

The Washington Times

Pentagon cuts could idle civilian defense workers by thousands

By Kristina Wong - January 7, 2013

The 113th Congress' most pressing defense-related concern will be the military's budget, despite the previous Congress having averted the so-called "fiscal cliff."

Come March 1, automatic spending cuts will begin slicing \$500 billion from the Pentagon's budget over the next 10 years — and prompting layoffs for as many as 800,000 civilian Defense Department workers.

"The onus is on Congress to avoid it once and for all," Pentagon press secretary George Little said last week.

The 112th Congress' fiscal cliff deal, the American Taxpayer Relief Act of 2012, delayed until March 1 the start of across-the-board, automatic spending cuts known as sequestration. The federal government would have to begin cutting its spending by about \$1 trillion over the next decade, with the Pentagon accounting for about half of that reduction.

U.S. officials said that, if sequestration begins in March, about \$42.5 billion would be cut from the defense budget over the following seven months. Civilian workers would be notified of layoffs after sequestration has begun and would be given about 30 days' advance notice. Layoffs would not occur all at once, but would be carried out on a rolling basis for a maximum of 22 days.

How the fiscal cliff deal will affect the fiscal 2013 and 2014 defense budgets was not immediately clear.

"There will probably be some impact to this year's budget. We don't know precisely what that number is ... details are still being worked out," Mr. Little said. "Our budget colleagues are working very hard to analyze [the fiscal 2014 budget] and to coordinate closely with the Office of Management and Budget."

The Defense Department is operating on a continuing resolution that will expire March 27. By then, the Senate will have to pass the 2013 defense appropriation bill to fund military spending for the rest of the fiscal year, which ends Sept. 30.

Top national security concerns for Congress in 2013 include Iran's nuclear program, the U.S. "pivot" to the Asia-Pacific region, al Qaeda's operations in Africa and Middle East, Syria's civil war and the withdrawal of American troops from Afghanistan.

Additionally, Defense Secretary Leon E. Panetta is expected to step down, and his replacement would face a Senate confirmation hearing.

Congress already has levied fresh sanctions against Iran in an effort to persuade the regime from trying to develop atomic weapons. The issue will take on more urgency this year as Tehran approaches the so-called “zone of immunity” — the time after which a military strike cannot set back Iran’s nuclear program. Israeli leaders for months have been mulling a strike on the Islamic republic’s nuclear sites.

Meanwhile, the Pentagon will keep Congress apprised of its shift of military assets to the Asia-Pacific — a region noted for large and developing economies but also roiled by various territorial disputes, North Korean provocations and Chinese maritime assertiveness. Sequestration likely would impact the pivot to Asia and require a rethink of the year-old military strategy behind it, a defense official said.

In addition, lawmakers will continue to monitor al Qaeda, its affiliates and other violent extremist groups operating in Africa and the Middle East. The 2013 National Defense Authorization Act allocates funds for training and equipping allied nations to defeat terrorists in Yemen and North Africa, as well as Somalia, Mali and Nigeria.

“The good news is that al Qaeda as an organization has been badly weakened, but it’s important to keep the pressure on them,” said Christopher Preble, director of foreign-policy studies at the Cato Institute.

Congress also is requiring the defense secretary to submit an assessment of limited military activities that could weaken the Syrian government’s ability to use air power against civilians and opposition groups, and submit a review of Russia’s military support to Syria.

Members of Congress also will oversee the military’s withdrawal from Afghanistan, where about 66,000 U.S. troops are fighting Taliban and al Qaeda forces. President Obama is to soon announce how many U.S. troops will remain in Afghanistan after 2014, which will determine the pace of the withdrawal in 2013 through the end of 2014.

Lawmakers also will allocate funds for Afghan National Security Forces after 2014, when all U.S. and international combat forces are due to leave the country.