

Panel approves \$10 billion cut in Medicare, Medicaid spending

Kevin Freking
THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

WASHINGTON — A Republican-led effort to slow spending on health care programs for the poor, elderly and disabled survived a stern test in the Senate Tuesday.

That chamber's Finance Committee, voting along party lines, approved legislation that would trim overall spending on Medicare and Medicaid by about \$10 billion over five years. The committee's 11 Republicans supported the legislation. The committee's nine Democrats opposed it.

In doing so, Democrats cited what they believed was

inadequate assistance for victims of Hurricane Katrina. In particular, Democrats wanted to temporarily extend Medicaid coverage to thousands of people currently ineligible for the program even though they have lost their jobs and their home.

"Eight weeks ago yesterday, Katrina made landfall. Eight weeks ago today, the levees broke. And eight weeks later, I cannot in good conscience join in cutting health care, when Congress has left the health care needs of Katrina's victims unaddressed," said Sen. Max Baucus of Montana, the top Democrat on the Finance Committee.

Republicans said they weren't thrilled with the bill, either, mainly because they said it did not go far enough to overhaul Medicaid, the nation's health insurance program for the poor. But they rejected the notion that beneficiaries would get a reduced level of care as a result of the changes they approved.

"We are not cutting health care services to the beneficiaries," said Sen. Rick Santorum, R-Pa. "We have squeezed some fraud out. We have squeezed providers."

The legislation reflected the difficult balancing act facing the committee's chairman, Sen. Charles Grassley, R-Iowa.

Grassley had to maintain

support from all 11 committee Republican to ensure the measure's passage. But some wanted more significant reductions in Medicaid than others were willing to accept.

In the end, the legislation the panel approved Tuesday would reduce Medicare spending by about \$5.8 billion over five years and Medicaid by about \$4.3 billion during that time.

Even with those reductions, however, the Congressional Budget Office projects that financing of the two programs would grow substantially over the coming five years.

The CBO predicts Medicaid spending will increase from about \$192 billion in 2006 to

about \$260 billion in 2010. Medicare spending will increase from about \$385 billion in the coming year to about \$525 billion in 2010. The increases reflect growing health care costs and a growing number of people becoming eligible for the programs.

This week, several committees in both chambers are considering legislation that would reduce spending on programs over which they have jurisdiction. Their contribution will be made part of an overall bill that would reflect a congressional budget blueprint passed in April.

The blueprint called for \$35 billion in spending cuts and

\$70 billion in tax cuts, a point that Sen. Kent Conrad, D-N.D., emphasized when he said that legislation billed as reducing the deficit would actually increase it.

"It's almost as if words have lost their meaning," said Conrad, another Finance Committee member.

But Sen. Mike Crapo, R-Idaho, said he viewed the legislation as not cutting taxes, but as preventing tax increases that would occur if Congress does not act.

Lawmakers filed 131 amendments to the legislation, but all of the amendments that came up for a vote Tuesday were defeated.

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that number about right.

Judith Yaphe, a former CIA Iraq analyst and a senior fellow at National Defense University, said she accepts estimates of 20,000 to 30,000 killed.

Anthony Cordesman, a military analyst at the Center for Strategic and International Studies in Washington, said in a report issued Friday that the Iraq Body Count figure of about 30,000 Iraqis killed was "extremely uncertain" — but that it did seem the best estimate

available.

Iraq Body Count's figures include Iraqi civilians killed by U.S. forces as well as by insurgents and militia. They also include homicides stemming from the breakdown in law and order.

The AP's count is based on reports from police, hospitals, government officials and eyewitnesses. The death toll includes Iraqi police and military — but not insurgents, victims of ordinary homicides or the nearly 1,000 Shiite pilgrims killed August 21 in a bridge stampede after someone shouted a suicide bomber was in the crowd.

There is no way of knowing how many deaths go uncounted, especially in areas too remote or dangerous to visit.

Estimates from other experts who measure overall Iraqi deaths, including insurgents and Iraqi troops, range higher than 30,000.

Michael O'Hanlon, a military analyst at the Brookings Institution who has closely followed the war's casualties, said an average of 1,500 to 2,000 Iraqis have been killed per month, about half of them insurgents.

While American troops are killed at the rate of about 60 to 70 per month, the new Iraqi military suffers that many deaths in a week, mainly from insurgent attacks that rose to about 90 per day in September, O'Hanlon said.

Exacerbating the carnage is the Iraqi crime rate, now the highest in the Middle East, with about 10,000 homicides a year that would not have happened without the invasion, he said.

The total of Iraqi deaths — including insurgents — from all manner of war-related violence could run as high as 70,000, said O'Hanlon, who teaches a course at Columbia University on estimating war casualties.

"These numbers matter a lot," O'Hanlon said. "They matter in humanitarian terms. And they

fuel the insurgency, because the perception and sometimes the reality is that we haven't done enough to protect innocent Iraqi lives."

One effort to count deaths, a study published in the *Lancet* medical journal last October, estimated that 98,000 more civilians died in Iraq since March 2003 than would otherwise have been expected. Many experts were skeptical of those findings, which were based on extrapolations.

As high as it is, the Iraqi death rate so far is much lower than that of the Vietnamese during the 1954-1976 Vietnam War, when about 1.1 million Vietnamese fighters and some 2 million civilians were killed — a rough average of 12,000 per month.

The Pentagon made it clear from the start of the Iraq invasion that it would not be counting Iraqi bodies, perhaps a reaction to the enduring embarrassment from its inflating Vietnam War body counts to demonstrate U.S. success in the battlefield.

John Sloboda, the director of Iraq Body Count, said the counting is left to volunteers like him, scouring the news for reports of Iraqis killed. He believes his own group's count is low.

News organizations have periodically tried to gauge the toll. A 2003 AP survey of records in large Iraqi hospitals found at least 3,240 civilians had been killed in the war's first month.

Responsibility for the tally now belongs to the Iraqi government and not the U.S. military, said Boylan.

But Iraqi government statistics have mainly covered those killed by insurgents, not by U.S. or Iraqi troops. Sloboda said government figures were consistently lower than his media-based estimates.

Whatever the figure, the rate of killing appears to be growing.

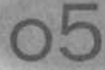
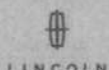
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