WASHINGTON - Vice President Dick Cheney prodded Congress yesterday to extend and broaden an expiring surveillance law, saying that "fighting the war on terror is a long-term enterprise" that should not come with an expiration date.

"We're reminding Congress that they must act now," Cheney told The Heritage Foundation, a conservative think tank. The law, which authorizes the administration to eavesdrop on phone calls and to view e-mail to and from suspected terrorists, expires Feb. 1. Congress is bickering over the terms of its extension.

On Tuesday, Senate Republicans blocked an effort by Harry Reid of Nevada, the majority leader, to extend the stopgap Protect America Act without expanding it, raising stakes for an expected showdown in the Senate later this week on a new version of the law.

"This cause is bigger than the quarrels of party and the agendas of politicians," Cheney said. "And if we in Washington, all of us, can only see our way clear to work together, then the outcome should not be in doubt."

Congress hurriedly adopted the stopgap act last summer in the face of warnings from the administration about dangerous gaps in the government's ability to gather intelligence in the Internet age.

Administration allies in Congress not only want the expiring law made permanent, but also seek to have it amended to give telephone companies and other communications providers immunity from being sued for helping the administration eavesdrop on phone calls and to view e-mail to and from suspected terrorists, expires Feb. 1. Congress is bickering over the terms of its extension.

By Tom Raum
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Cheney pushes Congress to extend, broaden wiretap law - The Boston Globe

Cheney said such providers "face dozens of lawsuits."

"The intelligence community doesn't have the facilities to carry out the kind of international surveillance needed to defend this country since 9/11. In some situations, there is no alternative to seeking assistance from the private sector. This is entirely appropriate," Cheney said.

At the White House, Dana Perino, press secretary, defended the proposal to protect phone companies from liability. "These are companies who helped their country right after 9/11," she said.

She also criticized Democratic plans for a one-month extension of the current law. "Look, there's been six months to hash out the differences. . . . And there was robust debate, a hearty debate back in August when we got the bill that we have now," she said.

At the heart of the controversy is whether the government's wireless surveillance program violated provisions of the original Foreign Intelligence Surveillance Act, or FISA, that require warrants for wiretaps whenever one of the parties involved in the communication resides in the United States.

Reid plans to bring to the Senate floor today competing versions of the legislation.

If a bill is not passed then, Reid said he would require the Senate to work through the weekend to get a measure approved. ■