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BY LYNN SWEET SUN-TIMES COLUMNIST

The Senate approved a measure to make it easier for Polish citizens to visit the United States without visas, in recognition of Poland's role as an ally in sending troops to Iraq and Afghanistan.

But the provision, sponsored by Senate Majority Leader Bill Frist (R-Tenn.), Sen. Rick Santorum (R-Pa.) and Sen. Barbara Mikulski (D-Md.) and passed unanimously on a voice vote Wednesday, faces many hurdles before it becomes law because it is part of the immigration bill being debated in Congress.

However, the Senate's adoption of visa waiver legislation for Poland, propelled by Frist's embrace of the cause, provides momentum that may allow it to surface in other measures even if Congress never sends the contentious immigration overhaul legislation to President Bush's desk.

"Allowing our allies in the war on terror to participate in the visa waiver program is a simple way to express appreciation for their contributions and foster continued goodwill," Frist said in a statement.

The lack of a visa waiver program for Poland, a staunch U.S. ally, has been a source of friction between the countries. Frist visited Warsaw last month and discussed the matter with Poland's new president, Lech Kaczynski.

"The people of Poland don't understand, and frankly neither do I, why France is among the 27 countries of the visa waiver program, but Poland is not," Mikulski said during floor debate Wednesday.

That's a reference to France's refusal to back the United States on the Iraqi war and an allusion to other European Union countries with visa waivers who did not send soldiers to Iraq.

Poland has about 1,000 soldiers in Iraq and another 1,000 in Afghanistan as part of a NATO mission. The new Polish government, however, may pull troops out of Iraq.

At present, the citizens of 27 nations are allowed to visit the United States without waivers, and pressure has been building for some time to add Poland to the list. It's a matter of vast importance to the Chicago area's large Polish and Polish-American community.

Last year, Rep. Dan Lipinski (D-III.) and Rep. John Shimkus (R-III.) were among the co-sponsors of a bill granting visa waivers for Polish citizens, but it stalled in part because the proposal never won the backing of the State Department.

The Senate-approved visa waiver plan for Poland has the support of the State and Justice departments. The amendment would allow Poland to be part of the visa waiver program for two years on a probationary basis, which would allow its citizens to visit the United States for 60 days without needing a visa.

Lipinski said he was encouraged about the ultimate prospects of the Polish waiver proposal now that it has the backing of Frist, and pessimistic about the prospects of the House and Senate agreeing on a bill to send to Bush to sign.

"Poland certainly has been a great ally of the United States," Lipinski said.

Said Mikulski, "The United States is blessed with few allies as stalwart as Poland, but we tell a grandmother in Gdansk she needs a visa to visit her grandchildren in America."