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House Panel Forbids Closing of Firing Range on Vieques

By JAMES DAO

W approved a measure that would prohibit the Navy from closing its firing range on the island of Vieques until it found a replacement that was as good or better, a move that Democrats said could keep the Puerto Rican training site open for many years.

The Bush administration has called for closing the Vieques range by May 2003. But Navy officials have said it will be difficult to find a site as good as Vieques for amphibious-assault training involving land, sea and air forces. The officials have suggested that the Navy might have to settle for splitting such training among two or more places.

But wording added today by Republican lawmakers to President Bush's proposed Pentagon budget specified that the Navy must find a single site that was "equivalent or superior" to Vieques.

Democrats who opposed the Republican language argued that it would allow the Navy to keep the Vieques range open well beyond 2003. The range, where a civilian employee was killed in a bombing accident in 1999, has been the focus of raucous protests by demonstrators, some of them politicians and celebrities from the mainland, who want the base shuttered immediately.

"How can we replicate the same kind of training site?" asked Representative Silvestre Reyes, Democrat of Texas, after the vote. "It would be difficult if not impossible."

The vote on Vieques occurred as the Armed Services Committee opened formal review of the president's proposed \$329 billion Pentagon budget for the fiscal year that begins on Oct. 1. Though today's debate was just the first of many on the spending plan, it defined the emerging partisan battle lines on several major issues.

For instance, Democrats offered an amendment that would cut nearly \$1 billion from the administration's proposed \$8.3 billion budget for missile defense. The Democratic proposal would shift that money toward programs that also enjoy broad support among Republicans and military commanders, including buying helicopters and transport planes, improving ship maintenance and developing a new Navy destroyer.

Although the Democrats expected to lose on a party-line vote, the move was intended to force Republican lawmakers into supporting a major increase in missile defense spending at the expense of conventional military programs that are popular

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within the Pentagon.

National security strategy and the future size and composition of the nation's military — especially nuclear forces — were discussed this afternoon when President Bush met at the Pentagon with Secretary of Defense Donald H. Rumsfeld.

"No decisions were being made and no conclusions were being reached," a senior Pentagon official said after the 90-minute session.

Today's vote on Vieques underscored how difficult it will be for the Bush administration to build a consensus behind its plan to end training on Vieques within two years. As part of that plan, the administration wants to prevent a binding referendum scheduled for this November that would allow the island's voters to decide whether the Navy should continue using the range.

Many Democrats, including Mr. Reyes, want the referendum to go forward to enable Vieques residents to voice their opposition to the Navy training. In a nonbinding referendum held on Vieques last Sunday, 68 percent of voters supported closing the range immediately, while 30 percent favored letting the Navy stay indefinitely.

On the other hand, the Bush administration, with the support of many Republicans and a significant number of centrist Democrats, oppose referendums, arguing that military policy should not be subject to popular votes.

But many of those same lawmakers oppose the Bush administration's efforts to close the Vieques training range, asserting that it is irreplaceable and that military readiness will decline sharply if the site is shut down.

"We're not going to have an alternative as good," said Representative Duncan Hunter, Republican of California, who opposes closing the range.

Vieques was not the only issue where House Republicans differed from the White House today.

Committee Republicans also tried to block an administration proposal to retire 50 nuclear-tipped MX missiles. The plan would require rescinding a 1998 law prohibiting the Pentagon from reducing the nuclear arsenal below levels set by the Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty.

But the administration's proposal was removed from the budget bill by Republican lawmakers who said they opposed allowing the Pentagon to mothball the MX missiles before a review of the nation's nuclear arsenal was completed this year.

In an odd role reversal, Democrats rallied behind the administration's proposal. After lengthy debate, the committee approved an amendment offered by Representative Tom Allen, Democrat of Maine, that would allow the Pentagon to begin dismantling the missiles.

The committee also approved an amendment offered by Representative Saxby Chambliss, Republican of Georgia, that would severely limit the Air Force's ability to cut the B-1 bomber force. The Pentagon has proposed retiring 33 of the 93-plane force, arguing the planes are costly to operate and highly vulnerable to enemy air

defenses.

But the plan has run into sharp, bipartisan opposition from states with B-1 bases, including Georgia, Kansas and Idaho.

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