

House Passes Rare Two-Year State Department Authorization Measure

By Caitlin Webber

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The House on Wednesday passed a State Department and foreign operations bill that would authorize the hiring of 1,500 new Foreign Service officers and 700 additional staff members at the U.S. Agency for International Development. It would also significantly expand the number of Peace Corps volunteers from the current figure of about 8,000.

The two-year bill (HR 2410) would authorize about \$18 billion for fiscal 2010 and an unspecified amount for fiscal 2011 for the State Department, the U.S. share of the costs of multilateral institutions such as the United Nations, and other foreign affairs programs.

The bill passed 235-187, with seven Republicans supporting it, but GOP opponents took aim at its price tag.

"This bill calls for exorbitant spending in the absence of true reform, and it does not take the difficult but necessary step of setting priorities, either with out-of-control spending or important international issues facing our country," said Ileana Ros-Lehtinen of Florida, ranking Republican on the Foreign Affairs panel, urging her colleagues to vote against the bill.

She cited a Congressional Research Service report that State Department funding had doubled between 2000 and 2008. "Clearly," she said, "this shows that growing the bureaucracy and throwing more money at the Department of State are not the answer."

The measure would authorize a pay increase for Foreign Service officers assigned overseas, bringing their pay in line with the higher salaries of officers stationed in Washington.

Foreign Affairs Chairman Howard L. Berman, D-Calif., said the results of the funding boost would be worth the cost.

"By wisely investing resources to strengthen our diplomatic capabilities, we can help prevent conflicts before they start and help prevent conditions that lead to failed states," he said. "For years, we have failed to provide the State Department with resources it desperately needs to pursue its core missions."

The legislation would authorize \$1.8 billion in fiscal 2010 in membership dues for international organizations, including the United Nations and the Organization of American States, and \$2.3 billion for contributions to ongoing U.N. peacekeeping activities.

It would also authorize whatever is necessary to pay unpaid past dues, long a sore spot on the Hill.

Abortion Debate

Despite Berman's efforts to keep the legislation clear of the contentious social policy and country-specific proposals that have ensnared previous attempts to enact State Department authorizations, the blocking of anti-abortion amendments from the floor consumed a considerable amount of time during the debate.

A Berman amendment, adopted 257-171, included language saying that nothing in the bill's provision creating the Office of Global Women's Issues should be construed as affecting existing laws preventing U.S. funds from being used to pay for or promote abortions overseas.

Christopher H. Smith, R-N.J., had hoped to offer an amendment that would specifically prevent the newly created office from being a player in overseas abortion debates. That proposal was

rejected by the Rules Committee on Tuesday, but it drew the attention of the National Right to Life Committee, which announced Wednesday that it would use the vote on final passage of the bill in its member ratings — the first vote of the 111th Congress to draw that scrutiny.

Berman said that Smith's proposals were irrelevant, since the purpose of the office is to promote women's and children's rights. "There is no basis for assuming this office to going to do anything to promote or lobby for abortion," Berman said.

Smith said that recent comments by Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton concerning her intention to promote "reproductive rights" abroad imply that the Obama administration might try to persuade developing countries to remove anti-abortion laws from their books.

Amendments Adopted

Among the 27 amendments considered Wednesday, whittled down from nearly 90 proposed to the Rules Committee on Tuesday, the House adopted:

- A Jared Polis, D-Colo., amendment, adopted by voice vote, that would require that functional and regional specialists be evaluated for promotion in the Foreign Service on equal footing. Currently, Foreign Service officers with regional expertise have priority status in promotions;
- A Michael McCaul, R-Texas, amendment, adopted 429-0, that would require the Obama administration to develop a comprehensive interagency strategy plan to address the humanitarian crisis in Sudan;
- A Harry Teague, D-N.M., amendment, adopted by voice vote, that would create a global clean-energy exchange program to promote international cooperation on the development of efficient energy; and
- A Michael N. Castle, R-Del., amendment, adopted by voice vote, that would allow the secretary of State to suspend diplomatic visas for countries that refuse to repatriate their citizens that have committed crimes or immigration violations.

A Ros-Lehtinen amendment that would have reduced U.S. funding to the International Atomic Energy Agency in line with the agency's technical support to Iran, Syria and Cuba — about \$4.5 million — was rejected, 205-224.

A Republican motion to send the bill back to committee and replace it with the language of a Berman bill (HR 2194) that would allow the president to sanction companies that provide petroleum products to Iran failed, 174-250.

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