

Senate On Track to Pass Ukraine Aid Bill

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WASHINGTON — The Senate is on track to approve sanctions against Russia and aid for Ukraine after Democrats withdrew a provision that was blocking Congress from issuing a sharp response to President Vladimir Putin's military intervention in Crimea.

A Senate vote was set for Thursday. The House Foreign Affairs Committee has approved its version of the measure, but it was unclear whether a final bill could be sent to President Barack Obama before the end of the week.

Democrats backed down Tuesday and stripped International Monetary Fund reform language from the bill, which had stalled its progress. With tens of thousands of Russian troops massed on Ukraine's eastern border, Senate Democrats decided it was more important to denounce Russia, codify sanctions against Putin's inner circle and support Ukraine rather than push right now for the IMF changes.

Democrats wanted the Ukraine legislation to include provisions to enhance the IMF's lending capacity, but Republicans were opposed. And since more than two weeks have passed since Russia's incursion into Crimea, Democrats decided it was important to move quickly to provide \$1 billion in loan guarantees to Ukraine and sanction Putin's inner circle.

Eight Senate Republicans introduced an amendment to the Senate measure to remove the IMF provisions.

Senate majority leader Harry Reid said he strongly supported IMF reform, but the main thing was to get the aid to Ukraine.

"We have to get IMF reform. But we cannot hold up the other," Reid told reporters Tuesday. "As much as I think a majority of the Senate would like to have gotten that done with IMF in it, it was headed to nowhere in the House."

Senator Robert Menendez, chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, said he too understood that political reality. In a speech on the Senate floor, Menendez said Democrats and Republicans needed to join together to send a message of support to Ukraine and a message of disapproval to Putin.

"We cannot and should not stand for the violations of international norms that were perpetrated on Crimea by Russia. The world is watching and the world's superpower cannot be seen as incapable of rising to Russia's challenge," Menendez said.

As lawmakers debated the issue, assistant majority leader Dick Durbin and Republican Senator John McCain met with Russia's Ambassador to the U.S., Sergei Kislyak, to discuss the ongoing crisis in Ukraine. Durbin and McCain were in Kiev, the capital of Ukraine, last week to meet with Ukrainian leaders about the rapidly deteriorating political and security situation in the country.

"The ambassador repeated the same Russian rationalizations and distortions we have heard since President Putin sent his troops and masked gunmen into Crimea," Durbin said. "We made clear we stood with our allies and the world in condemning this Russian aggression. We stand with Ukraine and all those who seek a democratic future."

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