

House passes bill to end bulk collection of U.S. phone records

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WASHINGTON — The House voted by a wide margin Wednesday to end the National Security Agency’s bulk collection of Americans’ phone records and replace it with a system to search the data held by telephone companies on a case-by-case basis.

The 338-to-88 vote set the stage for a Senate showdown just weeks before the Patriot Act provisions authorizing the program are due to expire.

If the House bill becomes law, it will represent one of the most significant changes stemming from the unauthorized disclosures of former NSA contractor Edward Snowden. But many Senate Republicans don’t like the measure, and Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell has introduced a separate version that would keep the program as is. Yet, he also faces opposition from within his party and has said he is open to compromise.

President Barack Obama supports the House legislation, known as the USA Freedom Act, which is in line with a proposal he made last March. The House passed a similar bill last year, but it failed in the Senate.

Most House members would rather see the Patriot Act provisions expire altogether than re-authorize NSA bulk collection, said Rep. Adam Schiff, ranking Democrat on the intelligence committee. “I think the Senate is ultimately going to pass something like the USA Freedom Act,” he said.

The issue, which exploded into public view two years ago, has implications for the 2016 presidential contest, with Republican candidates staking out different positions.

The revelation that the NSA had for years been secretly collecting all records of U.S. landline phone calls was among the most controversial disclosures by Snowden, a former NSA systems administrator who

in 2013 leaked thousands of secret documents to journalists.

The program collects the number called, along with the date, time and duration of call, but not the content or people’s names. It stores the information in an NSA database that a small number of analysts query for matches against the phone numbers of known terrorists abroad, hunting for domestic connections to plots.

Officials acknowledge the program has never foiled a terrorist attack, and some within the NSA had proposed abandoning it even before it leaked — on the grounds that its financial and privacy costs outweighed its counterterrorism benefits.

Proponents of keeping the program the way it is argue that the rise of the Islamic State group and its efforts to inspire Westerners to attack in their own countries make it more important than ever for the NSA and FBI to have such phone records at their disposal to map potential terrorist cells when new information surfaces. And they say there is no evidence the program has ever been misused.

Under the House measure, the NSA would no longer collect and store the records, but the government still could obtain a court order to obtain data connected to a specific number from the phone companies, which typically store them for 18 months.

If the legislation is enacted, “Americans will now rest easy knowing that their calls and other records will not be warehoused by the government, no matter how careful the government is in their procedures to access those files,” said Rep. Jim Himes, a Connecticut Democrat on the intelligence committee.

The House measure also provides for a panel of experts to advocate for privacy and civil liberties before the secret intelligence court that oversees surveillance programs. And it allows the government to continue eaves-

dropping on foreign terrorists without a warrant for 72 hours after they enter the U.S., giving authorities time to obtain such a warrant.

The Senate will have a short window to act before Patriot Act provisions authorizing the phone records program and other counterterrorism-related measures expire June 1. If McConnell’s bill passes to reauthorize the law with no changes, that would be seen as a crushing defeat for surveillance opponents.

On Tuesday, NSA Director Admiral Mike Rogers and FBI Director Jim Comey briefed senators on the program. Afterward, Sen. Bob Corker of Tennessee told reporters the NSA was not collecting all the data it should be. He declined to be specific, saying the briefing was classified, but he appeared to be addressing the fact that the collection does not include most mobile calls in an era when many people have stopped using landlines.

“The way it’s being implemented today, I don’t see how it’s ... useful at all to the American people,” said Corker, who wants to reauthorize the current law. “And I’m shocked, shocked ... by the small amount of data that is even part of the program. It needs to be ramped up.”

U.S. officials have confirmed the mobile records gap, saying it stemmed from technical and policy issues that ultimately would have been addressed absent the Snowden leak. Under the House’s USA Freedom Act, they said, the NSA would expand its queries to include mobile records, creating a potentially more effective program. But they have expressed concerns about working out an arrangement with phone providers to standardize the data so the information can quickly be searched.

Those officials, not authorized to comment publicly by name, spoke only on condition of anonymity.

BRIEFLY

UN: After 2nd quake, many in Nepal cut off by blocked roads

KATHMANDU, Nepal (AP) — Many survivors of Nepal’s most recent earthquake remain cut off by blocked roads in isolated villages, a U.N. official said Wednesday, after this Himalayan nation suffered through its second major quake in less than three weeks.

The magnitude-7.3 earthquake shook the impoverished country Tuesday, killing at least 79 people and injuring more than 2,300, just as it was beginning to rebuild from a devastating April 25 earthquake.

The most recent quake hit hardest in deeply rural parts of the Himalayan foothills, hammering many villages reached only by hiking trails and causing road-blocking landslides.

“Damaged houses were further damaged or destroyed. Houses and schools building spared before were affected yesterday, roads were damaged,” said Jamie McGoldrick, a top U.N. official in Nepal.

Among 14 quake-hit districts, some are barely accessible, and a large part of the affected population could not be reached easily because of damaged roads.

On Wednesday, officials with bullhorns walked through the worst-damaged streets of Chautara, a small town northeast of Kathmandu, calling for people to leave buildings in danger of collapsing after Tuesday’s quake.

“There is danger!” they said over the bullhorns. “Leave the buildings!”

Most people, though, had fled into the open the day before and had spent the night in tents or under plastic tarps.

Yemen’s truce barely holds as violence resumes

SANAA, Yemen (AP) — Yemen’s humanitarian cease-fire came under significant strain in its first 24 hours Wednesday, disrupted by a Saudi-led coalition airstrike, fighting between rival sides in a strategic province and shelling by coalition warships west of the port city of Aden.

The airstrike in Abyan province was in response to an attempt by the Shiite rebels, known as Houthis, to send a military convoy to reinforce their forces in Aden, according to Yemeni security officials. There were no immediate reports of casualties or damage from the airstrike.

The heaviest violence on the ground was in the southwestern province of Taiz, where the Iranian-backed rebels and their allies — forces loyal to ousted President Ali Abdullah Saleh — have for weeks been fighting forces loyal to the nation’s internationally recognized president.

Yemeni officials said the Houthis shelled residential areas in Taiz, a claim supported by an Amnesty International report. The London-based rights group said Wednesday that evidence suggested the Houthis have carried out indiscriminate mortar attacks on civilians and repeatedly targeted medical workers and facilities in Aden.

Lawyers give closing arguments in marathon bomber’s trial

BOSTON (AP) — Prosecutors and defense attorneys on Wednesday made their final appeals to the jury that will decide the fate of Dzhokhar Tsarnaev as jurors began deliberating whether the Boston Marathon bomber should get life in prison or the death penalty.

Jurors got the case late in the day and deliberated for about 45 minutes before going home. They will return to the federal courthouse Thursday to resume their work.

The jury must be unanimous in its decision to impose the death penalty. If even a single member votes against death, Tsarnaev will get life in prison.

Prosecutor Steve Mellin said Tsarnaev wanted to cause his victims as much physical pain as possible to make a political statement.

Defense attorney Judy Clarke asked jurors to spare Tsarnaev’s life, saying her client “is not the worst of the worst, and that’s what the death penalty is reserved for.”

Three people were killed and more than 260 injured when two bombs exploded near the marathon’s finish line on April 15, 2013.

Tsarnaev, 21, was convicted by a federal jury last month of all 30 counts against him, including use of a weapon of mass destruction. The same jury must now decide his punishment.

Vatican recognizes state of Palestine in new treaty

VATICAN CITY (AP) — The Vatican officially recognized the state of Palestine in a new treaty finalized Wednesday, immediately sparking Israeli ire and accusations that the move hurt peace prospects.

The treaty, which concerns the activities of the Catholic Church in Palestinian territory, is both deeply symbolic and makes explicit that the Holy See has switched its diplomatic recognition to the state of Palestine.

The Vatican had welcomed the decision by the U.N. General Assembly in 2012 to recognize a Palestinian state and had referred to the Palestine state since.

But the treaty is the first legal document negotiated between the Holy See and the Palestinian state.

Train in deadly wreck was going 106 mph

Associated Press

PHILADELPHIA — The Amtrak train that crashed in Philadelphia, killing at least seven people, was hurtling at 106 mph before it ran off the rails along a sharp curve where the speed limit drops to just 50 mph, federal investigators said Wednesday.

The engineer applied the emergency brakes moments before the crash but managed to slow the train to only 102 mph by the time the locomotive’s black box stopped recording data, said Robert Sumwalt of the National Transportation Safety Board. The speed limit just before the bend is 80 mph, he said.

The engineer, whose name was not released, refused to give a statement to law enforcement and left a police precinct with a lawyer, police said. Sumwalt said federal accident investigators want to talk to him but will give him a day or two to recover from the shock of the accident.

“There’s no way in the world that he should have been going that fast into the curve,” Mayor Michael Nutter told CNN. “Clearly he was reckless and irresponsible in his actions. I don’t know what was going on with him, I don’t know what was going on in the cab, but there’s really no excuse that could be offered.”

More than 200 people aboard the Washington-to-New York train were injured in the wreck, which happened in a decayed industrial neighborhood not far from the Delaware River just before 9:30 p.m. Tuesday. Passengers crawled out the windows of the torn and toppled rail cars in the darkness and emerged dazed and bloody, many of them with broken bones and burns.

It was the nation’s deadliest train accident in nearly seven years.

“We are heartbroken by what has happened here,” Nutter said.

Amtrak suspended all service until further notice along the Philadelphia-to-New York stretch of the nation’s busiest rail corridor as investigators examined the wreckage and the tracks and gathered up other evidence. The shutdown snarled the commute and forced thousands to find some other way to reach their destination.

The dead included an Associated Press employee, a midshipman at the U.S. Naval Academy and a Wells Fargo executive. At least 10 people remained hospitalized in critical condition.

Nutter said some people remained unaccounted for but cautioned that some passengers listed on the Amtrak manifest might not have boarded the train, while others might not have checked in with authorities.

“We will not cease our efforts until we go through every vehicle,” the mayor said in the afternoon. He said rescuers expanded the search area and were using dogs in case someone was thrown from the wreckage.

The NTSB finding about the train’s speed corroborated an AP analysis done earlier in the day of surveillance video from a spot along the tracks. The AP concluded from the footage that the



AP Photo/Patrick Semansky

In this aerial photo, emergency personnel work at the scene of a passenger train wreck in Philadelphia on Wednesday. Federal investigators arrived to determine why an Amtrak train jumped the tracks in Tuesday night’s fatal accident.

“There’s no way in the world he should have been going that fast into the curve.”

— **Michael Nutter**, Mayor of Philadelphia

train was speeding at approximately 107 mph moments before it entered the curve.

Despite pressure from Congress and safety regulators, Amtrak had not installed along that section of track Positive Train Control, a technology that uses GPS, wireless radio and computers to prevent trains from going over the speed limit. Most of Amtrak’s Northeast Corridor is equipped with Positive Train Control.

“Based on what we know right now, we feel that had such a system been installed in this section of track, this accident would not have occurred,” Sumwalt said.

The tight curve is not far from the site of one of the deadliest train wrecks in U.S. history: the 1943 derailment of the Congressional Limited. Seventy-nine people were killed.

Amtrak inspected the stretch of track on Tuesday, just hours before the accident, and found no defects, according to the Federal Railroad Administration. In addition to the data recorder, the train had a video camera in its front end that could yield clues to what happened, Sumwalt said.

As for the engineer, Sumwalt said: “This person has gone through a very traumatic event and we want to give him an opportunity to convalesce for a day or so before we interview him. But that is certainly a high priority for us, to interview the train crew.”

The crash took place about 10 minutes after the train pulled out of Philadelphia’s 30th Street Station with 238 passengers and five crew members listed aboard. The locomotive and all seven passenger cars hurtled off the

House GOP approves cuts to Amtrak budget

WASHINGTON (AP) — A Republican-controlled House panel on Wednesday approved deep spending cuts to Amtrak’s budget just hours after a deadly crash in Philadelphia.

The Appropriations Committee backed a \$55 billion transportation and housing measure after rejecting Democratic attempts to boost spending on Amtrak by more than \$1 billion, including \$556 million targeted for the railroad’s Northeast corridor, site of the derailment. The vote was 30-21 along party lines.

The GOP bill would cut Amtrak’s budget by \$251 million, to \$1.1 billion, for the upcoming fiscal year.

President Barack Obama asked for almost \$2.5 billion for Amtrak in his February budget, much more than he’d requested in previous years. Obama’s proposed boost is mostly dedicated to capital investment in track, tunnels and bridges and includes \$400 million in grants for capital construction.

The vote came as Congress stares down a deadline in 18 days to reauthorize legislation to pay for highways and transit programs.

track as the train made a left turn.,

Jillian Jorgensen, 27, was seated in the second passenger car and said the train was going “fast enough for me to be worried” when it began to lurch to the right. She said she “flew across the train” and landed under some seats that had broken loose from the floor.

Jorgensen said she wriggled free as fellow passengers screamed. She saw one man lying still, his face covered in blood, and a woman with a broken leg.

She climbed out an emergency exit window, and a firefighter helped her down a ladder to safety.