman Howard L. Berman, a California Democrat.

Berman's legislation (HR 2410) would authorize programs for fiscal 2010 and 2011 at the State Department and the Peace Corps, as well as U.N. peacekeeping and dues. It would authorize about \$18 billion in fiscal 2010, which Berman said matches the administration's request.

In the past, authorization bills have become bogged down by controversies over social policy issues such as abortion and by aid to certain countries, such as China and Pakistan — disputes that are likely to return.

When Berman announced at a hearing last week that he would take up the nearly 300-page bill, Republicans offered quick previews of their objections.

Dana Rohrabacher, R-Calif., cautioned against supporting "totalitarian governments," which he likened to "subsidizing tyranny."

Dan Burton, R-Ind., urged Berman to offer a "clean" bill that does not address issues such as the "Mexico City policy," which barred U.S. foreign aid to groups that perform or promote abortion. President Obama overturned the policy — known by the city where it was introduced in 1984 — in January.

"It just causes political problems that are not necessary," Burton said, although he added that the bill should be sure to provide sufficient support to Israel.

Christopher H. Smith, a New Jersey Republican, called for broad maternal health programs, then added: "As we do that, we should not simultaneously be promoting abortion, which again is, by definition, infant mortality."

The mention of "Mexico City" led freshman Democrat Gerald E. Connolly of Virginia to shoot back: "I think the Mexico City policy most certainly is relevant, and I'm delighted that the administration moved to overturn it. It was ill-conceived, if you forgive the expression."

Changing U.S. Aid

Berman says his top legislative priority is to rewrite the 1961 Foreign Assistance Act, which still serves as the basis for U.S. policy in delivering foreign aid.

Earlier this year, he introduced a bill (HR 2139) to require the administration to create a global development strategy, which it currently lacks; he also said he plans to take up broader overhaul legislation later this year.

Not everyone thinks enacting all this legislation will be possible.

"I would just like to get the message to the chairman that every day we get a few more items added to his must-pass list," the panel's ranking Republican, Ileana Ros-Lehtinen of Florida,

noted at a May 13 hearing. "And I believe that that dream of getting that bill in . . . a bipartisan way is slowly slipping away from our fingers."

GOP leaders have introduced competing legislation that would authorize \$2.8 billion less than Berman's bill. It would also not include language in the Berman bill that would authorize payment of arrears to the United Nations and increase the cap on contributions to U.N. peacekeeping operations.

Among other things, Berman's bill would:

- Require the president to present a national security strategy for U.S. diplomacy and development every four years, similar to the Defense Department's Quadrennial Defense Review.
- Create a high-level coordinator for the Merida Initiative, an effort begun under President George W. Bush to fight drug trafficking in Latin America, and expand the initiative to the Caribbean.
- Authorize 1,500 new Foreign Service officers at State and 700 at the U.S. Agency for International Development over fiscal 2010 and 2011.
- Enact two items sought by the Foreign Service: elimination of a rule that inadvertently reduces the pay of officers serving overseas by as much as 20 percent, and extension to same-sex partners of the benefits given to spouses and their families, such as access to U.S. health care and moving expenses. This last provision is likely to provoke GOP objections.

© Congressional Quarterly Inc.

All rights reserved.

All material appearing on this site is copyrighted. All rights reserved. CQ does not convey any license, right, title or interest in any information -- including information provided to CQ from third parties -- transmitted via any CQ publication or electronic transmission unless previously specified in writing. No part of any CQ publication or transmission may be republished, reproduced, transmitted, downloaded or distributed by any means, whether electronic or mechanical, without prior written permission of CQ. Unauthorized reproduction or transmission of CQ copyrighted material is a violation of federal law carrying civil fines of up to \$100,000 and serious criminal sanctions or imprisonment.