

# Clock is ticking for religious freedom panel

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September 21, 2011

WASHINGTON (RNS) The independent and bipartisan U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom could be forced to shut its doors if the Senate does not vote by week's end to reauthorize the panel.

The commission appears to be in legislative limbo after the House voted Sept. 15 to extend the panel for an additional two years. The commission is authorized through Sept. 30, but both houses of Congress are scheduled to be in recess starting Monday (Sept. 26).

Before the House vote, Rep. Frank Wolf, R-Va., urged fellow members to support the watchdog panel that monitors the persecution of religious minorities across the globe. But he worried that the Senate might not act in time.

"Quite frankly, I believe that some over there and this very administration would not mind seeing this commission shut its doors," said Wolf, who authored the original 1998 legislation that created the commission.

The House voted 391-21 in favor of reauthorization; a spokeswoman for the Senate Foreign Relations Committee did not immediately respond to a request for comment.

Kalinda Stephenson, the Republican staff director of the congressional Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission, said advocates for reauthorization had hoped it would occur earlier this year.

"With all the budget cuts, people don't see religious freedom as a priority," she said.

Stephenson said it would technically be possible to resurrect the panel if it was forced to shut down, but hopes that won't be necessary.

"It's a lot harder to revive a commission like that once it sunsets than to try really hard to make sure that it doesn't close in the first place," she said.

Wolf's reauthorization bill cuts the number of unpaid commissioners from nine to five, and reduces the commission's budget from about \$4.3 million to 3 million. It also calls for a Government Accountability Office investigation to assess the commission's effectiveness.

Commissioner Richard Land said he has long been concerned about whether the commission would continue past Sept. 30, as well as whether its 15-member staff would retain their jobs.

"Given the budget crunch that we're in and everybody being asked to sacrifice, I would rather see it reauthorized at five commissioners and a \$3 million budget than to see it cease to exist," said Land, who leads the Southern Baptist Convention's Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission.

Commissioner Don Argue, a former president of the National

Association of Evangelicals, said he hoped the Senate would consider the "human factor" of the commission's work and reauthorize it.

"Our commission is not even a drop in the bucket when you consider the entire budget," he said.