

## Dems eye insurance industry's antitrust protection

### Greater federal regulation possible

BY DAVID ESPO  
AP SPECIAL CORRESPONDENT

WASHINGTON (AP) — Top Senate Democrats intend to try to strip the health insurance industry of its exemption from federal antitrust laws, according to congressional officials, the latest evidence of a deepening struggle over President Barack Obama's effort to overhaul the health care industry.

If enacted, the switch would mean greater federal regulation for an industry that recently has stepped up its criticism of portions of a health care bill moving toward the Senate floor.

Congressional officials said Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid of Nevada and Sen. Patrick Leahy of Vermont, chairman of the Senate Judiciary Committee, arranged to make the an-

nouncement Wednesday, joined by Sen. Chuck Schumer of New York.

The officials who disclosed the plans did so on condition of anonymity to avoid pre-empting a formal announcement.

In a statement, the major industry trade group, America's Health Insurance Plans, said the industry already was one of the most regulated in the country. The focus on the industry's antitrust exemption, it said, was "a political ploy designed to distract attention away from the real issue of rising health care costs."

The move against the antitrust exemption came as Obama appealed to congressional Democrats not to let internal differences sink his comprehensive plan to remake the nation's health care system. "The bill you

least like" improves coverage for millions, he said in New York. "Let's make sure that we keep our eye on the prize."

After months of struggle, Democratic leaders in the House and Senate hope to have legislation ready for votes in both houses within a few weeks, and plan on having a compromise measure ready for Obama's signature by the end of the year.

Progress has been slow, particularly as Democrats squabble over whether to allow the federal government to sell insurance in direct competition with private insurers, and if so, under what terms. Obama's remarks appeared an attempt to place that and similar disagreements in a larger context — a decades-long attempt to provide insurance for millions who lack it while cracking down on insurance industry practices such as denying coverage on the basis of pre-existing medical conditions.

Insurance industry officials have been involved in discussions for months with the White House and key congressional Democrats over proposed legislation. They repeatedly said they would accept a series of new restrictions, as long as the legislation required Americans to purchase insurance, thus assuring insurers millions of new customers.

The tone changed last week after the Senate Finance Committee approved legislation that exempted an estimated 2 million individuals from the requirement to purchase insurance and greatly reduced the penalties on those still subject to the requirement.

In a report paid for by the insurance industry, the accounting firm PricewaterhouseCoopers said the legislation would add \$1,700 a year to the cost of family coverage in 2013 when most of the major provisions of the Senate Finance Committee

bill would be in effect.

The White House, Democrats in Congress and other supporters of the legislation attacked the study as flawed and deceptive.

Within a few days, Leahy convened a Judiciary Committee meeting to air the possibility of revoking the industry's antitrust exemption.

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## Diplomats: Iran to consider draft nuke deal

Deal would delay ability to make weapons by sending needed material to Russia

BY GEORGE JAHN  
ASSOCIATED PRESS WRITER

VIENNA (AP) — Iranian negotiators on Wednesday agreed to consider a draft deal that — if accepted by the Tehran leadership — would delay its ability to make nuclear weapons by sending most of the material it would need to Russia for processing, diplomats said Wednesday.

International Atomic Energy Agency chief Mohamed ElBaradei confirmed that representatives of Iran and its three interlocutors — the U.S., Russia and France — had accepted the draft, which still has to be finalized by the four nations' capitals. ElBaradei said he hoped that would occur by Friday.

"I have circulated a draft agreement that in my judgment reflects a balanced approach to how to move forward," ElBaradei told reporters, suggesting that all four parties had worked hard to overcome differences exacerbated by suspicions that Iran may be interested in nuclear weapons. Tehran insists its activities are peaceful and meant only to generate energy.

"Everybody who participated at the meeting was trying to look at the future not at the past, trying to heal the wounds," ElBaradei said. "I very much hope that people see the big picture, see that this agreement could open the way for a complete normalization of relations between Iran and the International community."

He gave no details of what was in the package. But diplomats told The Associated Press that it was essentially the original proposal drawn



AP/HANS PUNZ

Director General of the International Atomic Energy Agency Mohamed ElBaradei, front, arrives for a meeting of delegates from Iran, the U.S. Russia and France, on Monday at Vienna's International Center. The talks between the nations focus on a technical issue with huge strategic ramifications, whether Iran is ready to farm out some of its uranium enrichment program to a foreign country. Others are not identified.

up by the IAEA that would commit Tehran to shipping 75 percent of its enriched uranium stockpile to Russia for further enrichment.

After that material is turned into metal fuel rods, it would then be shipped back to Iran to power its small research reactor in Tehran, according to the draft, as de-

scribed earlier by diplomats.

The diplomats spoke on condition of anonymity because the meeting was confidential.

While essentially technical, such a deal would have

significant political and strategic ramifications.

It would commit Iran to turn over more than 2,600 pounds (1,200 kilograms) of low-enriched uranium — as much as 75 percent of its declared stockpile. That would significantly ease fears about Iran's nuclear program, since 2,205 pounds (1,000 kilograms) is the commonly accepted amount of low-enriched uranium needed to produce weapons-grade uranium.

Based on the present Iranian stockpile, the U.S. has estimated that Tehran could produce a nuclear weapon between 2010 and 2015, an assessment that broadly matches those from Israel and other nations.

David Albright of the Washington-based Institute for Science and International Security, which has tracked Iran for signs of covert proliferation, said any deal would buy only a limited amount of time. He said Tehran could replace 2,600 pounds (1,200 kilograms) of low-enriched uranium "in little over a year."

Iran's chief delegate, Ali Asghar Soltanieh emphasized that — while his side had accepted the draft — senior Iranian officials in Tehran still had to sign off it.

"We have to thoroughly study this text and also (need) further elaboration in capitals," Soltanieh told reporters.

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