

Pakistan Aid Bill in House Committee Contends With Senate, White House Plans

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As the House Foreign Affairs Committee takes up legislation to boost aid to Pakistan, its approach remains at odds with the Obama administration's over placing conditions on the money.

While the administration says congressional conditions on the aid would be restrictive and counterproductive, House Democrats seem to be near the end of their patience with Pakistan and in no mood to give up their oversight.

The committee will mark up its long-term aid plan (HR 1886) on Wednesday. On Tuesday, the Obama administration rolled out a \$110 million package of short-term humanitarian aid for the nearly 1.5 million Pakistanis the United Nations estimates have been displaced by fighting.

With that money, the administration seeks to replicate the public-relations success of its \$1 billion relief effort after a 2005 earthquake in Pakistan, which is widely credited as one of the few programs that has improved the U.S. image among Pakistanis.

The aid bill, sponsored by Foreign Affairs Chairman Howard L. Berman, D-Calif., would authorize \$1.5 billion in non-military funds for each of the next five fiscal years, which is designed to put U.S. aid on long-term, non-military footing. The legislation would also authorize \$600 million a year in military aid on the condition that Pakistan cooperates in dismantling nuclear supply networks and fighting terrorist groups. But the bill would allow the president to waive those conditions if he determines it is "vital" to U.S. national security interests to do so.

The bill would prohibit the use of any foreign military financing to purchase or make upgrades to F-16 fighter jets, with the exception of \$142 million to finish a 2006 deal to upgrade some of Pakistan's planes.

The F-16s are a sore spot for both countries. Many U.S. experts believe Pakistan is using the planes to prepare for conflict with India, not to fight terrorism, while Pakistanis remember U.S. promises to deliver the planes.

Competing Legislation

The Obama administration has previously endorsed competing Senate legislation sponsored by Foreign Relations Chairman John Kerry, D-Mass., and ranking Republican Richard G. Lugar of Indiana. The Senate bill (S 962) also would authorize non-military money for Pakistan and place conditions on the military aid, although it would allow the president to waive those conditions if it were "important" for national security interests to do so — a lower threshold than in Berman's bill.

Kerry and Lugar's bill would also condition economic assistance on the requirement that the United States develop a strategy for the aid and provide reports to Congress on progress being made toward the goals of the strategy. With an eye toward breaking the link between support and military aid, the legislation would not authorize military assistance, however, and makes no mention of F-16s.

Richard C. Holbrooke, the administration's special envoy to the region, told the Senate Foreign Relations Committee on May 12 that the bill has taken on an outsized importance in Pakistan.

"The phrase 'Kerry-Lugar' has a talismanic quality in the Pakistani press now," Holbrooke said. "It's not just the amount of money. It's the fact that it is now read as a symbol of our intentions to stick around and be serious about it."

Still, House members remain skeptical of Pakistan's willingness or ability to meet expectations. And Democrats and Republicans in both chambers have questioned the lack of a detailed strategy for spending the new economic-assistance money.

Republicans said they plan to offer a substitute amendment that would not include any benchmarks or timetables for progress.

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