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White House Seeks Deal to Save Intelligence Bill

By THOM SHANKER
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ASHINGTON, Nov. 23 - The White House held out hope on Tuesday that a compromise could be reached on legislation to overhaul American intelligence, as Defense Secretary Donald H. Rumsfeld, who has been accused of working secretly to scuttle the bill, vowed his support for President Bush's position.

In a Pentagon news conference, Mr. Rumsfeld denied that he had exerted his influence to protect the Defense Department's sweeping budgetary powers over intelligence. But he said that even the administration's views on the legislation could shift as Congressional negotiators sought compromise language to revive the bill.

"Needless to say, I'm a part of this administration," Mr. Rumsfeld said. "I support the president's position."

In Crawford, Tex., a White House spokeswoman said that Mr. Bush's stance remained unchanged but that the administration was working with members of Congress on legislative language that could accommodate the concerns of House Republicans without diluting the essence of the changes the bill would bring about.

"The president's views remain that he believes we should have a strong national intelligence director with full budget authority that also preserves the chain of command," said Claire Buchan, a spokeswoman for Mr. Bush.

White House officials said that there were "ongoing discussions" about the intelligence bill with Congress and that the talks would continue when senior White House officials attended a Republican House and Senate leadership retreat next week at a golf resort on Chesapeake Bay in Virginia.

With the bill stalled, the White House on Tuesday disclosed a series of orders that Mr. Bush signed last week intended to strengthen the nation's intelligence capabilities, including a directive to the Central Intelligence Agency to increase by 50 percent the number of analysts and agents in its clandestine unit and agents proficient in "mission-critical languages."

Standing at Mr. Rumsfeld's side at the Pentagon, Gen. Richard B. Myers, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, did not waver in expressing his opposition to any bill that did not preserve a provision in the House version to continue Pentagon control over intelligence money for gathering information specifically needed by combat commanders in the field.

His concerns, which echoed Congressional testimony last week by the Army, Navy, Air Force and Marine Corps service chiefs, had been solicited by the chairman of the House Armed Services Committee and were offered as part of his required duties as the nation's highest-ranking officer, General Myers said.

"My position on the particular issue is as stated in my letter," he said.

When that position was taken together with Mr. Rumsfeld's earlier public statements cautioning against a rush to reorganize how America's spy agencies collect, analyze and share intelligence, some in Congress saw a coordinated Pentagon effort to scuttle a bill endorsed by Mr. Bush and Vice President Dick Cheney.

Representative Christopher Shays, Republican of Connecticut, has described Mr. Rumsfeld as "blatant" in his opposition to the bill.

Mr. Rumsfeld said his words of caution and even criticism of efforts to create a national intelligence director to control budgets and the flow of intelligence were offered early in the debate. Those statements, he emphasized, were made "well before the president established a complete position on intelligence reform" and before the drafting of any legislation.

The defense secretary took a shot at members of Congress who said he had worked to kill the bill, and he specifically criticized an editorial in The New York Times on Tuesday that said "it seems obvious" that Mr. Rumsfeld lobbied against the legislation.

"The New York Times is wrong," Mr. Rumsfeld said. And any member of Congress who is "saying that I had blatant opposition to the bill is incorrect because the bill didn't exist in the form that it currently is, and the president didn't have a position on the bill at the times that I was briefing him."

Mr. Rumsfeld noted that House-Senate conference work and negotiations on possible compromise language was continuing and said that "the president's position is evolving as the negotiation evolves."

Little movement on the bill was seen on Capitol Hill on Tuesday, with most lawmakers already gone from Washington for the Thanksgiving holiday.

But the House speaker, J. Dennis Hastert of Illinois, and Representative Nancy Pelosi, the Democratic leader, agreed that they would make another push to pass the intelligence legislation when the House returned to Washington on Dec. 6.

The standoff remained between the Senate and the two House Republicans who had led objections to the bill, Representatives F. James Sensenbrenner Jr. of Wisconsin and Duncan Hunter of California.

Mr. Sensenbrenner wants provisions that would prevent illegal immigrants from getting driver's licenses, as some of the Sept. 11 hijackers had done. Mr. Hunter, whose son has served in Iraq, argues that the current bill would endanger troops by interfering with the Pentagon's ability to share intelligence with battlefield commanders.

John Feehery, Mr. Hastert's spokesman, said, "We need to get some movement from Democrats in the Senate."

Mr. Hunter, chairman of the House Armed Services Committee, indicated in a statement released late Tuesday that he saw little room for him to make additional compromises.

"This is not about protecting turf; it is about protecting troops," the statement said. "Yes, everyone supports the troops - but the conference report on intelligence reform, as presently written, needlessly risks the adequate and timely flow of intelligence to our troops."

The bill would adopt major recommendations of the commission that investigated the attacks of Sept. 11, 2001, including the creation of a cabinet-level national intelligence director. Some House Republicans contend that the legislation would dilute Pentagon authority on intelligence issues.

After a year-and-a-half investigation and hearings, the commission recommended in July that there be an intelligence director who would control the budgets of the C.I.A. and the government's other spy agencies, including those within the Pentagon. Legislators set to work immediately to enact the recommendations, but the Senate and House produced sharply different versions of the legislation.

The Senate version granted extensive powers to the intelligence director to create a unified effort and eliminate intelligence turf wars, especially those within the Federal Bureau of Investigation and the C.I.A. The House bill, which gave the intelligence director less authority, drew more support from the military.

Mr. Bush and his aides were ambivalent about the commission, and initially opposed its creation in 2002.

Thom Shanker reported from Washington for this article, and Richard W. Stevenson from Crawford, Tex. Elisabeth Bumiller and Sheryl Gay Stolberg contributed reporting from Washington.