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House votes to extend Patriot Act

Democrats voice civil liberties concerns

WASHINGTON (AP) -- The House voted Thursday to extend the USA Patriot Act, the nation's main anti-terrorism tool, just hours after televisions in the Capitol beamed images of a new attack in London.

As similar legislation worked its way through the Senate, House Republicans generally cast the law as a valuable asset in the war on terror. Most Democrats echoed that support but said they were concerned the law could allow citizens' civil liberties to be infringed.

Following more than nine hours of debate, the House approved the measure 257-171. Forty-three Democrats joined 214 Republicans in voting to renew key provisions of Patriot Act that were set to expire at the end of the year.

The bulk of the back-and-forth centered on language making permanent 14 of 16 provisions that had four-year sunset provisions under the original law, which Congress passed overwhelmingly after the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks.

The bill also proposed 10-year extensions to the two other provisions set to expire on December 31, one allowing roving wiretaps and another allowing searches of library and medical records. They were the focus of most of the controversy as members plowed through the main legislation and 18 amendments.

"While the Patriot Act and other anti-terrorism initiatives have helped avert additional attacks on our soil, the threat has not receded," said Rep. James Sensenbrenner, R-Wisconsin, chairman of the House Judiciary Committee.

Rep. John Conyers of Michigan, the top Democrat on the committee, said that while "I support the majority of the 166 provisions of the Patriot Act," the extensions could lessen accountability. "Ten years is not a sunset; 10 years is semi-permanent," he said.

The Bush administration hailed the vote.

"After measured deliberation and a public debate, the House has again provided the brave men and women of law enforcement with critical tools in their efforts to combat terrorism and protect the American people, Attorney General Alberto Gonzales said in a statement.

As the House debated the legislation, the Senate Judiciary Committee approved its own extension of the bill, though it included only four-year extensions for the roving wiretap and records search provisions.

A competing bill also has been approved by the Senate Intelligence Committee, which would give the FBI expanded powers to subpoena records without the approval of a judge or grand jury. That ensured further Senate talks on the terrorism-fighting measure. The House legislation will also have to be reconciled with whatever emerges from the Senate.

The House debate included frequent references to the attacks earlier in the day, two weeks after larger London blasts that killed 56, including four suicide bombers.

The roving wiretap provision, Section 206, allows investigators to obtain warrants to intercept a suspect's phone conversations or Internet traffic without limiting it to a specific phone or identifying the suspect. The records provision, Section 215, authorizes federal officials to obtain "tangible items" such as business, library and medical records.

Advocates argued that such powers already exist in criminal investigations so they should be expressly continued for terrorism investigations. They also cited safeguards in the bill, such as a requirement that a judge approve the records search.

One amendment, passed by a 402-26 vote, requires the FBI director to personally approve any request for library or bookstore records.

Another successful amendment sets a 20-year jail term for an attack against a rail or mass-transit vehicle; a 30-year sentence if the vehicle carries nuclear material; and life imprisonment -- with the possibility of the death penalty -- if anyone is killed in such an attack.

Rep. Mike Rogers, R-Michigan, a former FBI agent, recalled using such tools in gang and child molestation investigations.

"All we do in the Patriot Act is say, 'Look, if we can go after child molesters sitting in the library and bombers who we need to sneak-and-peek on a warrant, we ought to be able to go after terrorists,'" he said.

Critics heralded the bulk of the existing law, but said the sunsets were wisely inserted amid the inflamed passions following the September 11 attacks, and should be retained to assess the long-term impact of the law.

"Periodically revisiting the Patriot Act is a good thing," said Rep. Martin Meehan, D-Massachusetts. "The Patriot Act was an effort to answer the most difficult question a democracy faces: How much freedom are we willing to give up to feel safe?"


Democrats were incensed after Republican leaders blocked consideration of an amendment that would have blocked the library searches. The House approved identical language last month in a test vote.

"If you don't like it, come up and speak against it," said Rep. Bernie Sanders, I-Vermont, who sponsored the amendment. "But it has passed once and it would likely pass again."

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