

Senate Plans Background Check Vote Wed.

BY ALAN FRAM
 Associated Press

WASHINGTON — The Senate set a long-awaited vote for Wednesday on a bipartisan plan for expanding background checks to more firearms buyers, with supporters facing a steeply uphill path to victory.

By scheduling the roll call, Senate leaders ensured a showdown over the cornerstone of an effort by gun control supporters to tighten firearms laws following December's killings of 20 students and six aides at an elementary school in Newtown, Conn.

The Senate planned to vote on eight other amendments as well to a Democratic gun control bill that besides expanding background checks, would tighten laws against gun trafficking and boost school safety aid.

They included Democratic proposals to ban assault weapons and high-capacity ammunition clips, which are expected to lose; a Republican proposal requiring states to honor other states' permits allowing concealed weapons, which faces a close vote; and a broad GOP substitute for the overall gun measure.

The focus of both sides has been on a compromise by Sens. Joe Manchin, D-W.Va., and Patrick Toomey, R-Pa., broadening background checks. It will be the first amendment voted on Wednesday. Despite appearances at the Capitol on Wednesday by wounded former Rep. Gabrielle Giffords, proponents seem to face enough potential opponents to derail their endeavor unless they can figure out how to win more votes.

"The notion that Congress would defy the overwhelming instinct of the American people after what we saw happen in Newtown, I think is unimaginable."

BARACK OBAMA

No. 2 Democratic leader Richard Durbin of Illinois, his party's chief vote counter, left a lunch of Democratic senators saying they would need support from nine or 10 Republicans — a tall order.

Attending Tuesday's Senate lunch was Giffords, the Arizona Democrat severely hurt in a 2011 mass shooting in Tucson, and her husband, retired astronaut Mark Kelly. The two, gun owners both, have started a political committee that backs candidates who favor gun restrictions.

"His message was, 'We've been through this,'" Durbin said, describing Kelly's remarks to the lawmakers. "We're ready to fight back to stand up for those who have the courage to vote for gun safety."

Giffords did not address the lawmakers. In a blow to gun control advocates, Sen. Dean Heller, R-Nev., became the latest Republican to say he will oppose a bipartisan compromise broadening background checks.

"I believe that this legislation could lead to the creation of a national gun registry and puts

additional burdens on law-abiding citizens," he said.

Before the lunch, Giffords and Kelly met privately with Manchin and Toomey. Their compromise would expand background checks to cover gun shows and the Internet, a plan gun control supporters think gives them the best chance of pushing a broader system of checks through the Senate.

"They're helping immensely just by being here and talking to our colleagues. We're close, but we sure need their help," Manchin said after that meeting.

Manchin and Toomey were no longer considering a change to their bill to exempt people who live far from gun dealers, making it difficult to go to the dealers' shops to have background checks performed. The hope had been to attract votes from Alaska and North Dakota senators, and the sponsors' decision to move ahead without it seemed to suggest that the effort to win over those senators would fail.

Background checks are aimed at weeding out criminals and the seriously mentally ill from getting firearms. The current background check system applies only to transactions with licensed gun dealers.

President Barack Obama, in an interview with NBC's "Today" show, urged lawmakers to pay attention to public support for expanding background checks and remember the massacre at Sandy Hook Elementary School.

"The notion that Congress would defy the overwhelming instinct of the American people after what we saw happen in Newtown, I think is unimaginable," Obama said in the interview, aired Tuesday.

Massive Quake Hits Iran-Pakistan Border

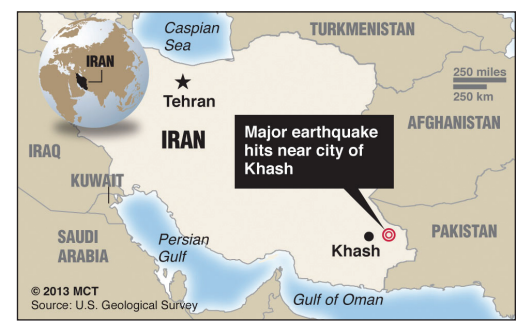
TEHRAN, Iran (AP) — An earthquake toppled homes and shops on both sides of the Iran-Pakistan border Tuesday, killing dozens of people and causing skyscrapers to sway in Dubai. It also forced Iranian officials — for the second time in less than a week — to issue assurances that its main nuclear reactor wasn't damaged.

At least 34 people were killed in a single village in Pakistan, a military official said. But the overall death toll became clouded after conflicting reports from Iran.

At first, Iran's state-run Press TV said at least 40 people died — which would push the two-nation tally to 74. But it later retreated from its account, and other Iranian outlets stepped in with a far less dire picture.

Despite the conflicting reports on the Iranian side, a Pakistani military official said at least 34 were killed on their side of the border and 80 were injured. Up to 1,000 mud homes were damaged, Pakistan Television added. The military spoke on condition of anonymity in line with Pakistan military policy.

A Pakistani policeman, Azmatullah Regi, said nearly three dozen homes and shops collapsed in one village in the Mashkel area, which was the hardest hit by the quake. Rescue workers pulled the bodies of a couple and their three children, ages 5 to 15, from the rubble of one house, he said.



Letter To Mississippi Senator Tests For Ricin

BY DONNA CASSATA
 Associated Press

WASHINGTON — An envelope addressed to Sen. Roger Wicker of Mississippi twice tested positive Tuesday for ricin, a potentially fatal poison, congressional officials said, heightening concerns about terrorism a day after a bombing killed three and left more than 170 injured at the Boston Marathon.

One senator, Claire McCaskill of Missouri, said authorities have a suspect in the fast-moving ricin case, but she did not say if an arrest had been made. She added the letter was from an individual who frequently writes lawmakers.

The FBI and U.S. Capitol Police are both investigating. Both declined to comment.

Late Tuesday, Wicker released a statement acknowledging the letter and said it was sent to his Washington office.

"This matter is part of an ongoing investigation by the United States Capitol Police and FBI," Wicker said. "I want to thank our law enforcement officials for their hard work and diligence in keeping those of us who work in the Capitol complex safe."

Terrance W. Gainer, the Senate sergeant-at-arms, said in an emailed message to Senate offices that the envelope to Wicker, a Republican, had no obviously suspicious outside markings and lacked a return address. It bore a postmark from Memphis, Tenn.

Mail from a broad swath of northern Mississippi, including the Memphis suburbs of DeSoto County, Miss., Tupelo, Oxford and the northern part of the Mississippi Delta region is processed

and postmarked in Memphis, according to a Postal Service map. The Memphis center also processes mail for residents of western parts of Tennessee and eastern Arkansas.

Gainer said there was "no indication that there are other suspect mailings." Yet he urged caution, and also said the Senate off-site mail facility where the initial tests were performed on the letter will be closed for a few days while the investigation continues.

The letter was discovered at a mail processing plant in Prince George's County in suburban Maryland, according to Sen. Dick Durbin, D-Ill.

Wicker, 61, was appointed to the Senate in 2007 and won election to a full term two years ago. He previously served a dozen years in the House.

He has a solidly conservative voting record, so much so that he drew notice last week when he voted to allow debate to begin on controversial gun legislation in the Senate. "I cast this vote at the request of the National Rifle Association, of which I am a member," he said in a statement at the time that added he has a 100 percent voting record in favor of Second Amendment rights.

Majority Leader Harry Reid told reporters of the letter. Other lawmakers said they had been provided information by Gainer's office.

Milt Leitenberg, a University of Maryland bioterrorism expert, said ricin is a poison derived from the same bean that makes castor oil. According to a Homeland Security Department handbook, ricin is deadliest when inhaled. It is not contagious, but

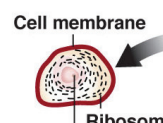
Ricin: Dangerous plant toxin

Ricin, a protein produced by the castor plant, is poisonous to humans, but difficult to deliver in fatal doses.

Extracted from waste left when castor beans are pressed to make castor oil

Effect on body

- 1 Enters by one of these three routes
- Skin penetration by pellet of ricin
- Swallowing ricin in water or food
- Inhaling mist or powder



Cell membrane
Nucleus
Ribosomes

- 2 Travels through bloodstream; destroys cells by attacking their protein-making sites called ribosomes

- 3 Fatal organ failure can occur in 36 to 72 hours, depending on how ricin entered body
- If not fatal in 3 to 5 days, person usually recovers
- No antidote; treatment consists of minimizing symptoms, removing ricin not yet in bloodstream

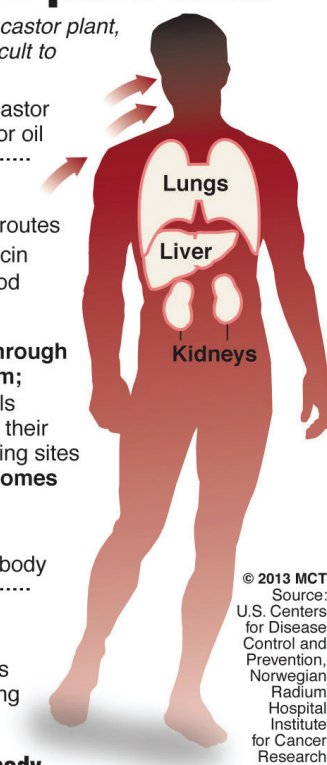
Effect depends on route into body

	Lethal dose	Time of first symptoms	Possible early symptoms	Possible lethal effect
Skin penetration	Pinhead-size amount	Variable; relatively prompt	Variable	Multi-organ failure
Swallowing	Much larger amount	Less than 6 hours	Vomiting, diarrhea, dehydration	Liver or kidney failure
Inhalation	Much larger amount	8 hours	Difficulty breathing, tight chest, cough	Respiratory failure

there is no antidote.

"Luckily, this was discovered at the processing center off premises," Durbin said. He said all mail to senators is "roasted, toasted, sliced and opened" before it ever gets to them.

One law enforcement official said evidence of ricin appeared on two preliminary field tests of the letter, although such results



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Computer Failure Forces Grounded Flights

DALLAS (AP) — A computer system used to run many daily operations at American Airlines failed Tuesday, forcing the nation's third-largest carrier to ground all flights across the United States for several hours and stranding thousands of frustrated passengers at airports and on planes.

Flights already in the air were allowed to continue to their destinations, but planes on the ground from coast to coast could not take off. And travelers could do little to get back in the air until the computer system was restored.

American blamed its reservation system, which is used for much more than booking flights. Airlines commonly rely on such systems to track passengers and bags, update flight schedules and gate assignments and file flight plans. The computers also help determine how much fuel to put in an aircraft or which seats should be filled to balance a plane.

The failure caused cascading delays and cancellations nationwide.

As of mid-afternoon, American and its American Eagle offshoot canceled more than 700 flights, and another 765 flights were delayed, according to tracking service FlightAware.

Chavez Heir: U.S. Behind Post-Election Violence

CARACAS, Venezuela (AP) — Venezuela's president-elect blamed the opposition Tuesday for seven deaths and 61 injuries that the government claims have occurred in disturbances protesting his election, and he accused the U.S. of organizing the unrest.

Opposition candidate Henrique Capriles later accused the government of being behind the violence. Maduro's accusation against Washington came after the U.S. State Department said it would not recognize the results of Sunday's unexpectedly close election without the vote-by-vote recount being demanded by Capriles.

"The (U.S.) embassy has financed and led all these violent acts," President-elect Nicolas Maduro, the chosen heir of the late Hugo Chavez, said during a televised meeting at the headquarters of the state oil company.

Earlier, he said he would not allow an opposition protest march called for Wednesday in Caracas, saying Capriles was "responsible for the dead we are mourning" from violence during protests across the country.

Immigration Bill Criticized By Left And Right

WASHINGTON (AP) — To some conservatives, it's amnesty. To some immigration advocates, it's unnecessarily punitive. The Senate's new bipartisan immigration bill drew criticism from the right and from the left Tuesday — convincing members of the bipartisan "Gang of Eight" that wrote it that they're on the right track.

"This has something for everybody to hate," said Sen. Jeff Flake, R-Ariz.

Said Sen. Chuck Schumer, D-N.Y.: "No one gets everything they want."

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