

Pakistan Aid Bill Clears House Committee

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WASHINGTON— A U.S. congressional committee has approved legislation that would provide Pakistan with billions of dollars in economic aid over the next five years. VOA's Dan Robinson reports from Capitol Hill, lawmakers on the House of Representatives Foreign Affairs Committee supported the need to help Pakistan battle an extremist insurgency, but some voiced concerns about strong conditions in the measure:

The Pakistan Enduring Assistance and Cooperation Enhancement Act would triple U.S. economic aid to Pakistan to \$1.5 billion a year until 2013, to help stabilize Pakistan's civilian government, and support national and provincial institutions and strengthen Pakistan's education and judicial systems.

It establishes a Pakistan Democracy and Prosperity Fund for non-military aid, and intensifies a focus on access to education for women and girls in Pakistan.

On the military front, the measure authorizes military aid to bolster the capabilities of Pakistan's army and special forces battling Taliban and other extremist groups. Congress has allocated \$400 million as part of a separate 2009 supplemental war funding bill for a new Pakistan Counterinsurgency Capability Fund (PCCF).

Democratic committee chairman Howard Berman said the legislation underscores the importance of Pakistan's fight against extremism. "All of us are deeply concerned about the stability and security of that country. We cannot allow al-Qaida or any other terrorist group that threatens our national security to operate with impunity in the tribal regions of Pakistan, nor can we permit the Pakistani state and its nuclear arsenal to be taken over by the Taliban," he said.

But the measure contains provisions designed to help Congress exert control and see results, a response to what lawmakers see as billions of dollars wasted by Pakistan's government over the past decade.

The U.S. president would have to report on whether Pakistan has demonstrated a sustained commitment to and made progress toward combating terrorist groups, including ending support by any elements in Pakistan's military or intelligence agencies to extremist and terrorist groups.

Pakistan would also have to be shown to have closed terrorist camps in the Federally Administered Tribal Areas [FATA], dismantled terrorist bases in other areas, and strengthened counter-terrorism and anti-money laundering laws.

While ranking panel Republican Ileana Ros-Lehtinen said Congress and the Obama administration are united on overall goals, she asserted such conditions would be counter-productive:

"I fear that the size and the tenor of the bill still leaves the impression that members of Congress are arm chair Generals and are endeavoring to micro-manage U.S. policy toward Pakistan at a delicate time when this new administration has yet to develop and submit an implementation plan for its strategy," he said.

Ros-Lehtinen noted that Defense secretary Robert Gates and Joint Chiefs of Staff chairman Michael Mullen expressed concern about what they called the degree of conditionality and limitations on flexibility in the bill. But Berman said the conditions were neither rigid nor inflexible.

A provision requiring a report on Pakistan's cooperation with efforts to dismantle nuclear weapons or material supplier networks sparked some intense debate.

While not specifically mentioning Pakistani nuclear scientist A.Q. Khan, the measure called for access to Pakistani nationals associated with such networks.

Representative Berman opposed an amendment by Republican Representative Michael McCaul to mention A.Q. Khan by name, saying that doing so would undermine U.S. efforts to build a new partnership with Pakistan:

MCCAUL: It basically just says very simply that if we are going to provide this kind of funding we should at least be entitled to ask Dr. Khan directly questions about the damage and the extent, expanse of his proliferation and it also asks that the [Pakistani] government monitor his movements.

BERMAN: Making specific reference to A.Q. Khan in the legislation is a mistake, because of the consequences in terms of building the relationship of partnerships and trust that we want to build with Pakistan to take on this mission."

McCaul withdrew his amendment in exchange for Berman's agreement to require that Pakistan provide direct access to Pakistani nationals, and to report the bill to the full House with language noting that this refers to A.Q. Khan.

The measure provides waiver authority the president can use to make exceptions in the interest of national security, and excludes from restrictions U.S. military aid for enhancing the ability of the Pakistan Frontier Corps to conduct counterterrorism operations along the border with Afghanistan.

Other sensitive conditions require that any direct U.S. assistance on or after January 1, 2010 be provided to a freely-elected government of Pakistan. The bill also prohibits use of funds to purchase or upgrade Pakistani F-16 fighter aircraft and munitions.

The measure also requires an assessment of Pakistani steps to close terrorist camps, including those of Jamaat-ud-Dawa and Lashkar-e-Taiba, increase oversight over curriculum in Islamic madrasas, including closing those with direct links to the Taliban or other extremist and terrorist groups.

Committee approval sets up debate and a vote by the full House of Representatives following the upcoming congressional recess. Similar legislation is pending in the Senate.