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Senate Approves Detainee Treatment Rules

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Associated Press
October 6, 2005

WASHINGTON - The Senate faces a confrontation with the House over a \$440 billion military spending bill that, despite White House opposition, would impose restrictions on the treatment of terrorism suspects.

Delivering a rare wartime slap at Pentagon authority and President Bush, the GOP-controlled Senate voted 90-9 on Wednesday to back an amendment that would prohibit the use of "cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment" against anyone in U.S. government custody, regardless of where they are held.

Sponsored by Sen. John McCain, R-Ariz., the proposal also would require all service members to follow procedures in the Army Field Manual when they detain and interrogate terrorism suspects.

"This amendment strives to establish uniform standards for the interrogation of prisoners and detainees as a means for helping ensure our service men and women are well trained, well briefed, knowledgeable of their legal, professional and moral duties and obligations," said Senate Majority Leader Bill Frist, R-Tenn.

The Senate was expected to vote on the overall spending bill by week's end. The House-approved version of it does not include the detainee provision. It is unclear how much support the measure has in the GOP-run House.

However, Rep. John Murtha of Pennsylvania, the top Democrat on the House Appropriations subcommittee on defense, who supports the measure, could prove a powerful ally when House and Senate negotiators meet to reconcile differences in their bills.

And the House could face immense pressure after such a mandate by the Senate. All but nine Republicans voted in favor of the legislation.

Sen. Ted Stevens, R-Alaska, said he was concerned that McCain's legislation could inadvertently endanger the lives of people who work in classified roles, and he hoped to fix the potential problems in the final bill.

"There are some changes that have to be made if we are going to be faithful to those people who live in the classified world," Stevens said.

The rebuke by members of the president's own party shows how reluctant some lawmakers are to give him unchecked wartime power as the conflict in Iraq drags on and U.S. casualties mount. It also comes as Bush seeks to show strength after weeks in which his approval rating plummeted as Americans questioned the direction of the war, the sluggish federal response to Hurricane Katrina and the surge in gas prices.

Bush administration officials say the legislation would limit the president's authority and flexibility in war, and advisers say they would recommend a veto of the spending bill if the prisoner provision is included in the version that goes to his desk.

However, Bush has never vetoed a bill, despite threats, and scrapping a measure that provides money for pay raises, benefits, equipment and weapons for troops while the country is fighting wars in Iraq and Afghanistan would open the president to a flood of criticism.

Still pending is an amendment by Sen. Lindsey Graham, R-S.C., that would distinguish between a "lawful enemy combatant" and an "unlawful enemy combatant," and put into law the procedures for prosecuting them at the Navy's Guantanamo Bay prison in Cuba.

Lawmakers increasingly started calling for Congress to provide U.S. troops with clear standards for detaining, interrogating and prosecuting terrorism suspects after allegations surfaced of mistreatment at Guantanamo Bay and the abuse scandal at Abu Ghraib prison in Iraq.

"We demanded intelligence without ever clearly telling our troops what was permitted and what was forbidden. And when things went wrong, we blamed them and we punished them," said McCain, a prisoner of war in Vietnam.

Republican supporters say U.S. troops interrogating terrorism suspects do not know which techniques are allowed. "We have let the troops down when it comes to trying to give them guidance in very stressful situations," said Graham, an Air Force judge for 20 years.

But Sen. Jeff Sessions, R-Ala., called the legislation unnecessary. "We do not have ... systematic abuse of prisoners going on by our United States military," he said.