

Clinton Urged to Tighten Gun Import Law

■ **Firearms:** A group of lawmakers calls on the president to widen the range of his planned directive against bringing assault weapons into the United States.

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TIMES STAFF WRITERS

Pressure mounted Wednesday from new corners of Capitol Hill urging President Clinton to act much more aggressively in cutting off the flow of imported assault weapons modified to skirt federal laws.

A day after the Clinton administration announced that it planned to ban imports of modified assault weapons, several members of Congress exhorted him in a letter to "go one step further" and stop the import of 30 other models already crossing U.S. borders by the thousands.

Rep. Carolyn McCarthy (D-N.Y.), whose husband was slain in 1993 by a man armed with a handgun equipped with a high-capacity ammunition magazine, said she signed the letter to Clinton because the "will of the people around the country is that we don't need these weapons on the streets.

"Just because there are these legal loopholes, that's not following the intent of the law," said McCarthy, whose son was injured in the same 1993 attack. "We have a hard enough time trying to control our own guns in this country from our own manufacturers. Would they sell those guns in their own countries? I doubt it. They shouldn't be unloading them on us."

The Clinton administration is said to be debating the scope of the pending presidential directive. At the minimum, Clinton is expected to sign an order that would suspend pending and future applications to import modified assault weapons. The directive also would examine the criteria used to allow importation of nonsporting weapons and adjust those criteria if necessary.

"We now are seeing manufacturers who are able, in a sense, to clone assault weapons and slip underneath

the standards," White House spokesman Mike McCurry said Wednesday. "The president has a big concern about that."

The White House's action came after 30 senators, led by Sen. Dianne Feinstein, wrote Clinton last month asking that he temporarily suspend imports of all semiautomatic assault weapons and block the proposed importation from Israel of thousands of reconfigured Uzi and Galil assault weapons. The Uzis and Galils have been altered so that they do not violate the 1994 restrictions on assault weapons, but their ability to accept large-capacity ammunition clips remains intact.

It was not clear Wednesday how, or if, Clinton's directive would affect the importation of the Israeli-made weapons or weapons from about 15 other countries that have already received importation permits from the U.S. Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms.

Feinstein—and now several members of the House—are urging Clinton to use his executive authority in much the same way President Bush did in 1989 when he banned the importation of 43 foreign-made assault weapons because they did not have a legitimate "sporting purpose" as required by law.

"You have the power to ban the import of all assault weapons, including those that have received federal permits in the past," the letter to Clinton said.

Besides McCarthy, the letter's signers were Rep. Charles E. Schumer (D-N.Y.), ranking member of the House Judiciary Committee and an influential voice on firearms matters, Nita M. Lowey (D-N.Y.) and Walter H. Capps (D-Santa Barbara).

Separately, Capps is circulating a second letter in

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Congress—which, as of late Wednesday, had been signed by 43 lawmakers—that also calls upon Clinton to broaden the importation restrictions.

“We want to push him on this because it’s the right thing to do,” Capps said Wednesday.

Gun control advocates also called upon Clinton to broaden the import directive.

“President Clinton recognizes that we need to take steps to stop cynical foreign gun makers from using legal loopholes to put these deadly guns on America’s streets,” said Kristen Rand of the Violence Policy Center in Washington. “This should be just the first step of many. We need a broader program to clean up, tighten up and more vigorously enforce the assault weapons ban.”

Top officials of the powerful National Rifle Assn. denounced Clinton’s pending action.

“This is the most disturbing step in 50 years—to ban an entire class of firearms,” said Wayne LaPierre, NRA’s executive vice president.

“This ban has nothing to do with crime,” he said. “More people are murdered each year with fists and feet than with assault weapons.”

He accused Clinton of embarking on “the process of banning full ownership of firearms by the American public.”

“What is next to be banned?” LaPierre asked. “The Remington 7400 semiautomatic deer rifle? The Benelli semiautomatic shotgun, like the one the president used in duck hunting?”

The effort to crack down on so-called copycat assault weapons comes after a Times series in August revealed significant flaws in the nation’s assault weapon laws that had allowed manufacturers here and abroad to produce weapons slightly different but just as lethal as banned ones.

Times staff writer Elizabeth Shogren in Washington, D.C., contributed to this report.