

Senators Reach Outline on Immigration Bill

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WASHINGTON, May 8 — Key senators said Tuesday that they had agreed on the outlines of a bipartisan bill that would toughen border enforcement and provide a path to legal status for illegal immigrants.

But they remain deeply divided on many details, lawmakers and Congressional aides said, and it remains unclear whether a deal can be reached by Monday, the deadline set by Senator Harry Reid of Nevada, the Democratic majority leader, for putting a compromise bill on the floor.

A group of Republican and Democratic senators and senior Bush administration officials have been negotiating intensively for the last several months to see if a bipartisan deal is possible this year on immigration, a politically volatile issue that has exposed fissures between and within the parties. President Bush, eager for a big second-term domestic accomplishment, has been pushing for legislation that he can sign, but his own party has been wary of any compromise that is seen as being too lenient toward the estimated 12 million illegal immigrants in the United States.

Senator Arlen Specter, Republican of Pennsylvania, said negotiators had reached what they called a “grand bargain.” It includes a series of triggers, Mr. Specter said, that require new border security measures to be up and running before the start of any programs to give legal status to people in the country illegally.

Points of continuing contention include the severity of penalties that illegal immigrants would have to face to seek legal status; whether temporary guest workers should be allowed an avenue to stay and become citizens; and what family members future immigrant workers should be allowed to bring to the United States, Senate aides and administration officials said.

Mr. Specter said there was agreement that illegal immigrants would “have to earn being on the citizenship path,” by, at minimum, paying back taxes, showing they had a substantial period of employment in the United States and learning English.

The package also includes expanded temporary worker programs for both low- and high-skilled workers; severe sanctions on employers who hire illegal immigrants; and new identification methods and verification programs to ensure that immigrants who seek jobs are authorized to work, Mr. Specter and other lawmakers said.

Senator Mel Martinez, Republican of Florida, called it “a pretty good skeleton of a bill.” But senators said it was highly unlikely they could complete any bill in the next few days to meet Mr. Reid’s deadline. As of Tuesday there was no working draft of what would be a huge measure, they said.

The negotiations to overhaul the nation’s foundering immigration system have been surprisingly quiet, substantive and bipartisan, participants say. Almost every day, Homeland Security Secretary Michael Chertoff either worked the phones or hunkered down for several hours behind closed doors with lawmakers led by Senator Edward M. Kennedy, the liberal Massachusetts Democrat, and Senator Jon Kyl, the conservative Arizona Republican, trying to hammer out what would be the broadest revision of the immigration laws in two decades.

Commerce Secretary Carlos Gutierrez also joined in, as did Senators John Cornyn of Texas and Lindsey Graham of South Carolina, both Republicans, and Senator Ken Salazar, Democrat of Colorado, among half a dozen others. Often staff aides were sent out of the room, leaving only senators and cabinet officials to go head to head over hard points of difference.

“By nature of hours invested, it’s hard to conceive of any other piece of legislation during the Bush presidency where they have been more committed and more involved,” Mr. Martinez said, referring to the administration.

Staff aides and analysts said the discussions had moved beyond some demands made by conservatives last year, with widespread deportation of illegal immigrants no longer part of the discussion.

In the Senate, “the debate about amnesty is coming to an end,” said Tamar Jacoby, a senior fellow at the conservative Manhattan Institute, referring to the term Republicans used last year to reject Mr. Bush’s plan to grant legal status to illegal immigrants. “The debate has shifted to much more important ground: Are we going to create an immigration system going forward that deals with our labor needs in a legal way?”

There is also new agreement on requiring illegal immigrants to leave the United States, at least briefly, to start obtaining legal status, a step that was rejected by Democrats last year.

Mr. Kennedy does not agree with Republican negotiators on provisions introduced by the White House that would shift the priority of the immigration system to supplying the nation’s labor needs, by sharply reducing chances for legal immigrants to bring parents and siblings.

For Mr. Bush, immigration is an issue where his views resonate with centrist Democrats, giving him perhaps his best chance at a major piece of bipartisan legislation in his second term, analysts said. It might also help the Republicans regain some of the ground lost with Latino voters in last year’s elections.

“Comprehensive immigration reform means that we’ve got to be humane about the nearly 11 or 12 million people who are already here,” Mr. Bush said last week to Hispanic evangelical pastors here, one of several recent speeches in which he has called for “neither amnesty nor animosity” in dealing with illegal immigrants.

A difference in the talks this year is the leading role played by Mr. Kyl, taking over the role of his fellow Arizona senator, John McCain, who has become less visibly active on the issue as he has campaigned for president, often encountering criticism from Republicans for his proposal to grant legal status to illegal immigrants. Mr. Kyl had been far more skeptical than Mr. McCain of granting legal status to illegal immigrants, and last year he and Mr. Cornyn offered a plan openly countering Mr. Bush’s proposals for legalization.

This year Mr. Kyl has taken a flexible, pragmatic approach, aides said. But he insisted that a new temporary worker program should not become a route for immigrants to become permanent residents and citizens, say Congressional aides.

On Tuesday Mr. Kyl said that a bipartisan agreement was within reach. “I think we can get there, so I think we need to keep working at it,” he said.

Mr. Reid said he would initiate procedures on Wednesday to bring some form of immigration bill to the floor by Monday. If there is no new bipartisan bill, Democrats said they might re-introduce the one that passed the Senate last year.

Senate Republicans will gather later this week to hear the results of the negotiations so far, and Mr. Kyl said he would like more time for the talks.

In the House, six staunch opponents of any legal status for illegal immigrants, including Representatives Lamar Smith, Republican of Texas, and Steve King, Republican of Iowa, wrote an open letter criticizing the Senate proposals for overhaul. Those measures would “pardon immigrant lawbreakers and reward them with the object of their crimes,” Mr. King said at a news conference.