

Congress OKs bill banning Guantanamo detainees from U.S.

Both Sens. Merkley, Wyden vote against bill

Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Congress sent President Barack Obama a \$607 billion defense policy bill that he is expected to sign even though he adamantly opposes its ban on moving some Guantanamo Bay detainees to U.S. prisons.

The Senate overwhelmingly approved the bill, 91-3, on Tuesday just days after the House passed the bipartisan measure, 370-58. The legislation authorizes Pentagon spending on military personnel, ships, aircraft and other war-fighting equipment.

Three senators — Jeff Merkley and Ron Wyden, both Democrats from Oregon, and Bernie Sanders, an independent from Vermont — voted against the defense bill.

The president plans to send Congress a blueprint for fulfilling his campaign pledge to close the U.S. prison in Cuba. But the plan is widely expected to be dead on arrival in Capitol Hill, with Republicans and some Democrats opposed to any move to detain some of the terror subjects on U.S. soil.

The congressional decision to retain a ban on transferring detainees to the U.S. has prompted debate on whether the president will try to bypass Congress and close the prison through executive action. “We know he’s contemplating it,” said Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell, R-Ky.

White House press secretary Josh Earnest said Obama would sign the bill because it includes provisions critical to protecting the United States. But he said the president’s signature does not change his position about the need to close the prison.

To do so, however, Obama would have to ignore the will of Congress.

Sen. Kelly Ayotte, R-N.H., said if Obama issued an executive order on Guantanamo it “clearly would violate the law.”

“This is not something the American people want to see happen with Guantanamo, and so the president needs to follow the law and the law is very clear on this,” she said.

The bill imposes restrictions on transferring any of the 112 remaining detainees to the United States or a foreign country. Loudest in congressional opposition have been the Republican senators from Colorado, Kansas and South Carolina — three states which have facilities reviewed by a Pentagon assessment team.

Pentagon press secretary Peter Cook said, “Let’s wait to see what the plan finally looks like. The folks who are crafting that plan have been working very hard on this for months. ... This is not going to deter the department from moving forward.”

The Senate also passed legislation by 93-0 that provides money to the Defense Department for military construction, military family housing, base closures and the Department of Veterans Affairs. Like the defense bill, the measure prohibits the admin-

istration from renovating, expanding or constructing facilities in the United States to house detainees from Guantanamo Bay.

The facilities reviewed by a Pentagon assessment team were the U.S. Disciplinary Barracks and Midwest Joint Regional Corrections Facility at Leavenworth, Kansas; the Consolidated Naval Brig, Charleston, South Carolina; the Federal Correctional Complex, which includes the medium, maximum and supermax facilities in Florence, Colorado; and the Colorado State Penitentiary II in Canon City, Colorado, also known as the Centennial Correctional Facility.

Obama vetoed an earlier version of the defense policy bill over a dispute, later resolved, about whether defense spending increases should be accompanied by boosts in domestic programs.

Among other things, the revised bill:

- Provides a 1.3 percent pay increase to service members and a new retirement option for troops.

- Authorizes \$300 million for Ukraine forces fighting Russian-backed rebels, including \$50 million for lethal assistance and counter-artillery radars.

- Extends a ban on torture to the CIA.

- Authorizes the president’s request of \$715 million to help Iraqi forces fight Islamic State militants.

- Identifies \$11 billion in unnecessary spending and reinvests it in fighter aircraft, shipbuilding and strengthening cyber defense.

- Authorizes \$3.8 billion for the Afghan national security forces.

VETERANS: 4,200 homeless in Los Angeles

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number of employees disciplined.

The VA’s reputation suffered another blow earlier this month after two high-ranking officials refused to testify at a congressional hearing on allegations that they manipulated the agency’s hiring system for their own gain. Investigators say they forced lower-ranking regional managers to accept job transfers against their will and then stepped into those vacant positions, keeping their pay while reducing their responsibilities.

Veterans groups have always viewed the twin goals of ending homelessness and the disability claim backlog with a healthy dose of reality. They’re generally encouraged by the trend lines.

“If you don’t meet your goals, it doesn’t necessarily mean failure,” said Joe Davis, a spokesman at Veterans of Foreign Wars. “You have to think big if you’re going to do big.”

The VA has been focused on getting the homeless into housing immediately and paying for it with a voucher that subsidizes most or all of the rent. The VA then works to provide the veterans with counseling, health care and other benefits.

In August, Connecticut became the first state to announce it had ended chronic homelessness among veterans. Officials said that means any veterans who had been homeless for more than a year or had four separate bouts of homelessness in recent years were either in permanent housing or on an immediate path to it. New Orleans, Houston and a few others have also made such declarations.

McDonald said last week that the end of the year was still the goal for ending veteran homelessness. The survey verifying that outcome won’t take place until January and takes almost a year to tabulate. McDonald said his focus is now on Los Angeles with an estimated 4,200 homeless veterans.

Earlier this year, the VA agreed to settle a lawsuit that requires it to develop a long-term master plan for turning a sprawling West Los Angeles VA campus into housing for homeless vets.

“For some ways for me, the clock didn’t start until we got that lawsuit settled,

“If you don’t meet your goals, it doesn’t necessarily mean failure. You have to think big if you’re going to do big.”

— Joe Davis, spokesman at Veterans of Foreign Wars

and we’re making a lot of good progress out there,” said McDonald, who was confirmed in July 2014.

Rep. Jeff Miller, the Republican chairman of the House Committee on Veterans’ Affairs, has been critical of the VA’s goal-setting strategy, which was driven by former Secretary Eric Shinseki’s belief that big goals were necessary to drive big changes.

The committee’s staff estimates that the VA’s spending on homelessness jumped from about \$376 million in 2009 to about \$1.5 billion last year.

“The fact that VA increases in spending on homeless initiatives are growing every year and far outpacing reductions in veteran homelessness calls into question the efficacy of VA’s efforts,” Miller said.

Progress on the disability claims backlog has been much more of a roller coaster. The backlog exploded in 2010 after the VA expanded the list of illnesses presumed to have been caused by Agent Orange.

That decision pumped about 260,000 claims into the system. The overall bottleneck grew exponentially when combined with other factors, such as the latest generation of veterans from Iraq and Afghanistan returning from war.

In March 2013, with the backlog peaking and a political crisis in full bloom, the VA ordered more than 10,000 workers to put in at least 20 hours of overtime each month.

McDonald said the agency completed 1.4 million claims this past fiscal year, the most in its history.

The budget for the VA has consistently increased in recent years. On Tuesday, the Senate passed a measure that contains funding to hire 770 additional VA claims processors to ease the claims backlog.

Associated Press writer Matthew Daly contributed to this report.

Republican candidates jab again in another debate

MILWAUKEE (AP) — Republicans Jeb Bush and Ben Carson sought to steady their presidential campaigns in Tuesday night’s GOP debate, with Bush taking advantage of a policy-focused contest to detail positions on the economy and immigration while Carson swatted away mounting questions about the veracity of his celebrated biography.

“I have no problem with being vetted,” said Carson, a quiet-spoken retired neurosurgeon. “What I do have a problem with is being lied about.”

The debate, the last for the GOP until mid-December, could help shape the course of the campaign into the winter as voters begin to pay more attention to the White House race. After a furor over moderators’ aggressive tone in the last debate, Tuesday’s hosts from Fox Business News allowed the eight candidates to deliver lengthy, uninterrupted answers and avoided attempts to get them to



Republican presidential candidates take the stage before the Republican presidential debate at the Milwaukee Theatre on Tuesday.

engage with one another. Bush entered the debate in a precarious position, desperate to ease the anxiety of donors and other supporters.

While it’s unclear if his competent performance Tuesday night will be enough to reset his campaign, he highlighted his fluency on domestic policy issues and described himself as best prepared to take on Democratic front-runner Hillary Rodham Clinton in a

general election.

In one of the night’s notable exchanges, Bush stood by his call for allowing some people living in the U.S. illegally to find a path to legal status, criticizing billionaire Donald Trump’s call for mass deportations as an impractical plan that would hand Democrats a talking point as they seek to appeal to Hispanic voters.

“They’re doing high fives in the Clinton campaign when they’re hearing this,”

said Bush, the former Florida governor.

Bush avoided tangling with fellow Floridian Marco Rubio, a shift in strategy after his poor performance in the last debate. Rubio had another strong performance, sticking to his strategy of weaving his own compelling personal story into his policy discussions and taking an aggressive stance on foreign policy.

Still, Rubio faced criticism from some rivals, most notably Kentucky Sen. Rand Paul, about whether he’s a true conservative given his calls for a child tax care credit and increased military spending.

Texas Sen. Ted Cruz repeatedly played the populist. He railed against the “Washington cartel,” big government and even big banks.

But in moment reminiscent of a former Texas Gov. Rick Perry’s “oops” debate debacle, Cruz blanked when it came to naming the five departments he would eliminate.

BRIEFLY

Jimmy Carter says doctors find no new cancer growth

ATLANTA (AP) — Doctors have found Jimmy Carter is responding well to treatment for cancer and report no evidence of new tumors, according to a statement released by the former U.S. president’s spokeswoman on Tuesday.

Doctors at Emory University’s Winship Cancer Institute told Carter “that recent tests have shown there is no evidence of new malignancy, and his original problem is responding well to treatment,” spokeswoman Deanna Congileo said in the statement.

Carter, 91, revealed in August that doctors had removed melanoma from his liver and discovered four small tumors on his brain. He received a radiation treatment targeted at those tumors and four doses of Keytruda, a newly approved drug to help his immune system seek out cancer cells appearing anywhere else.

Man convicted in Jewish site killings sentenced to death

OLATHE, Kan. (AP) — A judge followed a jury’s recommendation and sentenced an avowed anti-Semite to death Tuesday for the fatal shootings of three people at Kansas Jewish sites.

Johnson County District Judge Thomas Kelly Ryan imposed the sentence for

Frazier Glenn Miller Jr., who was convicted of one count of capital murder, three counts of attempted murder, and assault and weapons charges for the April 2014 shootings in suburban Kansas City. The same jury that convicted him in August recommended that Miller be sentenced to death.


“Your attempt to bring hate to this community, to bring terror to this community, has failed,” Ryan said sternly before sentencing Miller to die by lethal injection. “You have failed, Mr. Miller.”

Upon Ryan’s announcement, Miller yelled “Heil Hitler” and was removed from the courtroom.

Miller said he shot his victims because he wanted to kill Jewish people before he dies. He suffers from chronic emphysema and has said he doesn’t have long to live. A doctor testified during trial that Miller is ill and likely has years to live.

Thirteen people addressed the court Tuesday afternoon either in person or through written statements, including family members of victims.

After the victim statements, Miller became defiant and spent nearly an hour talking about how Jewish people were running the government, media and Federal Reserve. Family members and supporters of the victims walked out of the courtroom as he spoke. He said his conscience forced him to do what he did, and he would attack more people if he ever got out of prison.



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