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Senate panel delays Africa AIDS bill

Republicans want focus on abstinence, not condoms ✓

By Amy Fagan
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The Senate Foreign Relations Committee yesterday delayed plans to consider a bill that would finance efforts to prevent and treat AIDS worldwide because top Republicans and the White House say it does not adequately promote abstinence over condom use.

A committee vote on the legislation scheduled for today was canceled to allow consideration of additional ideas from the White House, the Senate majority leader and others, said Sen. Richard G. Lugar, Indiana Republican and chairman of the Foreign Relations Committee.

Sen. Sam Brownback, Kansas Republican and committee member, said the bill needs to emphasize abstinence and monogamy, and is not modeled after Uganda's successful "Abstinence, Be Faithful, or use Condoms" (ABC) campaign, as desired by President Bush and other Republicans.

"They do mention abstinence, but that doesn't mean it's a priority," said a House Republican aide involved in the issue. "There's nothing in the Lugar bill that would change our current policy."

Mr. Lugar, who crafted the bill, said late yesterday he wasn't going to discuss the provisions because they were still being worked on.

"There are still some issues that are concerns to the White House and various Republican senators, including Senator [Bill] Frist," said Bob Stevenson, spokesman for Mr. Frist, Tennessee Republican. "These are being worked on, and the senator remains

optimistic that the committee will produce a bill in the near future that enjoys broad support."

Mr. Bush has asked Congress for \$15 billion over the next five years to fight AIDS in Africa and the Caribbean. A House AIDS bill is set for markup today in the International Relations Committee. It is sponsored by Rep. Henry J. Hyde, Illinois Republican and committee chairman.

While condom distribution and "safe sex" have been the core of failed U.S. and international efforts in Africa to inhibit HIV transmission for 20 years, ABC is winning important backers on the left and the right, as ABC campaigns in Senegal and Zambia also have begun to show similar positive results.

Mr. Frist mentioned the ABC program in a memo to Mr. Lugar suggesting improvements to the bill. Mr. Frist also would like the bill to more forcefully aim to eliminate the sex trade and prostitution, which are believed to contribute to the spread of HIV.

He also wants Mr. Lugar to include provisions to confidentially notify wives of HIV-infected men that they may be at risk and should be tested.

Another issue is how to divide the money. Conservatives would like to limit the amount of money given to the global AIDS fund, which is composed of international groups and representatives. They say that once money is given to the fund, there is no way to control how it is spent.

"This organization has not proven that it can adequately account for its use of funds and has sent money to North Korea," said Rep. Joe Pitts,

Pennsylvania Republican, who said the bill should stick to the president's request of \$200 million for the global fund in the first year.

The Lugar bill does not set a number for how much specifically should go to the global fund. The House bill says the president can give up to \$1 billion to the fund in the first year.

The White House remained optimistic that the issues can be worked out.

"We are committed to and continuing to work with leaders in the Senate and in the House to get legislation passed that is consistent with what the president outlined," said White House spokesman Scott McClellan, adding that it should be based on the Ugandan model.

"We want to make sure that [condom distribution] is not the main part of the outreach," said Connie Mackey, vice president of government affairs at the Family Research Council, adding that the new AIDS initiative should not turn into "an airlift for condoms."

Michael Schwartz, vice president for government relations at Concerned Women for America, is focusing on the House bill, which he said should mandate that most of the money should be spent on treatment of AIDS and should include an opt-out for faith-based groups who do not want to distribute condoms.

Sam Stratman, spokesman for Mr. Hyde, said the bill does contain a provision to protect faith-based groups and added that it also contains safeguards to monitor the global AIDS fund.