

Foreign Affairs panel chief Berman backs deal

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Washington— The Chair of the House Foreign Affairs Committee, Howard Berman, said he would vote for the Indo-US nuclear deal since a bill introduced by him ensures Congressional oversight of the agreement and is consistent with the provisions of the Hyde Act.

"I support peaceful nuclear cooperation with India, and in 2006 I voted for the Hyde Act, which established a framework for this cooperation," Berman, a strong opponent of some provisions of the 123 agreement, said in a briefing to Republican and Democratic colleagues, according to a statement released by his office.

He said he was under no illusion that India will give up its nuclear weapons as long as the five recognised nuclear states fail to make "serious reductions in their arsenals" but went on to add that "I believe it (deal) is a positive step to integrate India into the global nonproliferation regime."

Berman has introduced his legislation, H.R. 7061 on the US-India civilian nuclear agreement which is expected to be taken up in the House floor.

"I continue to have concerns about ambiguities in the nuclear cooperation agreement that the Bush Administration negotiated with the government of India, particularly with regard to the potential consequences if India tests another nuclear weapon, and to the legal status of so-called 'fuel assurances' made by our negotiators," he said.

"This India legislation includes a number of provisions designed to improve Congressional oversight of the India nuclear cooperation agreement and help ensure that the agreement is interpreted in a manner consistent with the constraints in the Hyde Act," he said.

"I will therefore vote in support of this Agreement," the chair of the powerful Senate panel said.

Besides expressing concern over the "ambiguities" in the agreement, Berman, in his statement, also said he was "deeply troubled" that the Bush Administration "completely disregarded important nonproliferation requirements in the Hyde Act -- thus putting American companies at a competitive disadvantage -- when seeking a special exemption for India at the Nuclear Suppliers Group."

After a lot of drama and suspense, Berman introduced the bill which was almost identical to the one that was overwhelmingly adopted by the Senate Foreign Relations Committee with a rider that all nuclear assistance to India would cease if New Delhi conducts a test.

However, his bill had an extra paragraph that would require that the Senate and the House versions would have to be reconciled in a committee with the involvement of the administration also.

Berman was also persuaded to drop killer amendments including one on Iran that could have sabotaged the legislation following which he introduced the bill.

The bill in the House of Representatives is expected to be considered under suspension of the rules with about a 40-minute debate. It is not subject to amendments and a two-thirds majority vote is required for passage.

The measure is expected to be managed by Chairman Berman for the Democrats and the Republican Manager is expected to be Florida Republican Congresswoman Ileana Ros-Lehtinen.