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Oregon Law Would Jail War Protesters as Terrorists

Reuters | April 2, 2003
 By Lee Douglas

PORTLAND, Oregon (Reuters) - An Oregon anti-terrorism bill would jail street-blocking protesters for at least 25 years in a thinly veiled effort to discourage anti-war demonstrations, critics say.

The bill has met strong opposition but lawmakers still expect a debate on the definition of terrorism and the value of free speech before a vote by the state senate judiciary committee, whose Chairman, Republican Senator John Minnis, wrote the proposed legislation.

Dubbed Senate Bill 742, it identifies a terrorist as a person who "plans or participates in an act that is intended, by at least one of its participants, to disrupt" business, transportation, schools, government, or free assembly.

The bill's few public supporters say police need stronger laws to break up protests that have created havoc in cities like Portland, where thousands of people have marched and demonstrated against war in Iraq since last fall.

"We need some additional tools to control protests that shut down the city," said Lars Larson, a conservative radio talk show host who has aggressively stumped for the bill.

Larson said protesters should be protected by free speech laws, but not given free reign to hold up ambulances or frighten people out of their daily routines, adding that police and the court system could be trusted to see the difference.

"Right now a group of people can get together and go downtown and block a freeway," Larson said. "You need a tool to deal with that."

The bill contains automatic sentences of 25 years to life for the crime of terrorism.

Critics of the bill say its language is so vague it erodes basic freedoms in the name of fighting terrorism under an extremely broad definition.

"Under the original version (terrorism) meant essentially a food fight," said Andrea Meyer of the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU), which opposes the bill.

Police unions and minority groups also oppose the bill for fear it could have a chilling effect on relations between police and poor people, minorities, children and "vulnerable" populations.

Legislators say the bill stands little chance of passage.

"I just don't think this bill is ever going to get out of committee," said Democratic Senator Vicki Walker, one of four members on the six-person panel who have said they oppose the legislation.



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"Political power grows out of the barrel of a gun"

-MaoTse Tung
(Mass Murderer)



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