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CQ Today

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House and Senate Democratic leaders said Thursday that despite the lack of floor action so far on any of the 12 annual appropriations bills, they still plan to pass the fiscal 2009 bill funding the Pentagon before the current fiscal year ends Sept. 30.

"I know the Defense bill, appropriations bill, will be passed," House Speaker Nancy Pelosi, D-Calif., said at a news conference. "That is our responsibility, and we will do that."

Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid, D-Nev., said the Senate wants the Defense spending bill done as well. But floor action in both chambers may not come until September, when Congress returns from the August recess.

Despite questions in both chambers about timing, details about the draft House bill have begun to emerge.

The House subcommittee will recommend that Congress give more money to soldiers who have been held beyond their commitments, will try to press the Pentagon to speed up its tanker competition and will try once again to change the president's war policies, especially with regard to detainees held at Guantánamo Bay.

Left to be answered is whether the final Defense bill will be sent to President Bush as a stand-alone measure or serve as a vehicle for additional spending provisions or even legislation, a continuing resolution (CR), to keep other government agencies funded into early next year, when a new president takes office. The new fiscal year begins Oct. 1.

Democratic leaders have said they plan to keep the government running by passing a CR before Congress leaves for the year in September. Bush is threatening to veto many spending bills and Democrats have no interest in having that fight in the fall.

The White House and the Pentagon badly want the Defense bill enacted before Congress leaves so the department does not have to deal with the planning and accounting problems associated with not having its full budget in place at the start of the fiscal year.

Using the Defense bill as a vehicle for a CR for the rest of the government would make it difficult for congressional Republicans or the White House to object to temporarily funding the government until a new administration assumes power.

The overall appropriations process has been in flux.

House Appropriations Chairman David R. Obey, D-Wis., has halted committee work on all fiscal 2009 spending bills because of veto threats by the president and what he perceives to be a lack of cooperation from Republicans.

And while the Senate Appropriations panel plans to have all 12 of its bills approved by the end of the month, Reid has made it clear he plans to make floor time this year for only the Defense and Military Construction-VA bills.

On Thursday, House Defense Appropriations Subcommittee Chairman John P. Murtha, D-Pa., said that he wasn't sure when his subcommittee would mark up its bill but that Pelosi has told him to get it ready.

"We certainly can't take it to the floor before the August recess, so it makes no difference whether [the markup is] this week or the next week," he said. It may very well not occur until September.

Senate appropriators are nearing a decision on whether to still hold their markup this month. Traditionally, the Senate prefers to follow the House.

The House subcommittee had previously planned to mark up its bill July 16,

and details of that draft have emerged.

The subcommittee has decided to give a monthly salary bonus to soldiers, National Guard members and reservists whose tours overseas have been extended involuntarily by the Army's stop-loss policy.

Murtha said the bonus would be between \$500 and \$1,500 monthly. According to Army figures, as of March there were 12,235 soldiers, guardsmen and reservists affected by the policy.

Based on those figures, the annual cost of Murtha's benefit would be between \$73 million and \$220 million, and the Army has agreed to go along.

Republicans and Democrats have also come to a compromise over language related to shutting down the detention center at the U.S. naval base at Guantánamo Bay, Cuba, several subcommittee members said.

Whereas Democrats wanted to include language directing the Defense Department to close the facility, the bill in its current form would take a softer approach, directing the administration to search for alternative sites to house the detainees, both at home and abroad.

"The language is intended to phase it out, although we should be shutting it down," said appropriator James P. Moran, D-Va., who has long fought to close the prison.

C.W. Bill Young of Florida, the subcommittee's ranking Republican, said the panel is likely to give the Pentagon the \$800 million it has requested for the Air Force's aerial refueling tanker program, even though the \$35 billion contract is being rebid because the Government Accountability Office upheld a protest by the losing contractor, the Boeing Co., against the original contract winner, Northrup Grumman.

Although not finalized, the bill is expected to include some language that would condition the money on a timely execution of the new contract award, but it will not specify how the Pentagon should go about setting up the latest iteration of the tortuous competition.

“We have to be careful we don’t look like we’re trying to be the contracting agency,” Young said.

Subcommittee member Norm Dicks, D-â€Wash., a strong Boeing supporter, said he was waiting for the new competition details before moving forward with more legislative action. The key points are whether the Pentagon will give “extra credit” for more fuel storage capacity and whether the Pentagon will calculate the life cycle costs of the plane based on an estimated 25- or 40-year life expectancy, Dicks said.

Since the smaller Boeing plane carries less fuel than the version proposed by Northrop Grumman, metrics for fuel storage and cost over time could tilt the evaluation significantly.

The subcommittee is also expected to add several war policy provisions to the bill that have been tried before but have been stripped because of the administration’s objections. Among the provisions: mandates that troops be fully trained and equipped before being sent overseas and that they be given rest time at home equal to the length of their deployments.