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## **Future of domestic surveillance powers uncertain as Congress fights**

Patricia Zengerle and Mark Hosenball

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The future of the U.S. government's power to spy on Americans' phone calls was up in the air on Thursday as Congress fought over proposed reforms, with no clear outcome in sight.

Lawmakers were close to deadlock over the central question of how far citizens' privacy rights should be infringed to protect the country from violent extremists.

Experts also disagreed on how counter-terrorism might be affected if lawmakers failed to prevent the June 1 expiration of portions of the USA Patriot Act, which was approved after the Sept. 11, 2001, attacks.

The White House backs a reform measure known as the USA Freedom Act, which the House of Representatives passed on May 13 but has not come up for a vote in the Senate.

The Freedom Act would replace bulk phone-data collection and other domestic surveillance practices that are permitted under the Patriot Act, introducing more targeted procedures. Privacy rights activists have been clamoring for such reforms since former National Security Agency contractor Edward Snowden exposed the surveillance program two years ago.

Officials from President Barack Obama's Democratic administration have been lobbying the Republican-controlled Congress to support the Freedom Act, calling it the best way to prevent "a very uncertain future" for the national security authorities.

Some experts disagreed.

"Our intelligence capabilities against terrorists will take a hit" if the Freedom Act becomes law, Stewart Baker, former general counsel at the National Security Agency, told Reuters.

If Congress lets the provisions of the Patriot Act simply expire, it would mean "a double hit," Baker said. "That would leave terrorism investigators without tools that drug crime investigators use every day. That's nuts."

With the House of Representatives adjourned until June 1 for the Memorial Day recess, the Senate was juggling several decisions.

The picture became more complicated when Senate Intelligence Committee Chairman Richard Burr said on Thursday he would offer compromise legislation that would include parts of the Freedom Act, give the NSA two years to wrap up the bulk data program and keep in place other less-controversial pieces of the Patriot Act.

He said he expected votes on Friday in the Senate on the Freedom Act and a two-month extension of the existing surveillance powers, but predicted neither would pass. He said he hoped instead for a days-long extension to allow debate on his compromise.

"I don't think that any member outside of Senator Paul wants to see the program go away," Burr told reporters, referring to Rand Paul, a Republican candidate for next year's presidential election, who led 10 hours of speeches on Wednesday opposing the Patriot Act.

Julian Sanchez of the libertarian-leaning Cato Institute played down the impact of ending the surveillance, saying of the potential cessation of bulk telephony metadata collection that two independent reviews had found it to be "of little if any real utility."