

Anti-terrorism bill advances

Congressional Democrats hope to log a pre-recess win by passing legislation that enforces the 9/11 commission's recommendations.

By Richard Simon, Times Staff Writer
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WASHINGTON — House and Senate negotiators reached agreement Wednesday on a long-debated anti-terrorism bill as the Democratic majority in Congress scrambled to rack up accomplishments to boost its dismal job-approval ratings.

The legislation to implement many of the recommendations of the bipartisan commission that investigated the Sept. 11, 2001, attacks is among a crush of measures that Democrats hope to pass before leaving for their monthlong summer recess next week.

One major provision would require screening of all cargo destined for U.S. ports, including Los Angeles and Long Beach, within five years, and steer more anti-terrorism funds to regions at the greatest risk of attack, which would probably bring more money to California's largest cities.

"I'm very pleased," said Lee H. Hamilton, a former Democratic congressman from Indiana who co-chaired the 9/11 commission. "It's a major step forward in making the American people safer."

The legislation was among the high-profile measures Democrats promised to deliver after they took control of Congress last year. The House passed it in January in its 100-hour legislative drive; the Senate passed its version in March. But negotiations stalled until Democrats dropped an effort to give airport screeners collective bargaining rights — a provision that was opposed by the White House.

Sen. Joe Lieberman (I-Conn.), chairman of the Senate Homeland Security Committee and a key negotiator, said the bill would "make it more difficult for terrorists to enter and operate in the United States. It will secure vulnerable targets from attack and help train and equip first responders."

The decision to move the bill was welcomed by the party's rank and file, who are anxious to burnish their national security credentials at a time when they are challenging President Bush's Iraq war strategy.

Democrats, after winning a campaign against the "do-nothing" Republican-controlled Congress, want to show voters they have been productive; they hope to act on an overhaul of lobbying

rules, an energy bill, a defense spending bill and the 9/11 bill before breaking for August.

But their efforts to get bills enacted into law could be difficult given a wave of White House veto threats targeting Democratic initiatives and the high level of partisan bickering enveloping the Capitol.

White House spokesman Scott Stanzel said the administration would review the final measure "to make sure it strengthens the security of our nation, as that is the president's top priority."

A number of Republicans have assailed the cargo-screening requirement, saying it could slow commerce.

"Based on current technology, this proposal is not practical because of the huge volume — 11 million containers per year — coming into our seaports," said Sen. Susan Collins of Maine, the top Republican on the Senate Homeland Security Committee. The provision gives the secretary of Homeland Security the authority to extend the deadline.

Republicans, however, cheered a provision they sought that would provide legal protections to people acting in "good faith" who report suspicious activity around transportation systems. It would not protect individuals who knowingly make false statements.

The provision was prompted by an incident at Minneapolis-St. Paul International Airport last fall when six Muslim imams were held up after being accused of suspicious behavior. They have sued the airline and some of the passengers who raised concerns about their behavior.