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9/11 kin support provisions on illegals

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A group of families of September 11 victims yesterday told Congress to scrap the entire intelligence overhaul effort this year and start over next year rather than pass the pending bill, which omits strong immigration security provisions.

"You allowed the murder of my son. I will not allow you to kill my daughters," said Joan Molinaro, mother of a New York City firefighter who died September 11, as she first held up a picture of her son and then a picture of her two daughters. "No bill should pass the Senate, the House, anywhere, unless it contains immigration reform -- you secure our borders, you keep my girls alive."

She and fellow leaders of the 300-member 9/11 Families for a Secure America sought to counter the publicity machine of those who support the bill by running radio commercials praising key House Republicans who blocked the bill from coming up for a vote on Nov. 20. The ads instead blame senators.

As the bill languishes in a conference committee, both sides are ramping up massive public-relations campaigns, with dueling press conferences yesterday and the promise of a busy week of publicity ahead.

Other groups of family members of September 11 victims, who oppose the House Republicans and support the senators, are planning public vigils to demand passage of the senators' preferred bill. Meanwhile, September 11 commission members and others are trying to force President Bush to put more pressure on House Republicans to cave in.

"If we don't have a vote on September 11, it will be my feeling that the president didn't weigh in strong enough," said Rep. Christopher Shays, Connecticut Republican, while commission Vice Chairman Lee H. Hamilton, a former Democratic congressman from Indiana, said this is Mr. Bush's "first test" since the election, and "I don't think the president wants to take a defeat on this bill."

And commission Chairman Thomas H. Kean, former Republican governor of New Jersey, warned that Congress "can't play Russian roulette here" by waiting until next year.

Mr. Kean and Mr. Hamilton met with Vice President Dick Cheney yesterday to try to coordinate their lobbying efforts, and Mr. Bush, in a press conference after meeting with Canadian Prime Minister Paul Martin, again called for the bill's passage.

"I want a bill. Let's see if I can say it as plainly as I can -- I am for the intelligence bill," he said.

Key House Republican negotiators want any final bill to include immigration security measures and protections for the military's ability to gather and use intelligence even under a new director of national intelligence. For now, those lawmakers remain at a stalemate with Senate negotiators, who are refusing to accept the immigration security provisions.

The House will return to session on Monday to address a problem in the pending omnibus spending measure, and if there is a final compromise on the intelligence bill, they also could vote on that, with the Senate then returning soon after to vote as well.

But nothing has happened so far to sway two key House Republican negotiators who have led fellow lawmakers in opposing the bill. Armed Services Committee Chairman Duncan Hunter of California and Judiciary Committee Chairman F. James Sensenbrenner Jr. of Wisconsin remain committed both to including national standards for secure driver's licenses and to preserving the Defense Department's authority even under a new national director of intelligence.

In a further signal that Mr. Sensenbrenner isn't ready to back down, yesterday's press conference by the Families for a Secure America was held in the Judiciary Committee room in the Rayburn House Office Building at the Capitol, which the chairman controls.

The Families for a Secure America said they think they have been shut out by press reports that blame the House rather than the Senate for blocking the bill and that focus on what they said is a minority of victims' families that support the Senate bill.

They said that's the reason for the new radio ads.

They and House Republicans both point to the September 11 commission's report, which calls for a national standard for verifiable driver's licenses. But Mr. Kean told reporters at a breakfast yesterday morning the commission was calling for standards such as biometrics, not a crackdown on whether licenses were being obtained by illegal immigrants.

"This just wasn't in our recommendations. We can't say it was," Mr. Kean said. "Our problem with it is not whether it's right or wrong, but whether because of that one provision, the bill should be held up for six or seven months."

But members of the Families for a Secure America said Mr. Kean wasn't being honest about what his report said.

"Chairman Kean is wrong when he says none of these provisions would have stopped the 19 hijackers. He should read his own report," said Debra Burlingame, whose brother Charles was the pilot of American Airlines flight 77, which hit the Pentagon.

Perhaps one of the most interesting aspects of the publicity chess match is that there are family members of September 11 victims on both sides of the issue.

A group called the Family Steering Committee for the 9/11 Commission is urging passage of the Senate bill without the immigration provisions.

"Just the use of the word 'illegal' aliens takes it beyond terrorism," said Beverly Eckert, a member of the committee. "It is an important issue, but it should be left for another bill where Mr. Sensenbrenner can hold hearings and get the ball rolling in the 109th Congress."

Some of the members of Families for a Secure America said it sounded as if Ms. Eckert and her fellow steering committee members are either "naive beyond description" or have been "blackmailed by the senators."

Peter Gadiel, one of the organizers of the group, said congressional opponents of immigration reform are caving to pressure from pro-illegal immigrant business interests and lobbyists.

"Many of the people in this Congress have been bought -- essentially bought," he said.

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