Prospect for quick end to shutdown is remote

By David Espo
Associated Press

WASHINGTON — The prospect for a swift end to the 4-day-old partial government shutdown all but vanished Friday as lawmakers squabbled into the weekend and increasingly shifted their focus to a midmonth deadline for averting a threatened first-ever default.

"This isn't some damn game," said House Speaker John Boehner, as the White House and Democrats held to their position of agreeing to negotiate only after the government is reopened and the $16.7 trillion debt limit raised.

House Republicans appeared to be shifting their demands, de-emphasizing their previous insistence on defunding the health care overhaul in exchange for reopening the government. Instead, they ramped up calls for cuts in federal benefit programs

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SHUTDOWN

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and future deficits, items that Boehner has said repeatedly will be part of any talks on debt limit legislation.

Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid, D-Nev., also said the two issues were linked. "We not only have a shutdown, but we have the full faith and credit of our nation before us in a week or 10 days," he said.

Reid and other Democrats blocked numerous attempts by Sen. Ted Cruz to approve House-passed bills to reopen portions of the government. The Texas Republican is a chief architect of the "Defund Obamacare" strategy and met earlier this week with allies in the House and an aide to Majority Leader Eric Cantor, R-Va., to confer on strategy.

There was no evident urgency about ending the partial shutdown before the weekend.

The Republican-controlled House approved legislation restoring funds for federal disaster relief on a vote of 247-164. Another allowing the resumption of the Women, Infants and Children nutrition program was approved 244-164.

Saturday's agenda called for passing a bill to assure post-shutdown pay for an estimated 800,000 furloughed federal employees off the job since midday Tuesday, then turning off the lights on the House floor until Monday night to allow lawmakers to fly home for two days.

After issuing a string of veto threats against GOP spending bills, the White House did not object to the one to assure pay for furloughed employees.

Treasury Secretary Jacob Lew has said that unless Congress acts, the government will be unable to pay all its debts and will run the risk of default. He has urged lawmakers to act by Oct. 17.

Debt limit bills typically pass first in the House, then move to the Senate. So far, neither Boehner nor the rest of the leadership has said when they expect to draft and have a vote on one. More than a week ago, they circulated a list of items that might be included — calls for higher Medicare costs for better-off seniors, a wholesale easing of environmental regulations and approval of the Keystone Pipeline among them.

Republican officials said that in a closed-door session with the rank and file during the day, the speaker renewed his long-standing commitment to seeking reforms and savings from benefit programs to help reduce federal deficits. They spoke on condition of anonymity.

At the White House, Obama has said repeatedly he will not negotiate over the terms of debt limit legislation but is willing to discuss a range of issues once the government is reopened.