

WASHINGTON, D.C. - Legislation written by Congressman Sam Farr (D-Carmel) designed to improve the nation's civilian response capacity in troubled regions moved closer to passage Wednesday morning. The bill was marked up by the House Foreign Affairs Committee, a crucial step allowing the bill to move to consideration by the full House of Representatives.

The legislation, called the "Reconstruction and Stabilization Civilian Management Act," would authorize the president to provide assistance to stabilize and reconstruct countries facing conflict or civil strife. The bill would also create the Office of the Coordinator for Reconstruction and Stabilization within the State Department; this office would provide civilian management of global stabilization and reconstruction efforts.

"In recent years, our military has been forced to shoulder nation-building duties that they aren't trained for and are ill-equipped to fulfill," said Rep. Farr. "The State Department and USAID, which should be carrying the burden of stabilization and reconstruction activities, are currently incapable of doing so. This bill will create a coordinating office and a Readiness Response Corps trained to assist unstable regions, allowing the military to focus on its core mission."

In his written statement on the bill, Foreign Affairs Committee Chairman Howard Berman (D-Calif.) noted that there are only 6,600 professional Foreign Service officers in the State Department, less than the number of active military band members. He said this inequity must be fixed, suggesting two main goals for the bill:

"In the short-term, the bill will ease the burden on the armed forces by allowing the State Department to deploy civilians in crisis situations previously staffed by the military," Rep. Berman said. "In the long-term, the bill will enable the U.S. government to project 'smart power' in situations that cry for such civilian expertise."

The committee gave its unanimous approval to the bill, which reports it to the full House. The next step for the legislation (H.R. 1084) will be a vote by the full House of Representatives. Democratic leaders are working to ensure a suspension vote, a procedure used for bills that are supported by both parties and expected to pass with overwhelming support. It's possible the bill will reach the House floor in the next few weeks.

A companion bill, introduced by Sens. Joseph Biden (D-Del.) and Richard Lugar (R-Ind.), has also passed out of committee and awaits consideration by the full Senate. If both bills pass their respective chambers, a conference committee will iron out the differences before the bill is sent to the White House. The Bush administration supports the bill, having already requested nearly \$250 million for stabilization and reconstruction activities.

"Among the many lessons we've learned in Afghanistan and Iraq is that the U.S. military is not the right tool for every job," Rep. Farr said. "We've allowed the civilian side of the equation to suffer, and we've paid the price. To win the peace and rebuild countries, we must invest in our civilian agencies and train them for the task."

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