

Washington, Sep 17 (AP)- The House Select Committee on Benghazi gets its public debut Wednesday, two years after militants in the eastern Libyan city killed the U.S. ambassador and three other Americans, and four months after Republicans launched their special investigation. The panel is using its first open hearing to focus on what the Obama administration has done since the Sept. 11, 2012, attack to improve security at U.S. embassies and other diplomatic missions around the world. The State Department's chief of diplomatic security was to be the committee's first witness.

It was unclear whether the big allegations that prompted the probe will be examined - that U.S. forces were directed not to respond and that administration officials lied about the nature of the attack.

"This is truly an effort to do fact-finding," Rep. Mike Pompeo, one of seven Republicans on the 12-member committee, said in a telephone interview, stressing the thoroughness of the investigation, not its urgency. "Much of the work we're going to do won't be in hearings like we're having this week."

On the surface, the hearing should be noncontroversial. It will center on the State Department's implementation of an independent review board's recommendations to correct "systemic failures" that led to grossly inadequate security in Benghazi. The department endorsed the recommendations and there is little disagreement between congressional Democrats and Republicans about them.

But on almost everything else related to Benghazi - interpretations of what happened before, during and after the attack - far greater partisan divide prevails.

Republicans have issued a range of accusations, from the military holding back assets that could have saved American lives to President Barack Obama, former Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton and others misleading the public about the attack as Americans prepared for a presidential election. Democrats deride the continued interest in Benghazi as a right-wing obsession designed to maintain talk of scandal and harm a potential Clinton bid for the presidency in 2016.

When Republican House Speaker John Boehner called for the select committee's establishment in May, he accused the Obama administration of "obstructing the truth about Benghazi." The new body, Boehner vowed, will work "quickly" to get answers.

Democrats on the panel are trying to pressure majority Republicans into providing a time frame and scope for the investigation. The initial budget is \$3.3 million but no limits have been placed on what the select committee can look at or when the probe must finish.

"We can't keep re-litigating the same issues over and over," Democratic Rep. Adam Schiff said at a news conference Tuesday.

Democrats have created a website pulling together various Benghazi claims of Republican House and Senate members alongside the conclusions of past congressional investigations. Democratic Rep. Adam Smith said the goal was to prevent the select body from becoming "another partisan witch hunt."

Despite the attention devoted to the Benghazi attack, the panel clearly was being overshadowed this week.

Lawmakers, eager to return this week to campaigning for the Nov. 4 election in which control of Congress will be at stake, were racing to seal a spending bill that would avert a government shutdown and authorize Obama to train and arm moderate Syrian rebels to fight Islamic State

militants in the Middle East.