

Senate Democrats seem ready to adopt Iraq plan

Bennett Roth

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WASHINGTON — President Bush and House leaders Wednesday agreed on a resolution that would hand the White House authority for a possible invasion of Iraq.

The White House has yet to strike a deal with the Democratic-led Senate, which is expected to debate the issue as soon as Wednesday. A House vote on the resolution is expected next week.

Senate Democratic leaders have sought to put a number of conditions in the resolution to ensure that diplomatic avenues are exhausted in the United Nations before any military moves.

But a number of moderate Democratic senators broke with their leaders Wednesday and endorsed the House resolution, an indication that Bush likely will get his way in the Senate.

Bush, surrounding himself with lawmakers from both parties in the Rose Garden, hailed the resolution saying it "will show to friend and enemy alike the resolve of the United States."

The president said Iraqi leader Saddam Hussein will be given a chance to disarm, but he added if "he

chooses to do otherwise, if he persists in his defiance, the use of force may become unavoidable."

Bush won over House Democratic Leader Richard Gephardt, D-Mo., by making a number of minor concessions, such as agreeing to notify Congress of military strikes beforehand, or at the latest within 48 hours after the action. The notification would certify that diplomatic and other peaceful means were not adequate to protect Americans from Saddam's weapons.

Bush also will update Congress every 60 days about the Iraq situation. He had offered earlier to report every 90 days.

Standing with the president at the White House, Gephardt said, "many of us believe that we need to deal with this threat diplomatically if we can, militarily if we must."

Lawmakers from both parties predict broad bipartisan support when the vote comes next week.

Democrats have been trying to accommodate a wide range of views on Iraq among their members, some of whom back the president while others believe Bush has not done enough on the diplomatic front.

Senate Majority Leader Tom

Daschle, D-S.D., who was not invited to the Rose Garden event with Bush, said he wanted the resolution to more fully spell out the administration's strategy regarding Iraq.

"I continue to believe that the final resolution should include greater emphasis on eliminating Iraq's weapons of mass destruction, a stronger statement that operations against Iraq will not undermine the ongoing international effort against al-Qaida, and a clear assessment of the administration's plans for ... a post-Saddam Iraq," said Daschle in a statement issued by his office.

Senate Foreign Relations Chairman Joe Biden, D-Del., has unsuccessfully been pushing a resolution that would require that Bush work through the United Nations before launching an attack.

However, Biden has been undercut by others in his party, including Sen. Joseph Lieberman, D-Conn., who introduced the House resolution language in the Senate and stood with the president in the Rose Garden.

Lieberman said that while the Senate will consider a number of alternative resolutions, "in the end, this resolution will pass in the Senate with a very large, bipartisan majority."

Lili's winds reach 145 MPH

Mike Tolson

Hearst Newspapers

HOUSTON — As Hurricane Lili gained speed and fury with each passing hour, thousands of frightened coastal residents in Texas and Louisiana fled inland Wednesday.

Unwilling to take their chances with the second major storm in a week to target the area, people from Port Arthur to Lafayette, La., paid heed to suggestions to evacuate.

Lili was expected to barrel ashore today in south-central or southwestern Louisiana. Its steady winds of 145 mph earned it a Category 4 designation — ripe with deadly and devastating potential.

Most of the Texas coast escaped serious concern. But officials in Orange and Jefferson counties spent the day overseeing evacuation efforts. Highways in East Texas were clogged with refugees in search of shelter.

Forecasters with the National

Hurricane Center predicted Lili, compact and well-defined, would gradually veer to the north and make landfall this afternoon near New Iberia, La.

It will be preceded by a storm surge of 10-20 feet, they warned, as well as by numerous rain bands dumping from 6 to 10 inches on land still soggy from last week's Tropical Storm Isidore.

Though less likely, a Texas landfall near the Golden Triangle remained a possibility. Gov. Rick Perry signed a precautionary disaster declaration late Tuesday to speed up state and federal assistance to areas likely to be affected by the storm.

"Hurricane Lili will cause a great deal of damage wherever it hits," Perry said.

A hurricane warning covered a stretch of the Gulf Coast from east of High Island to the mouth of the Mississippi River. Tropical storm warn-

ings went much farther, to Freeport on the west and to the Alabama coast on the east.

Unlike Isidore, a once-menacing hurricane that was reduced to a muddling tropical storm by its journey across the Gulf of Mexico, Lili has grown in danger over the past 48 hours since sideswiping Jamaica and clipping Cuba's western tip.

The air pressure in Lili's center — one measure of a storm's ferocity — dropped to 938 millibars by mid-day Wednesday, low enough to place it among the top 20 of the most intense storms on record. Seas near the storm were running 25 feet.

"This is going to be a very, very dangerous hurricane," said Krissy Williams, a meteorologist with the National Hurricane Center in Florida. "This is the type of storm where everybody along the coast definitely needs to evacuate, especially if you are in low-lying areas."

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