

Washington, D.C. - By Bree Hocking

Roll Call Staff

In his second inaugural address, President Bush emphasized the importance of strengthening democracy around the globe.

Now Congress is getting into the act.

Shortly before leaving Capitol Hill for the spring recess last month, the House passed a resolution creating a commission aimed at assisting parliaments in emerging democracies.

The commission, to be made up of a yet-to-be specified number of House Members appointed by Speaker Dennis Hastert (R-Ill.) and House Minority Leader Nancy Pelosi (D-Calif.), is expected to be chaired by Rep. David Dreier (R-Calif.), who introduced the measure. The primary Democratic co-sponsor, Rep. David Price (N.C.), will likely become the panel's ranking member.

"There is nothing that quite fills the bill in terms of direct parliament-to-parliament, member-to-member involvement with these emerging democracies," said Price, who also participates in the U.S. delegation to the NATO Parliamentary Assembly. "What's unique is that direct Member outreach."

The announcement of the commission's members, who will serve terms consistent with the Congress in which the appointment is made, could come as soon as this month. The size of the commission will be determined based on Member interest, said Hastert spokesman Ron Bonjean.

The commission is modeled after a House effort in the 1990s known as the Frost-Solomon Task Force, which provided equipment and technical assistance to the parliaments of the newly independent Eastern and Central European countries.

While the goals of the new commission fit comfortably within the vision articulated by Bush in his inaugural address, the idea for a commission was actually conceived long before the January 2005 speech, Price said. Price, along with then-Rep. Doug Bereuter (R-Neb.), introduced two versions of a similar measure in the 108th Congress.

Still, the resolution, which passed the House March 14, references the commission's consistency with what Bush in his address termed "the idealistic work of helping raise up free governments."

The commission will enable Members, staff and Congressional support agencies, such as the Library of Congress, to advise the parliaments of a select number of geographically diverse emerging democracies. It will facilitate visits of parliamentary members from these nations and make recommendations to the administrator of the U.S. Agency for International Development regarding the allocation of material assistance, such as information technology and library supplies.

In support of this work, the commission will carry out an annual study looking at, among other things, the role of the parliament in the legislative process and government oversight, the usefulness of Congressional expertise on issues ranging from constituent services to budget process, and the parliament's information-technology needs. Assistance will be contingent on the nation's expressed interest in receiving such aid.

Each year, a report detailing the results of the study and the activities of the commission will be submitted to the Speaker, the House Minority Leader, the International Relations Committee and other appropriate House committees, the USAID administrator, and the House Office of Interparliamentary Affairs no later than Sept. 30, until the panel sunsets in 2009.

The move comes at a time when democracy promotion has taken on new urgency on Capitol Hill. Legislation aimed at bolstering democracy throughout the world is pending in both the House and Senate. And interest in parliamentary exchange is rising, said a senior Democratic

aide on the International Relations Committee, pointing to the creation of the chamber's interparliamentary affairs office.

That office was created in fiscal 2004 to facilitate interparliamentary and overseas travel services for Members and foreign governments, among other duties. It is currently in the process of preparing for the annual meeting of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe Parliamentary Assembly, which is scheduled for July in Washington.

The commission, which will be primarily staffed and funded through the International Relations panel, currently has one aide, John Lis, a committee staffer, who is taking the lead in organizing the initial studies of possible participant countries. About five nations will likely be selected to participate in the program beginning in fiscal 2006.

Although the first batch of new democracies has yet to be decided, Rep. Mark Kirk (R-Ill.) — a co-sponsor of the resolution who hopes to join the commission — said he would like to see the parliaments of Egypt, Iraq, Afghanistan and possibly the Palestinian territories considered for assistance.

The panel's work, he added, will also help shore up U.S. national security.

"Democracies do not attack each other," he said.