

# Gates Skeptical of Repeal Of 'Don't Ask, Don't Tell'

By ELISABETH BUMILLER

MUSCAT, Oman — Defense Secretary Robert M. Gates cast doubt Monday that the Senate would vote before the end of the year to allow gay men and women to serve openly in the armed forces.

In comments aboard the aircraft carrier Abraham Lincoln in the Arabian Sea, Mr. Gates said he was unsure that there would be a repeal of the 17-year-old "don't ask, don't tell" policy that requires gay or bisexual members of the military to keep their sexual orientation secret or face discharge.

"I'd have to say I'm not particularly optimistic that they're going to get this done," he told sailors aboard the Lincoln, although he added, "I would hope that they would." Mr. Gates's remarks were provided by a pool report from a small group of journalists accompanying him on the ship.

Mr. Gates repeated his concern that if Congress did not act on the legislation, the courts might overturn the policy on their own. His greatest fear, he said, is that "we will be told to implement it without any time for preparation for training."

The House of Representatives has voted to repeal the law, and there appear to be the votes for the Senate to do the same, but it is unclear if there is enough time before the end of the year to advance the measure. President Obama, Mr. Gates and Adm. Mike Mullen, the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, have all called for its repeal.

Mr. Gates spoke aboard the same ship that former President George W. Bush used for his May 2003 speech declaring the end of

major combat operations in Iraq, with the now infamous "Mission Accomplished" banner behind him. The United States did not officially end combat operations until the end of August this year, more than seven years later.

Mr. Gates was aboard the ship to meet with sailors and see in part how the United States fights the air war in Afghanistan. Planes that take off from the ship provide close air support and surveillance for forces on the ground.

On North Korea's recent behavior, including the shelling of a South Korean island and the North's recent disclosure of a new nuclear facility, Mr. Gates told the sailors that it was part of a succession drama as the North Korean leader, Kim Jong-il, prepared for his son to take his place.

"These all seem to be designed to show that the son is tough and strong," Mr. Gates said. "And the message is to the elites in North Korea, especially the military, that he is strong enough to take leadership."

Mr. Gates said that it was a "difficult and potentially dangerous time," then added: "The North Koreans have engaged in some very provocative actions. They get everyone upset, then they volunteer to come back to talks, and we basically end up buying the same horse twice."

Echoing a call throughout the Obama administration for help from China on dealing with North Korea, Mr. Gates said, "I think we just have to work with the Chinese and with others to see if we can't bring some greater stability, some greater predictability to the regime in Pyongyang."