

Bush must take Cong nod before attacking Iran

Say US lawmakers

AFP, Washington

US lawmakers on Thursday demanded President George W Bush win approval from Congress before using military force against Iran, even as officials again denied that any attacks are in the cards.

Legislation calling on Bush to obtain congressional backing before any military strike against Iran was put to the US House of Representatives as Defence Secretary Robert Gates visited the Middle East seeking to line up support against Tehran.

The resolution proposed by a half dozen Republican and Democratic lawmakers was meant to prevent the United States from becoming embroiled in another intractable war like the one raging in Iraq.

"Congress will not stand by idly - it won't be railroaded into another war that will only make America and the world less safe," Democratic Representative Martin Meehan, a co-author of the bill, said at a news conference Thursday.

Meanwhile, Gates, during a swing through the Gulf aimed in part at rallying Arab allies against Iran, told reporters in Manama that the United States did not want a conflict with Iran, and there were many other courses of action it could take short of force.

"I don't think anyone wants another military conflict in this region," Gates said in the Bahraini capital.

But the US defence secretary also accused Tehran of overplaying its hand on the world stage.

"There clearly is concern about Iranian ambitions, and they certainly expect the United States to play a role in containing those ambitions," he said.

Gates, who travelled to the region for meetings with Saudi King Abdullah Wednesday night and the emir of Qatar, described Iranians

as being "very aggressive" in trying to take advantage of Washington's perceived misfortunes in Iraq.

Officials in Tehran, he said, "believe they have the United States at some disadvantage because of the situation in Iraq."

Meehan pointed to such Bush administration statements -- along with recent US military manoeuvres -- as evidence that an attack on Iran could be in the offing.

"The indications of the initial sabre-rattling are everywhere," the Massachusetts congressman said. "I'm not here to tell you that I trust Iran, but I am here to say that I don't trust the administration," Meehan said.

Bush announced last week that he had ordered a second US air-craft carrier battle group to the Gulf and was to deploy a Patriot antimissile battalion to the region to protect allies against potential Iranian missile strikes.

In a speech on January 10 unveiling his new strategy for Iraq, the US president also vowed to "seek out and destroy" any networks funnelling weapons or fighters from Syria or Iran into Iraq.

Those moves fuelled speculation that a US attack might be imminent, despite the administration's repeated denials.

"There is a growing concern -- justified or not -- that some US officials are contemplating military action against Iran," said US Representative Walter Jones, another sponsor of the bill.

He added that in his view, an invasion of Iran would flout the US Constitution.

"If the president is contemplating committing our blood and treasure in another war, then he and his administration must make the case to Congress and the American people why it would be in the national security interests of the United States to engage militarily in Iran," Jones said.

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