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Democrats Push New Iraq Measures to US House

By Dan Robinson
28 July 2007

A key congressional committee has approved and sent to the full House of Representatives legislation to require President Bush to develop and send Congress a specific strategy to withdraw U.S. forces from Iraq. VOA's Dan Robinson reports, two measures passed Friday by the House Armed Services Committee are the latest step in majority Democrat's efforts to maintain pressure on the president.

Committee approval of the troop withdrawal resolution was by a vote of 55 to 2, meaning that while Republicans expressed reservations, most joined Democrats in voting it through to the full House.

Congressman Neil Abercrombie, one of the Democratic sponsors of the troop redeployment measure, told what it would require the president to do. "[The president would] submit to the congressional defense committees the status of planning for the redeployment of the armed forces from Iraq, exactly the kind of contingency planning that sensible people in the Pentagon are doing anyway at the direction of the president I am sure, and that we then have that before us so we can contemplate how to be helpful in bringing this to a conclusion," he said.

The resolution requires a report from President Bush within 60 days laying out a comprehensive strategy to transition U.S. forces from "policing civil strife or sectarian violence" to counter-terrorism, protecting U.S. diplomatic and other personnel, and equipping Iraqi forces.

It also essentially declares the 2002 congressional authorization for military action in Iraq no longer valid, noting that Iraq is now ruled by a freely elected democratic government and not the former regime of Saddam Hussein.

Although most of them voted with Democrats, some Republicans raised objections to aspects of the withdrawal resolution, and a separate measure to require U.S. troops to receive more time off between deployments to Iraq, and require the president to certify that military units meet minimum preparedness standards.

Congressman Duncan Hunter opposed what he called tying the hands of military commanders. "It cannot be our congressional prerogative to limit our nation's commander-in-chief in such a way that would effectively paralyze our military, remove operational flexibility, and impose in statute a rigid set of parameters that our military commanders have not requested, and by all accounts don't want."

Both sides heard testimony by witnesses voicing opposite views of the situation in Iraq.

Larry Korb urged lawmakers to approve the resolutions, asserting Congress needs to step in and essentially save a U.S. military weakened by repeated deployments in Iraq and Afghanistan so it can respond to other global needs. "We have other interests. Our objective is not 'whatever' it might be to win the war in Iraq, but to provide for the overall security of the United States," he said.

Former U.S. Army Vice Chief of Staff, General John Keane, strongly disagreed with suggestions that the military has been "broken".

He warned against "dictating" the missions of military commanders. While acknowledging what he termed a failed U.S. strategy in Iraq from 2003 to 2006, he made this emotional appeal to lawmakers. "Your actions here in the Congress appear to be in direct conflict with the realities on the ground, where the trends are up and progress is being made. Your resolution, like so many others proposed, ties the hands of our military commanders and deprives them of the opportunity to use the appropriate level of force for the time it is required to use that force."

In recent weeks, similar Democratic-sponsored legislation designed to ease the strain of U.S. troops received some Republican backing in the Senate, but failed to gain 60 votes required to pass there.

The resolutions approved Friday may see debate as stand-alone measures on the House floor next week, although they face a presidential veto threat.

Democratic war critic John Murtha will propose his own withdrawal plan in an amendment to defense spending legislation.

None of the latest Democratic measures, including an earlier House vote urging a 2008 withdrawal target for ending most U.S. combat operations, are tied to war funding, something President Bush rejected when he vetoed other legislation nearly three months ago.