

## **Gay US diplomats to get equal benefits: lawmaker**

Agence France Presse

May 20, 2009

WASHINGTON— Secretary of State Hillary Clinton has promised to provide equal benefits to partners of homosexual US diplomats stationed overseas, a congressman said Wednesday.

Howard Berman, head of the House Foreign Affairs Committee, had sought to require the State Department to offer benefits such as medical care, transport between postings and security training to partners regardless of sexual orientation.

Berman, in a hearing on funding for the Foreign Service, said he would drop his legislative bid as "it is my expectation, based on very recent conversations, that the Secretary of State will move forward with implementing all of the benefits provided in that provision in the very near future."

The congressman invited to the hearing Michael Guest, the former US ambassador to Romania who in 2007 left the Foreign Service, citing unfair treatment of his partner.

"For 26 years he served our country with distinction and was sadly forced to leave the Foreign Service when he could no longer accept the second-class status accorded his lifetime partner," said Berman, a Democrat from California.

"But I am heartened that soon no more of our best and brightest will be forced to choose between family and country," he said.

The ranking Republican member on the committee, Ileana Ros-Lehtinen of Florida, has supported the effort.

Ros-Lehtinen signed a letter to Clinton sent in February by Tammy Baldwin, a Democrat from Wisconsin who is openly lesbian, warning the State Department risked losing qualified diplomats unless it provided equality to gay partners.

But another Republican lawmaker criticized a separate part of the bill aimed at promoting gay rights.

The funding bill calls on US diplomats to encourage other countries to revise laws that restrict consensual homosexual relations or limit the freedoms of gay people and groups.

Christopher Smith, a Republican from New Jersey, charged that the bill could force US diplomats to promote policies that go against their religious beliefs.

"Does that make it permissive -- or mandatory -- that they be advocates for the homosexual agenda?" Smith asked.

Under President Barack Obama, the United States has switched gears from the previous George W. Bush administration by supporting a United Nations resolution calling for the global decriminalization of homosexuality.

Homosexuality is punishable by death in seven countries -- Iran, Mauritania, Nigeria, Saudi Arabia, Sudan, the United Arab Emirates and Yemen.