

SENATE TO VOTE ON CRIMINAL JUSTICE BILL

Overhaul would change 'tough on crime' laws

The Associated Press

WASHINGTON — Under pressure from President Donald Trump and many of his Republican colleagues, Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell said Tuesday that he will bring legislation to the floor to overhaul the nation's sentencing laws.

McConnell's decision comes after more than three years of overtures from a large, bipartisan group of senators who support the criminal justice bill, including Senate Judiciary Committee Chairman Chuck Grassley and

House Speaker Paul Ryan. Trump announced his support for the legislation last month, but McConnell treaded cautiously and said the bill was among a number of competing priorities for the lame-duck session.

Texas Sen. John Cornyn, the No. 2 Republican, said Trump's push for the legislation had been "critical to the outcome here."

"Senator McConnell was always concerned about the small window of time that we have to do all these things we need to do, but the president was insistent that this be included," he said.

If the legislation passes, it could be a rare bipartisan policy achievement for this Congress and the largest sentencing overhaul in decades.

Most Democrats support the

bill, which would revise 1980s and '90s-era "tough on crime" laws to boost rehabilitation efforts for federal prisoners and give judges more discretion when sentencing nonviolent offenders, particularly for drug offenses. Supporters say the changes would make the criminal justice system fairer, reduce overcrowding in federal prisons and save taxpayer dollars.

Supporters have long said that the bill would pass if McConnell would just put it on the floor. But McConnell appeared to have concerns that it would divide his caucus. One vocal GOP opponent, Sen. Tom Cotton of Arkansas, has criticized the bill as allowing for early release of serious and repeat felons.

McConnell said he was moving the bill as soon as this week

"at the request of the president" and following improvements to the legislation. A revised bill makes some changes requested by Senate Republicans and law enforcement groups who had concerns it would be too soft on some offenders.

Cornyn announced Tuesday morning that he had requested changes to the bill to bring on more Republicans. He said one of the changes was to ensure that fewer firearms offenders got reduced sentences.

"My goal all along has been trying to grow the vote and gain support for the law enforcement community, and I think the bill has improved as a result, and I think the prospects for passage are much better," he said.

Cornyn said similar sentencing reforms on the state level in

Texas show that criminal justice overhaul can be successful.

It's unclear how long it will take to move the bill. McConnell said senators should be prepared to stay in session the week following Christmas if necessary to complete their work.

Supporters who have been pushing the bill for years — including many law enforcement organizations, liberal advocacy groups and major GOP donors — were elated.

"It's an incredibly groundbreaking moment and it's really emotional for the broad coalition who has worked so hard on this legislation for so many years," said Holly Harris, executive director of the advocacy group Justice Action Network. "I never doubted the leader would be on the right side of history on this bill."



A woman cries outside the Metropolitan Cathedral after a church shooting, in Campinas, Brazil.

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Yemen rivals to swap prisoners

The Associated Press

RIMBO, Sweden — The two sides in Yemen's civil war agreed Tuesday to exchange more than 15,000 prisoners by Jan. 20, a member of the rebel delegation said, in what could be the first major breakthrough in the 4-year-old conflict that has killed thousands of people and left millions more facing hunger.

Delegations from the internationally recognized government of President Abed Rabbo Mansour Hadi and Iran-backed Shia rebels said at news conferences in Sweden that they have exchanged prisoner lists.

The lists will be reviewed over four weeks, ahead of a final swap to be facilitated by the International Committee of the Red Cross, the representatives said.

The move is a crucial step in implementing an agreement reached earlier this month on the exchange of all prisoners held by both sides.

The government, which is backed by a Saudi-led coalition, said it has provided UN mediators with an initial list of 8,200 prisoners allegedly held by the rebels, known as Houthis.

The government list included members of the family of former President Ali Abdullah Saleh, who was killed by the Houthis in December 2017. It also included more than 300 children and 88 women.

The rebel delegation said it has provided its own list of prisoners held by the government.

"The Houthis provided a list of 7,487 captives and detainees. We provided a [list] of 8,576 detainees," said Askar Zouail of the government delegation. "But the number of detainees [held by the rebels] exceeds 18,000 detainees since the beginning of the war" in March 2015.

While UN officials at the talks called the exchange of prisoner lists "very impressive," the sheer size of the swap could potentially delay the process beyond the Jan. 20 deadline and hinder implementation of the deal.

Othman Mujali, who is agriculture minister in the Hadi government, said both sides are considering a mechanism for implementing the swap.

"We hope the other side is serious. For us, we are serious and ready at the moment," he said.

Gunman kills 4, then himself, after Mass

RIO DE JANEIRO — A man opened fire in a cathedral in southern Brazil after Mass on Tuesday, killing four and leaving four others injured before taking a bullet in the ribs in a firefight with police and then shooting himself in the head, authorities said.

The mass shooting, a rarity in Latin America's largest nation, happened right after the midday service had ended at the Metropolitan Cathedral in Campinas, a city about 60 miles

north of Sao Paulo.

Hours after paramedics were seen taking bodies and the injured out of the church, authorities identified the shooter as 49-year-old Euler Fernando Grandolpho of Valinhos, a nearby city in the densely populated state of Sao Paulo.

Grandolpho, a systems analyst, was not a member of the church, authorities said. According to public records, Grandolpho had held various

jobs with government entities, including a stint as an assistant to the prosecutor in the public ministry in Sao Paulo.

Authorities said they had not identified a motive.

Brazil has long struggled with gun violence, and is routinely the world leader in total homicides. Last year, nearly 64,000 people were killed.

Still, mass shootings like those in the United States are unusual. — AP