

Trouble looms on N-deal

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NEW DELHI: The clouds now seem to be gathering in Washington over the nuclear deal. Even before the Indo-US agreement has been extricated from Left roadblocks at home, there were ominous signals from the US Congress on Wednesday when it met to hear the budget proposals for the State Department.

The first blow was the news that a strong opponent of the nuclear deal, Democratic Congressman Howard Berman, has taken over as chairman of the House Foreign Affairs Committee. He succeeds deal-friendly Tom Lantos who passed away on Feb 11.

Berman's name rings alarm bells here. He authored killer amendments to the Hyde Act when the enabling legislation was being debated in the US Congress in 2006. Then, last October, he urged President Bush to ensure that the waiver for India from the Nuclear Suppliers Group does not deviate from the conditions in the Hyde Act.

The second blow was his not-so-gentle reminder at the first meeting he chaired of the House Committee on Wednesday that he is still on the warpath. Although the House Committee was discussing next year's budget for the State Department, Berman raised the Indo-US deal.

He said he was concerned that the Bush Administration had circulated a proposal for a "clean" (or unconditional) exemption for India from the NSG.

"[The proposal] does not reflect any of the restrictions contained in the Hyde Act," he remarked.

Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice's reply offered little consolation. She assured Berman that the US cannot support anything with India in the NSG that contradicts the Hyde Act. "We will have to be consistent with the Hyde Act," she said, "or I don't believe we can count on the Congress to make the next step [in consummating the deal]."

Officials here were reluctant to speculate on the implications of the exchange between Berman and Rice. On the face of it, Rice could not give any other reply. The Bush Administration has consistently said that all its steps are in line with the Hyde Act, including the controversial 123 Agreement, which the Left has refused to pass.

However, one official acknowledged that this position is correct in a broad interpretation of the Hyde Act. A narrow reading of the Act could create problems, particularly if India conducts another nuclear test.

A senior Left leader said that Rice's reply only confirms their worst fears about the deal. "We have all along said that the Hyde Act cannot be ignored when considering the next steps," he pointed out.