

HR 2431

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Clinton Opposes Religious Sanctions

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Filed at 11:33 a.m. EDT**By The Associated Press**

WASHINGTON (AP) -- President Clinton is urging evangelical Christian leaders to withdraw their support from legislation that would impose mandatory sanctions on countries judged guilty of religious persecution.

Clinton, in a meeting Monday, said he believes the legislation would harm efforts to address violations of religious freedoms around the world.

While saying he shares the goals of the measure, Clinton said there are better ways to address the problem.

He echoed the view of many critics of the bill that the threat of mandatory sanctions would put pressure on the United States to overlook problems so it would not have to impose penalties.

The president made his remarks in the Roosevelt Room to about 60 members of the National Association of Evangelicals. Clinton dropped by a meeting they were attending with his national security adviser, Sandy Berger.

White House press secretary Mike McCurry said Clinton "gave this group a pretty candid explanation of what normally comes out as fairly turgid sounding diplomatic parlance."

He said the administration often feels that Congress infringes on the president's ability to conduct foreign policy when it imposes restrictions in law. "They lead to situations in which the Congress mandates certain approaches on handling problems that require deft diplomacy," McCurry said.

"And that's exactly the point that the president made yesterday, that when you lock in a certain approach ... you take away the ability to manage out a more effective way to address our concerns," McCurry said.

"He reiterated the administration's opposition to legislation that would impose mandatory sanctions on countries that are judged to violate freedom of worship of their citizens," said Eric Rubin, a spokesman for the National Security Council.

Further, he said that Clinton emphasized ``the administration's commitment to working with concerned groups in this country to strengthen our efforts to address violations of religious freedom and to seek concrete improvements."

The administration has long been on record as opposing the measure, sponsored in the House by Rep. Frank Wolf, R.-Va. The administration says the bill could play into the hands of extremist groups seeking to incite more intolerance.

The measure would ban exports of goods to foreign governments engaging in abuses. It would shut off U.S. aid to such nations and require the administration to block loans by international financial organizations, such as the World Bank and International Monetary Fund.

The bill also would establish a special White House office to monitor religious persecution overseas. Its director would determine which nations are guilty of violations, and automatic sanctions would be imposed.

Last week the House International Relations Committee approved Wolf's bill by a 31-5 vote. Wolf has argued that the United States should single out countries that violate human rights.

The bill's sponsors say Christians, Muslims, Tibetan Buddhists, Bahais, Jews, Hindus and other groups were being targeted. They cited China, Iran, Pakistan, Vietnam, Algeria, Sudan and Vietnam as some of the worst offenders.

Sen. Arlen Specter, R-Pa., is sponsoring a similar version of the bill in the Senate.



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