

Border security should be priority, Hastert says

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Body

WASHINGTON -- Two months after the Senate passed a bill that would give citizenship to millions of illegal immigrants, House Speaker Dennis **Hastert** remains adamant that **border security** must be improved before Congress considers other changes to the law.

"I would look at it as if you have a patient who is bleeding to death," **Hastert** told USA TODAY. "Close the wound first. Secure the **border**. And then you can begin to look at what other options are."

The Illinois Republican's comments came on the eve of a weekend inspection of the U.S.-Mexican **border**, which he calls "a sieve." He is leading a delegation that includes supporters of a House immigration bill that emphasizes tighter **border security** and penalties on employers who hire illegal immigrants, as well as opponents who prefer the Senate bill.

As the top House Republican, **Hastert** will be a key figure in determining whether an immigration bill is enacted this year. He's determined to use his leverage to get a bill more to his liking.

Hastert is making no promises about when or if he will appoint House negotiators to a committee that will work out differences between the two immigration bills. It will happen "when I think we're ready to move a bill," he **said**.

That may take longer than some supporters of a comprehensive immigration overhaul, such as President Bush, had hoped. **Hastert said** he may extend House hearings on immigration and **border security** into September, a move that could jeopardize chances for a compromise before the Nov. 7 elections. Congress is set to recess for the campaign on Sept. 29.

Hastert's go-slow approach puts him at odds with Bush, who has urged quick congressional action. Bush **says** the legislation should go beyond **border-security** measures to include more opportunities for foreigners to work here temporarily and a promise of citizenship for many of the nation's estimated 12million illegal residents.

Supporters of the Senate bill, such as Sens. Arlen Specter, R-Pa., and Lindsey Graham, R-S.C., have **said** they have opened informal discussions with House Republicans and are still hopeful that a compromise can be struck.

Hastert said he won't be moved, not even by White House overtures. "I don't need assurances from the president," he **said**. "I know what we want."

The speaker **said** he told Bush recently that he wants to see a measurable drop in illegal **border** crossings before considering other immigration measures the president wants.

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Hastert and five other House lawmakers will tour **border** hot spots in Arizona and Texas today and Saturday. He plans to meet with National Guard troops and homeland **security** officials. "I'm going to be talking to people who are actually at the gates," he **said**.

One out of every five voters in **Hastert's** suburban Chicago district is Hispanic. He **said** his stance has sparked "a mixed attitude" from his constituents.

Graphic

PHOTO, B/W, Tim Dillon, USA TODAY

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