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 US lawmakers pass \$400.5 billion defense bill

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(Updates with House passage, grafs 1-3)

By Vicki Allen

WASHINGTON, May 22 (Reuters) - The U.S. Congress on Thursday overwhelmingly passed a \$400.5 billion defense bill that ends a decade-long ban on research and development of small nuclear weapons, a step critics said may heighten risks of nuclear war.

The Senate voted 98-1 for its bill authorizing next year's defense programs that repeals the ban on study and development of "mini-nukes," which Congress imposed in 1993 to stem their spread to other nations.

The House passed its bill 361-68, but the White House said its measure did not offer enough leeway to explore the new generation of nuclear weapons because it keeps the block on their development.

The Bush administration has said it just wants to study and has no plans to build them, although Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld has said they could be useful in destroying biological and chemical arms other countries may have hidden underground.

In a statement it said barring development would "hinder the ability of our scientists and engineers to explore technical options to deter national security threats."

The low-yield weapons are five kilotons or less, or about one-third the force of the bomb dropped on Hiroshima in World War Two that killed more than 100,000 people.

Democrats who are in the minority in both chambers fought for the ban, saying President George W. Bush was sending a signal that would spur a new arms race and raise risks of nuclear weapons on battlefields.

The Senate voted to lift the ban on study and development, but to make Bush get congressional approval before moving to engineer such weapons.

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Lawmakers will reconcile differences in House and Senate measures before a final bill is sent to Bush.

The White House has threatened to veto the huge measure if it keeps House restrictions on the Pentagon's plans to close and realign military bases, a potent issue for lawmakers with installations in their districts.

In other key differences, the House bill gives Rumsfeld power he wants to manage the Pentagon's 700,000 civilian employees, which Democrats said would strip them of civil service rights. The Senate bill is silent on that issue.


The House also voted to ease protections for endangered wildlife on military lands and to reduce harm to marine mammals from sea operations. The Senate voted to keep many of the endangered species protections, and did not consider lifting the safeguards for whales, dolphins and other ocean life.

While the Senate bill expands a \$450.8 million program to secure and destroy nuclear, chemical and biological weapons of the former Soviet Union, Democrats said the House bill stymied efforts to destroy a huge stash of chemical warheads at a Russian facility. Critics say Russia is not cooperating on the program, and it is floundering.

Republicans rebuffed efforts in both chambers to halt the administration's research on high-yield nuclear earth penetrating weapons, which Rumsfeld said may deter countries from burying weapons deep underground.

The Senate passed a measure to force the Pentagon to open bidding on contracts for Iraq's reconstruction after complaints that Halliburton Co., formerly run by Vice President Dick Cheney, was getting huge contracts without competitive bids to revive Iraq's oil industry.

In the Senate, just West Virginia Democrat Robert Byrd, a critic of Bush's defense and foreign policies, opposed the defense bill. (Reporting by Vicki Allen, editing by Bette O'Connor; Reuters Messaging: [vicki.allen.reuters.com@reuters.net](mailto:vicki.allen.reuters.com@reuters.net); e-mail [vicki.allen@reuters.com](mailto:vicki.allen@reuters.com), +1 202-898-8391))

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