

Congress Is Ready to Respond to This Nation's Threats

The House of Representatives could vote in the coming days on legislation backed by Republican and Democratic lawmakers to broaden U.S. sanctions on North Korea, House leaders said on Thursday, a day after Pyongyang announced it had tested a hydrogen nuclear device.

Republican House Speaker Paul Ryan did not provide a timeline for the vote on the long-delayed legislation but a congressional source said it was expected as soon as Monday.

Nancy Pelosi, the House Democratic leader, told reporters that Republicans, who control the House, were likely to move a bill as early as next week and that Democrats would support it. She said there was strong backing in both parties for the legislation.

The measure would target banks facilitating North Korea's nuclear program and authorize freezing of U.S. assets of those directly linked to illicit North Korean activities. It would also penalize those involved in business providing North Korea with hard currency.

Congressional sources told Reuters on Wednesday that Republican House leaders were discussing the sanctions bill and planned a vote as soon as next week.

Republican Ed Royce, chairman of the House Foreign Affairs Committee, and Eliot Engel, the panel's top Democrat, introduced the measure last year, and it was passed by the committee in February.

House Republican leaders did not bring the measure up for a vote in 2015, but North Korea's announcement on Wednesday left lawmakers clamoring for a strong U.S. response.

The vast majority of North Korea's business dealings are with its ally China, which bought 90 percent of the isolated country's exports in 2013, according to data compiled by South Korea's International Trade Association.

There was no immediate word on whether the U.S. Senate planned to consider similar legislation. Senators do not return from their year-end recess until next week. For the measure to become law, it would have to pass both the House and Senate and be signed by President Barack Obama.

U.S. lawmakers from both parties expressed outrage over North Korea's action and called for an international response.

(Additional reporting by Richard Cowan, Susan Cornwell and Susan Heavey; Editing by Doina Chiacu and Will Dunham)

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