

Senate panel passes bill allowing guest workers

Sweeping immigration legislation faces stiff opposition in the House

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WASHINGTON - The Senate Judiciary Committee approved election-year immigration legislation Monday that clears the way for millions of undocumented workers to seek U.S. citizenship without having to first leave the country.

After days of street demonstrations that stretched from California to the grounds of the U.S. Capitol, the committee also voted to strip out proposed criminal penalties for residents found to be in this country illegally.

The panel's vote cleared the way for the full Senate to begin debate Tuesday on the emotional immigration issue.

"All Americans wanted fairness, and they got it this evening," said Sen. Edward M. Kennedy, the Massachusetts Democrat who played a pivotal role in drafting the legislation. The bill was approved 12-6.

Committee Chairman Arlen Specter, R-Pa., voted for the bill but signaled that some of the provisions could well be changed by the full Senate.

In general, the bill is designed to strengthen border patrol, create new opportunities for so-called guest workers and determine the legal future of the estimated 11 million immigrants living in the United States illegally.

Democrats' advantage

At several critical points, committee Democrats were united while Republicans splintered. In general, GOP Sens. Lindsay Graham of South Carolina, Sam Brownback of Kansas and Mike DeWine of Ohio, who is seeking re-election this fall, sided with Democrats.

That gave Democrats a majority that allowed them to shape the bill to their liking.

Earlier Monday, as more than a thousand immigration rights activists rallied outside the Capitol, the Senate Judiciary Committee adopted an amendment by Sen. Dick Durbin, D-Ill., that would protect church and charitable groups, as well as individuals, from criminal prosecution for providing food, shelter, medical care and counseling to undocumented immigrants.

"Charitable organizations, like individuals, should be able to provide humanitarian assistance to immigrants without fearing prosecution," Durbin said.

The House voted in December to make offers of such non-emergency aid a felony. The Senate panel also rejected a proposal Wednesday by Sen. John Cornyn, R-Texas, to require humanitarian groups providing aid to illegal immigrants to register with the Department of Homeland Security.

The immigration bills have sparked protests around the country, and with the committee's action on Monday demonstrators at the front of the Capitol claimed to have already had an impact. At least 200 clergy members were present, including dozens wearing handcuffs to protest the House's action.

'We are Americans, too'

"This is not about legislation any more," said Jorge Medina, an immigrant from Honduras now living in Charlotte, N.C. "This is about feelings now. We are Americans, too. We are not from Mars, and we are not from the moon."

President Bush used a naturalization ceremony Monday for swearing in 30 new citizens from 20 countries to warn critics of his proposal to let some illegal immigrants remain in the United State against stoking anti-immigrant feelings.

"The immigration debate should be conducted in a civil and dignified way," the president said as lawmakers began tackling the hot-button election issue of what to do with the nation's estimated 11 million illegal immigrants.

More than 500,000 people rallied in Los Angeles on Saturday, demanding that Congress abandon the House-passed measures that would make being an undocumented immigrant a felony and would erect a 700-mile fence along the 2,000-mile U.S.-Mexico border.

Similar but smaller protests were held in Dallas, Phoenix, Milwaukee and Columbus, Ohio, over the weekend. On Monday, hundreds of demonstrators, many waving U.S. and Mexican flags, marched through Detroit. In Huntington Park, Calif., several hundred high school students walked out of class as protests against an immigration crackdown continued on California's Cesar Chavez Day.

A difficult task ahead

Overhauling the nation's immigration laws "is not going to be easy," Bush said at the naturalization ceremony at Constitution Hall two blocks from the White House.

"No one should play on people's fears or try to pit neighbors against each other," Bush said. "No one should pretend that immigrants are threats to America's identity because immigrants have shaped America's identity.

"No one should claim that immigrants are a burden on our economy because the work and enterprise of immigrants helps sustain our economy," the president said. "We should not give in to pessimism. If we work together, I am confident we can meet our duty to fix our immigration system and deliver a bill that protects our people, upholds our laws and makes our people proud."

Since the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks, calls for tougher border security have dominated debate over the knotty problem of controlling immigration.

But a tough immigration-enforcement bill passed by the House last year has galvanized forces that want worker programs for illegal immigrants already in the country.

"We will not accept enforcement-only approaches," said Cecilia Munoz, vice president of the National Council of La Raza, a Hispanic advocacy group.

Debate comes during election year

Senators up for re-election this year are being forced by the debate to juggle the demand from voters for tighter borders to keep out terrorists and businesses who look to the tide of immigrants to help fill jobs.

Employers and immigration advocates prefer a bill drafted by Sens. John McCain, R-Ariz., and Edward M. Kennedy, D-Mass., that would allow illegal immigrants to become eligible for permanent residency after working for six years. Both McCain and Frist are likely candidates for the Republican presidential nomination next year.

Another approach offered by Cornyn and Sen. Jon Kyl, R-Ariz., would let illegal immigrants get temporary work permits for up to five years. They would have to leave the United States but could then apply for legal re-entry.