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Senate Foreign Relations Committee Votes To Suspend U.S. Economic & Military Aid To Panama

by Deborah Tyroler

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On Nov. 19, the Senate Foreign Relations Committee voted unanimously to cut off military and economic aid to Panama, and to suspend that country's sugar quota to the US market. The 19 to 0 vote came on legislation introduced in Congress last summer. After the vote, Sen. Alan Cranston (D-Calif.) said the step was taken to send an "unmistakable message of support" to the Panamanian people. He added that it should also be a signal to the "venal, corrupt leadership" of Panama's Defense Forces that the US will not participate in supporting oppression and abuse of the Panamanian people. Cranston, a leader in the effort to obtain Senate ratification of the Panama Canal treaty in 1978, said the new legislation will have no effect on US obligations regarding the treaty. He added that there is no truth to charges by Panamanian military chief Gen. Manuel Antonio Noriega that the US is trying to renege on the treaty. The legislation states that no US government funds may be appropriated for use in economic and military support to Panama, nor will the sugar quota be renewed, until the US president certifies to Congress that the government of Panama has demonstrated substantial progress in: assuring civilian control of the armed forces, and the end of involvement by Panama Defense Forces and its leaders in non-military activities and institutions; restoration of press freedoms and other constitutional guarantees; reaching a satisfactory agreement between the existing government and the legally constituted political opposition on the timing and conditions for free and fair elections; and, conducting an impartial investigation into accusations of illegal activities by the Panamanian Defense Forces. The full Senate will vote on the bill soon, and it is expected to be signed into law before the Dec. 15 Christmas break. The Senate and the House had previously approved non-binding resolutions calling for a freeze on economic and military aid until Panama effectively removed the military from politics. Those resolutions do not have the force of law, as does the bill approved by the Foreign Relations Committee. However, the executive branch suspended all US aid to Panama as a result of violent demonstrations in Panama June 30 that resulted in damage to US Embassy property. As a result of pressure from the Senate on Panama, the Pentagon has been forced to "indefinitely suspend" joint military maneuvers with the Panamanian Defense Forces scheduled for January.

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