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US Congress passes \$633 billion military spending bill

By Kate Randall

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The US Senate voted Thursday night to authorize nearly \$633 billion in military spending. President Obama is expected to sign the legislation, which provides \$552.1 billion for the regular military budget and \$80.7 billion for the war in Afghanistan and other overseas contingency operations (OCO).

The 2014 National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA) authorizes spending for the fiscal year that began October 1. It is the 52nd consecutive year that Congress has passed such legislation, and represents a minimal reduction from the \$643 billion authorized for fiscal year 2013.

To put these expenditures into perspective, the budget for all of fiscal year 2013 for food stamps, the Supplemental Nutritional Assistance Program (SNAP), was \$76.4 billion, only 12 percent of the figure designated for the military in 2014. A Republican proposal in the Farm Bill, which Congress has yet to pass, would cut \$39 billion over the next decade from this vital nutrition program.

Some 1.3 million Americans will lose their sole income at the end of this month when the federal government ends extended unemployment benefits. The \$25.6 billion spent on these benefits in

2013 is dwarfed by the massive spending on the military apparatus and its destructive weaponry slated for fiscal year 2014.

The Senate voted 84-15 to pass the Pentagon spending bill, and the US House approved similar legislation last week in a 350-69 vote. The bill's passage demonstrates the overwhelming bipartisan support in Congress for the continued US presence in Afghanistan and other acts of military aggression across the globe. The legislation covers combat pay, ships, aircraft and military bases, as well as providing a 1 percent pay raise to military personnel.

The bill also includes measures in response to the widespread instances of sexual assault in the US military and their cover-up and deliberate disregard and mishandling by the military brass. The Pentagon estimates that at least 26,000 members of the military may have been sexually assaulted last year alone, and that thousands more victims did not come forward for fear of inaction or retribution.

The legislation would strip commanders of their ability to overturn military jury convictions and would also require a civilian review if a commander declines to prosecute a case. Any individual convicted of sexual assault would also face dishonorable discharge or dismissal.

The legislation does not include a proposal by Sen. Kirsten Gillibrand (Democrat of New York) that would give victims of sexual assault an independent route to pursue prosecutions of their attackers outside the military chain of command.

The Congressional authorization of close to \$81 billion to fund the continued occupation of Afghanistan stands in sharp contrast to deep popular opposition to the 13-year-old war, in which 2,289 US troops have died and more than 19,000 wounded.

A Washington Post-ABC News poll of 1,005 US adults conducted December 12-15 shows that 66 percent of Americans say the war in Afghanistan was not worth fighting, and a record 50 percent now "strongly" believe that the war has not been worth the cost.

A separate Associated Press-GfK poll released Wednesday shows that 57 percent of Americans think the US did "the wrong thing" in going to war in Afghanistan.

Tens of thousands of Afghan civilians have died as a result of airstrikes, house-to-house raids, as well as a consequence of displacement, starvation and disease, and lack of medical treatment. The US government has refused to sign a security agreement with the regime of Afghan President Hamid Karzai—which would keep 8,000-10,000 troops in Afghanistan after 2014—guaranteeing a halt to US military raids on civilian homes.

The NDAA not only authorizes the stationing of US troops in Afghanistan and at bases and other locations around the world, but covers the cost of weapons programs and military construction

projects. The measure also authorizes \$17.6 billion for nuclear weapons programs at the Department of Energy.

The Pentagon is authorized to buy this year's installment of 29 F-35 Lightning II jets, capable of performing ground attack and reconnaissance with stealth capability. Produced by Lockheed Martin in Bethesda, Maryland, the fighter jet is the military's costliest weapons program, with an overall projected cost of \$391.2 billion for a fleet of 2,443 aircraft.

The measure authorizes \$1.3 billion for multiyear procurement contracts for Northrop Grumman's E-2D Advanced Hawkeye surveillance plane, and would also prohibit the Pentagon's plan to retire Northrop's Global Hawk Block 30 drone.

The bill also authorizes \$90 billion to continue upgrades performed by General Dynamics in Ohio of the M1A2 tank. It also provides \$178 million in funding that was not requested by the Pentagon for M-1 Abrams tanks.

The cost ceiling has been raised to \$12.9 billion on the USS Gerald R. Ford, being built by Huntington Ingalls Industries in Newport News, Virginia, making the vessel the most expensive US warship in history. The NDAA will require quarterly reports from the Navy on its cost estimates for the USS John F. Kennedy, the next in the new class of aircraft carriers.

The NDAA authorizes \$284 million to boost Israel, the US ally in the Middle East in its pursuit of control over the oil rich region and its targeting of Iran, Syria and other nations. This includes \$33.7 million to improve the Arrow Weapon System and \$117 million for the Short-Range Missile Defense Program. Another \$22 million is pegged for development of the Arrow-3 upper-tier interceptor, a joint development project of Chicago-based Boeing Co. and Israel Aerospace Industries Ltd.