

Emotions over Obama's trade agenda roil Senate, delay action

By CHARLES BABINGTON
Associated Press

WASHINGTON — Emotional disagreements over trade erupted in Congress on Wednesday, when a liberal senator delayed a committee's likely endorsement of a top trade priority for President Barack Obama.

The day began with Senate Finance Committee Chairman Orrin Hatch, R-Utah, predicting a "strong bipartisan vote" for "fast track" legislation. The measure would renew presidential authority to present trade deals that Congress can endorse or reject but not amend.

But liberal Sen. Bernie Sanders, I-Vt., a fierce opponent of the trade legislation, invoked a Senate scheduling rule to delay the committee's actions for hours.

"This job-killing trade deal has been negotiated in secret," said Sanders, who made a lengthy Senate speech denouncing the legislation. "It was drafted with input by special interests and corporate lobbyists, but not from the elected representatives of the American people."

Hatch rejected the claims, saying fast track and other trade proposals have been carefully negotiated and will undergo long public scrutiny.

"We need to be doing all we can tear down barriers to American exports while, at the same time, creating enforceable rules for our trading partners so we can be sure that American workers and job creators are competing on a level playing field," Hatch said.

He said the committee would work late into the night if necessary to address many proposed amendments. The committee resumed its meeting in the late afternoon.

The Hatch-Sanders dispute is one of many emerging as Congress turns to trade proposals bitterly opposed by labor unions and others who say trade pacts hurt U.S. jobs.

Obama says his Democratic opponents have their facts wrong. He wants fast-track powers to help push free-trade proposals such as the 12-nation Trans-Pacific Partnership.

"I would not be doing this trade deal if I did not think it was good for the middle class," Obama said in an interview Tuesday with MSNBC. "When you hear folks make a lot of suggestions about how bad this trade deal is, when you dig into the facts, they are wrong."



AP Photo/Shizuo Kambayashi
People walk in front of a container ship docked at a container terminal in Tokyo on Wednesday.

Several top Democrats aren't backing down, however. Senate Minority Leader Harry Reid of Nevada told reporters, "I'm not only no, I'm hell no" on Obama's bid for fast-track authority.

Few issues divide Democrats more than trade. Obama, like former President Bill Clinton, supports free trade, but many Democratic lawmakers do not.

Clinton's and Obama's stands — and liberal groups' opposition — pose a dilemma for Hillary Rodham Clinton, the former first lady now seeking the presidency herself. Campaigning Tuesday in New Hampshire, she declined to say whether she supports the Pacific-rim proposal.

"We need to build things, too," Clinton said, taking a pro-manufacturing stance generally embraced by both parties. "We have to do our part in making sure we have the capabilities and skills to be competitive," she said, while getting back to "a much more focused effort, in my opinion, to try to produce those capacities here at home."

Senate Finance Committee member Chuck Schumer, D-N.Y., says the administration must press China to stop manipulating its currency, even though China isn't a party to the Pacific-rim negotiations.

If a nation keeps its currency value artificially low, it can boost exports by making local products more affordable to foreigners. Economists disagree on whether China still engages in the

practice, and the Obama administration says it addresses currency manipulation in the fast-track bill.

The Senate committee added Schumer's anti-currency manipulation amendment to a customs bill Wednesday, despite administration objections. But Schumer's staff said he would not try to add it to the fast-track bill, which would be more problematic for Obama.

Republicans generally support trade pacts. But Obama can't count on them alone to push the fiercely debated bills through the GOP-controlled House and Senate.

"He has to bring Democrats," Rep. Paul Ryan, the Wisconsin Republican who heads the House Ways and Means Committee, said Wednesday.

Most or all Senate Finance Committee Republicans support fast track. Democratic supporters include Sens. Ron Wyden of Oregon, Maria Cantwell of Washington, Tom Carper of Delaware and Mark Warner of Virginia.

Committee passage would move the bill to the full Senate.

In the House, the Ways and Means Committee was scheduled to debate the fast-track legislation Thursday. The panel's top Democrat, Rep. Sander Levin of Michigan, is offering an alternative bill that would make greater demands on trading partners on issues including workers' conditions and currency policies.

House Democratic leader Nancy Pelosi endorsed Levin's bill.



AP Photo/Doug Pizac, File
In this Jan. 17, 1994 file photo, the covered body of Los Angeles Police Officer Clarence Wayne Dean, 46, lies near his motorcycle which plunged off the State Highway 14 overpass that collapsed onto Interstate 5, after a magnitude-6.7 Northridge earthquake.

Over 143 million Americans live in quake-prone areas

By ALICIA CHANG
AP Science Writer

LOS ANGELES — More than 143 million people in the Lower 48 states now live on shaky ground, earthquake scientists say.

That's because more people have moved into the quake-prone West Coast and some quake zones were recently expanded, according to researchers from the U.S. Geological Survey.

The research didn't include Alaska, Hawaii and Puerto Rico, but scientists using older data estimated that nearly half of Americans — or 150 million people — live in earthquake regions.

About 28 million people face the highest threat, mostly along the West Coast where the San Andrea Fault cuts through California and a huge undersea fault lurks off the Pacific Northwest.

The latest calculations by the USGS, Federal Emergency Management Agency and California Geological Survey were reported Wednesday at a Seismological Society of America meeting in Pasadena.

There have been a few previous attempts to figure out how many people live in quake-prone areas. A federal estimate two decades ago found that 75 million people in 39 states were at risk of shaking.

The USGS last year updated its national earthquake maps that increased the quake danger for one-third of the country. While the Pacific coast remains a seismic hotspot, other regions as the Rockies, Midwest, New England and parts of the Southeast also face an elevated risk.

"The distribution of earthquake risk is much broader and wider beyond the West Coast," lead researcher and USGS contractor Kishor Jaiswal said in an email.

The new work focused on the Lower 48 states because scientists don't yet have updated maps for the whole country. Researchers didn't take into account regions where small earthquakes have been caused by oil and gas drilling. If those were included, the number of people exposed to shaking would be higher, Jaiswal said.

The team also calculated potential economic losses from damaged buildings such as homes, hospitals, schools and fire stations. The average loss amounted to \$4.5 billion with the greatest financial hit to California, Oregon and Washington.

"We've always been told that we should be prepared. But this study puts some teeth into the recommendation," said USGS seismologist Sue Hough who had no connection to the research.

Government scientists have been testing a West Coast seismic alert system designed to detect the initial shock waves from a large jolt, calculate the strength and give a few seconds of warning before the arrival of slower, damaging waves.

Supporters say an early warning system would allow trains to stop, companies to shut off gas lines and people to duck under a table until the shaking stops. Only select scientists and companies currently receive the alerts.

U.S. Geological Survey: <http://earthquake.usgs.gov/hazards/>

Seismological Society: <http://www.seismosoc.org/>

BRIEFLY

New airstrikes in Yemen after Saudis say operation over

SANAA, Yemen (AP) — Hours after Saudi Arabia declared an end to its coalition's nearly monthlong air campaign in Yemen, new airstrikes Wednesday hit Iran-backed militants and their allies in two cities, and the rebels said they would welcome U.N.-led peace talks in the conflict that has killed more than 900 people.

The continued airstrikes suggested that the U.S.-backed offensive, aimed at restoring Yemen's internationally recognized president, was entering a new phase in which the Saudi-led military action will be scaled back but not halted completely.

Air raids struck positions held by the rebels, known as Houthis, and their allies in the southern port of Aden and the central city of Taiz, Yemeni officials said. Fighting continued in both areas between the rebels and supporters of exiled President Abed Rabbo Mansour Hadi, a close U.S. ally who fled Yemen on March 25.

The capital of Sanaa was calm, however, giving residents their most peaceful night in almost four weeks. In the evening, thousands of pro-Houthi demonstrators marched and vowed they would never submit to what they described as "Saudi-American aggression."

The Shiite rebels are backed by former President Ali Abdullah Saleh, an autocrat who ruled the impoverished but strategic country for three decades until he was removed amid a 2011 Arab Spring uprising. His military forces have aided the rebels who advanced from the north and control much of Yemen, including Sanaa.

Saudi Arabia and a coalition of its Gulf allies

began the air campaign March 26, aimed at crushing the Houthis and allied military units loyal to Saleh. The Saudis believe the rebels are tools for Iran to take control of Yemen. Iran has provided political and humanitarian support to the Houthis, but both Tehran and the rebels deny it has armed them.

Anti-human trafficking bill passes Senate

WASHINGTON (AP) — The Senate unanimously passed legislation Wednesday to help the victims of human trafficking, ending a tortuous partisan standoff over abortion that also delayed confirmation of President Barack Obama's attorney general nominee.

The vote was 99-0 to approve the Justice for Victims of Trafficking Act, which expands law enforcement tools to target sex traffickers and creates a new fund to help victims. The House has passed similar legislation and the White House has voiced support.

The unanimous outcome put a bipartisan punctuation mark on legislation that started out with wide support from both parties, but veered into a partisan cul-de-sac last month when Democrats said they'd noticed language that could expand federal prohibitions on abortion funding. How or why Democrats had failed to see the provision in the first place became a topic of frosty dispute on Capitol Hill, with Republicans pointing out that the bill had unanimously passed committee, and one Democratic senator's office acknowledging that an aide had in fact known of the abortion language.

At the same time, Attorney General-designate Loretta Lynch languished despite

commanding enough votes to be confirmed, because Republican leaders made the decision, never fully explained, to delay her confirmation vote until the trafficking bill was completed. Now that it is, Lynch will get a vote Thursday to replace Eric Holder and become the nation's first black female

attorney general. The partisan gridlock on the trafficking bill and Lynch made no one look good, and with all sides eager for a resolution Cornyn worked with Sens. Patty Murray, D-Wash., and Democratic Leader Harry Reid of Nevada to compromise, which they announced Tuesday.

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