

8 Million Calls To IRS Went Unanswered

WASHINGTON (AP) — The IRS’ overloaded phone system hung up on more than 8 million taxpayers this filing season as the agency cut millions of dollars from taxpayer services to help pay to enforce President Barack Obama’s health law. For those who weren’t disconnected, only 40 percent actually got through to a person. And many of those people had to wait on hold for more than 30 minutes, IRS Commissioner John Koskinen said Wednesday. The number of disconnected callers spiked just as taxpayers were being hit with new requirements under the health law. Last year, the phone system dropped 360,000 calls, Koskinen said. For the first time, taxpayers had to report whether they had health insurance last year on their tax returns. Those who received government subsidies had to respond whether they received the correct amount. People without insurance faced fines, collected by the IRS, if they did not qualify for an exemption. A new staff report by Republicans on the House Ways and Means Committee criticized the agency’s spending priorities. The report said the IRS diverted \$134 million in user fees that had been spent on customer service last year to other areas this year.

Saudi-led Coalition Bombs Yemen

SANAA, Yemen (AP) — Hours after Saudi Arabia declared an end to its coalition’s nearly monthlong air campaign in Yemen, new airstrikes Wednesday hit Iran-backed militants and their allies in two cities, and the rebels said they would welcome U.N.-led peace talks in the conflict that has killed more than 900 people. The continued airstrikes suggested that the U.S.-backed offensive, aimed at restoring Yemen’s internationally recognized president, was entering a new phase in which the Saudi-led military action will be scaled back but not halted completely. Air raids struck positions held by the rebels, known as Houthis, and their allies in the southern port of Aden and the central city of Taiz, Yemeni officials said. Fighting continued in both areas between the rebels and supporters of exiled President Abed Rabbo Mansour Hadi, a close U.S. ally who fled Yemen on March 25. The capital of Sanaa was calm, however, giving residents their most peaceful night in almost four weeks. In the evening, thousands of pro-Houthi demonstrators marched and vowed they would never submit to what they described as “Saudi-American aggression.” The Shiite rebels are backed by former President Ali Abdullah Saleh, an autocrat who ruled the impoverished but strategic country for three decades until he was removed amid a 2011 Arab Spring uprising. His military forces have aided the rebels who advanced from the north and control much of Yemen, including Sanaa.

Anarchy Fuels Migrant Smuggling

CAIRO (AP) — Libya’s chaos has turned it into a lucrative magnet attracting migrants desperate to make the dangerous sea voyage to Europe. With no central authority to stop it, business is booming, with smugglers charging ever more as demand goes up, then using the profits to buy larger boats and heavier weapons to ensure no one dare touch them. It’s a vicious cycle that only translates into more tragedies at sea. With each rickety boat that sets off from Libya’s coast, traffickers rake in hundreds of thousands of dollars. So assured are they of their impunity that they operate openly. Many even use Facebook to advertise their services to migrants desperate to flee war, repression and poverty in the Middle East and Africa. And they are armed to the teeth, often working with powerful militias in Libya that control territory and hold political power. One coast guard officer in Sabratha, a Libyan coastal city that is a main launch point for smugglers’ boats headed to Europe, said his small force can do little to stop them. Recently, he heard about a vessel about to leave but refused to send his men to halt it.

Lawyer: Hinckley Should Leave Hospital

WASHINGTON (AP) — The would-be assassin of President Ronald Reagan is ready to leave a mental hospital for good, his lawyer told a federal judge Wednesday, arguing that if he lives full-time with his mother in Virginia, he won’t “be a danger to himself or others.” John Hinckley Jr. is “clinically ready” to live in the community, a position supported by his doctors and therapists, his lawyer Barry Levine said. The mental illness that drove him to shoot the president in 1981 has been in “full and stable remission” for more than two decades, and conditions including regular visits with a psychiatrist and therapist can make sure he stays sane, he said. Prosecutor Colleen Kennedy argued to the contrary, calling the proposed conditions “irresponsible” and “inadequate” when it comes to keeping Hinckley and the community safe. She asked the judge to impose nearly three-dozen restrictions on Hinckley’s freedom, some of which Levine called “draconian,” before he is allowed to leave St. Elizabeths mental hospital in Washington. Hinckley, who turns 60 next month, was 25 when a jury found him not guilty by reason of insanity in the shooting, which also seriously wounded Press Secretary James Brady and two others. He has lived at St. Elizabeths ever since, but for a dozen years now he’s been allowed to spend more than half his time at his mother’s home, gradually reintegrating into society.

66-Year-Old Fugitive Ends Secret Life

FRANKFORT, Ky. (AP) — Frail and tired of leading a secret life for four decades, 66-year-old Clarence David Moore called police this week to surrender. The deputy who answered thought it was a prank. It wasn’t. Moore escaped from police custody three times during the 1970s and eventually settled into a quiet life, living in Kentucky since at least 2009. His health is poor from a stroke and he has difficulty speaking. Without a legitimate ID or Social Security number, he had apparently struggled to get medical care. When Franklin County Sheriff Pat Melton showed up at Moore’s house to make the “arrest,” Moore was in a hospital bed. He broke down in tears. “He looks like he’s almost 90,” the sheriff said. A woman who had been living with Moore had no idea of his past. “She was just blown away when all this happened,” the sheriff said.

Senate Passes Human Trafficking Bill

WASHINGTON (AP) — The Senate unanimously passed legislation Wednesday to help the victims of human trafficking, ending a tortuous partisan standoff over abortion that also delayed confirmation of President Barack Obama’s attorney general nominee. The vote was 99-0 to approve the Justice for Victims of Trafficking Act, which expands law enforcement tools to target sex traffickers and creates a new fund to help victims. The House has passed similar legislation and the White House has voiced support. “We have not fallen deaf to the cries of those who actually need our help, the victims of human trafficking,” said Sen. John Cornyn, R-Texas, the lead GOP sponsor. “This legislation will be instrumental in helping victims of sexual abuse and trafficking recover from a life in bondage.” The unanimous outcome put a bipartisan punctuation mark on legislation that started out with wide support from both parties, but veered into a partisan cul-de-sac last month when Democrats said they’d noticed language that could expand federal prohibitions on abortion funding. How or why Democrats had failed to see the provision in the first place became a topic of frosty dispute on Capitol Hill, with Republicans pointing out that the bill had unanimously passed committee, and one Democratic senator’s office acknowledging that an aide had in fact known of the abortion language.

United States Goes Green On Earth Day



President Barack Obama speaks at Everglades National Park to call attention to climate change on Wednesday near Homestead, Florida. MICHAEL LAUGHLIN/SUN SENTINEL/TNS

NYC Mayor Unveils Sweeping Environmental Plan On Earth Day

BY JONATHAN LEMIRE
Associated Press

NEW YORK — The nation’s biggest city, under the direction of Mayor Bill de Blasio, marked Earth Day on Wednesday by linking a sweeping effort to limit its impact on the environment with its fight against income inequality by pledging to lift more than 800,000 people out of poverty.

De Blasio unveiled his ambitious OneNYC plan as a comprehensive strategy to improve New Yorkers’ lives by providing affordable housing, shortening commute times and preserving the environment.

“The way forward is to create a vision for one city where there’s opportunity for all, sustainability for all and fairness for all,” de Blasio said. “So many people who have fought for economic justice have also fought for environmental justice because these challenges go hand in hand.”

The waste reduction proposal — first reported Tuesday by The Associated Press — is central to the plan. New York, home to about 8.5 million residents, aims to reduce its waste output by 90 percent by 2030 from its 2005 level. The plan, the biggest undertaken by a city in the Western Hemisphere, would eliminate more than 3 million tons of garbage by overhauling the city’s recycling program, offering incentives to reduce waste and embracing the City Council’s plan to dramatically reduce the use of plastic shopping bags.

The waste reduction plan is part of an update to the sustainability project cre-



ated by de Blasio’s predecessor, Michael Bloomberg. But even changing its name from PlaNYC to the loftier OneNYC: The Plan for a Strong and Just City, which invokes de Blasio’s campaign promise to combat the “tale of two cities” created by income inequality, makes clear that the updated plan would grow in scope.

The mayor pledged to lift 800,000 New Yorkers out of poverty or near poverty in the next decade, one of the largest anti-poverty efforts in the nation’s history. De Blasio said it would “change the reality of this city.”

He also reiterated his lofty housing goals — he

aims to create 500,000 units of affordable housing by 2040 — and said he wants to end racial and ethnic disparities in premature mortality. He pledged to explore new capital expenditures — including the feasibility of a new subway line to serve central Brooklyn — to improve the city’s aging infrastructure and to reduce the average New Yorker’s commuting time to 45 minutes.

But de Blasio declined to discuss the cost — or source of funding — for the projects, saying much of that would be revealed in next month’s budget presentation.

Some resiliency advocates applauded the lofty goals, but others, including Jordan Levine of the New York League of Conservation Voters, chided the plan for not providing specifics on funding and warned that “implementation is where rubber meets the road.”

For decades, the city’s trash has been exported to South Carolina, Virginia, New Jersey, Pennsylvania or upstate New York. The amount of waste produced by the city has fallen 14 percent since 2005 because of an increase in recycling, and a key component of the plan is to bolster that output by simplifying the process and consolidating all recycling into one bin by 2020.

Organics — such as food scraps and yard waste — make up nearly a third of the city’s residential waste stream. A program to collect that material directly from residents’ homes is expanding to nearly 200,000 residents by year’s end, and city officials want to serve every home by the end of 2018. The city also will offer economic incentives to participate, including potentially a property tax rebate for homeowners.

The city also aims to reduce commercial waste by 90 percent by 2030 by adopting a program that could mean tax incentives for participating businesses and fines for nonparticipants.

The de Blasio administration stopped short of endorsing a City Council bill that proposes a 10-cent fee on plastic bags, but officials said that reducing their use is a priority and that they would coordinate efforts with the council.

House Panel Is Told Of Slavery In Seafood Industry

BY MARTHA MENDOZA
AP National Writer

WASHINGTON — Modern-day slavery persists around the world, including the abuse of fishermen in the Thai seafood industry whose catch can end up in U.S. markets, a congressional panel was told Wednesday.

“As has been reported for years, the Thai fishing industry is rife with forced labor, both on the high seas and within seafood processing and packing plants,” Mark Lagon, former State Department ambassador for trafficking in persons, told a House Foreign Affairs subcommittee.

Lagon, who now heads Freedom House, a nonprofit organization that advocates for human rights, said it remains to be seen whether the Obama administration will impose sanctions it is authorized to deploy, which would bar Thai seafood from U.S. markets.

The State Department’s key weapon for combatting human trafficking comes in a politically charged annual ranking in “tiers”— Tier 1 is best, 2 means more could be done, and 3 is a blacklist that can spark sanctions. The House global human rights subcommittee urged

the Obama administration to come down hard on those countries that violate human rights when it releases the report in June.

Rep. Chris Smith said China was prematurely upgraded to Tier 2 in 2014, and singled out Myanmar, also known as Burma, Malaysia and Thailand as countries that need to do more to fight human trafficking across shared borders. Unless they’ve dramatically changed their law enforcement, prosecutions and investigations, several African countries face automatic downgrades this year.

Smith said the rankings spur parliamentarians, law enforcement officials and advocates globally “to demand real, measurable change in countries struggling to fight slavery.”

Matthew Smith, who directs Thailand-based Fortify Rights, a nongovernment group, testified that hundreds of thousands of Rohingya Muslims are displaced after widespread attacks in Myanmar and are at grave risk of being trafficked. And he said Myanmar women and girls are often subject to sexual and domestic servitude, or forced to work in the sex industry.

Last month The Associ-

ated Press reported on hundreds of fishermen whose catch is exported from Thailand to the U.S. who were working as modern day slaves, held in cages on the Indonesian island community of Benjina, whipped with sting ray barbs and forced to work at sea for years on end. To date, authorities have rescued some 370 of those men and identified hundreds more still trapped.

The fish they netted can wind up in the supply chains of some of America’s biggest food sellers, such as Wal-Mart, Sysco and Kroger. It can also find its way into the supply chains of some of the most popular brands of canned pet food, including Fancy Feast, Meow Mix and Iams. The companies have all said they strongly condemn labor abuse and are taking steps to prevent it, such as working with human rights groups to hold subcontractors accountable. And Thai authorities, whose \$7 billion seafood export industry counts the U.S. as a key customer, have said for years they are taking strong steps to clean up labor practices; yet documented abuses persist.

The AP also found the U.S. has enforced a law banning the import of goods

made with forced labor just 39 times in 85 years because of a significant loophole: Slave-caught seafood and other items must be allowed in if consumer demand cannot be met without them.

Senate and House committees passed amendments this week to close that loophole.

“There is never a time when forced labor is OK. This is 2015, and there is absolutely no room in our trade policies for any exceptions to that principle,” Sen. Ron Wyden, D-Ore., said during a meeting of the Senate Finance Committee, which approved the change Wednesday evening.

Among those rescued this month from Benjina by Indonesian authorities, Hlaing Min, 32, was told about the congressional hearing while awaiting repatriation to his homeland, Myanmar.

“I want to say to the congressmen that if I were to mention about all the human skulls and bones from the fishermen who died, the sea would be full of Burmese bones,” he said. “On behalf of all the fishermen here, I request to the congressmen that the U.S. stop buying all fish from Thailand. If the label says Thailand, the U.S. should stop buying it.”