

NATION/WORLD DIGEST

Obama Signs \$600M Border Security Bill

WASHINGTON (AP) — President Barack Obama on Friday signed into law a \$600 million measure that will put more agents and equipment along the Mexican border.

Obama signed the bill in the Oval Office alongside Homeland Security Secretary Janet Napolitano. It will pay for the hiring of 1,000 new Border Patrol agents to be deployed at critical areas along the border, as well as more Immigration and Customs Enforcement agents. It also provides for new communications equipment and greater use of unmanned surveillance drones.

Some Republicans, including Arizona Sen. John McCain, say that while the legislation is a start, it falls short by not dramatically increasing the number of customs inspectors along the border and not funding a program that charges illegal immigrants with low-level crimes.

Arizona has been at the epicenter of the border security debate because of its new law directing law enforcement officers to be more aggressive in seeking out illegal immigrants. Although a federal judge has since struck down some of the law's major provisions, it remains a rallying cry for those who say Washington has lost control of the border.

Laborers' Union To Rejoin AFL-CIO

WASHINGTON (AP) — The Laborers' International Union is rejoining the AFL-CIO five years after leaving in a bitter dispute that split the U.S. labor movement.

AFL-CIO President Richard Trumka says the move is an important step in helping organized labor become more unified. The 800,000-member laborers' union represents workers in the construction industry.

The Laborers and five other unions left the AFL-CIO amid complaints that the nation's largest labor federation focused too much on politics and not enough on organizing new members. Those break-away unions formed the Change to Win federation.

The Laborers are the second union to return to the AFL-CIO. Last year, the union of hotel, restaurant and clothing workers known as UNITE HERE rejoined.

Auditor: Efficiency Funds Going Unspent

WASHINGTON (AP) — A government audit finds that most of the money authorized for one of the energy efficiency programs in last year's stimulus plan is going unspent.

The Energy Department's inspector general said Friday that grant recipients have spent just 8.4 percent of the \$3.2 billion authorized to help state and local governments become more energy efficient.

Inspector General Gregory H. Friedman says the department didn't have the resources or staff in place to get the Energy Efficiency and Conservation Block Grant Program going last year.

But department spokesman Stephanie Mueller says the program has gained steam in recent months.

White House Against Ending Birth Citizenship

WASHINGTON (AP) — The Obama administration says it's wrong to try to change the constitutional amendment that grants automatic citizenship to babies born in the United States.

Homeland Security Secretary Janet Napolitano says she's surprised that Republican congressional leaders are joining a push to reconsider the 14th Amendment instead of working with Democrats on comprehensive immigration reform. Napolitano says that's "just wrong."

White House spokesman Robert Gibbs says President Barack Obama agrees with Napolitano.

Senate Republican leader Mitch McConnell of Kentucky has said he supports holding hearings to reconsider the citizenship rights of illegal immigrants' babies born in the U.S. But he emphasized that Washington should remain focused on border security.

Gates Likes Plans To Reinvest Savings

SAN DIEGO (AP) — Defense Secretary Robert Gates said Friday he is pleased with the military services' initial recommendations for cutting their budgets and spending the savings on weapons modernization.

Gates called the services' cuts and reinvestment priorities ambitious and aggressive.

"Because they get to reinvest savings, they're highly motivated to make it work," the Pentagon chief said.

Gates has ordered the services and the Pentagon's agencies to find \$100 billion in spending cuts and savings over the next five years.

He made the comments to reporters accompanying him on a visit to San Diego's Marine recruit depot. There, he welcomed a group of 196 Marines who had just completed a 13-week basic training course.

As the new Marines stood under the bright sun with a breeze rippling palm trees behind them, Gates praised the "uncommon perseverance" they showed in making it through basic training.

Later he was flying to Whidbey Island Naval Air Station in Washington state.

Clinton Tries Dialing Diplomacy For Mideast

WASHINGTON (AP) — Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton is working the phones to prod Israel and the Palestinians into direct peace talks.

The State Department said Friday that Clinton had called Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and the foreign ministers of Jordan and Egypt to discuss remaining obstacles to getting the talks under way.

Her calls late Thursday followed a visit to the region by U.S. Mideast peace envoy George Mitchell, who wanted to get direct negotiations started next month. The Obama administration remains hopeful that several months of indirect talks mediated by Mitchell can soon be parlayed into face-to-face discussions. But to date, the two sides have balked at direct talks for different reasons.

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Obama Backs Mosque Near Ground Zero

BY ERICA WERNER
Associated Press Writer

WASHINGTON — President Barack Obama on Friday forcefully endorsed allowing a mosque near ground zero, saying the country's founding principles demanded no less.

"As a citizen, and as president, I believe that Muslims have the same right to practice their religion as everyone else in this country," Obama said, weighing in for the first time on a controversy that has riven New York City and the nation.

"That includes the right to build a place of worship and a community center on private property in lower Manhattan, in accordance with local laws and ordinances," he said. "This is America, and our commitment to religious freedom must be unshakable."

Obama made the comments at an annual dinner in the White House State Dining Room celebrating the Islamic holy month of Ramadan.

The White House had not previously taken a stand on the mosque, which would be part of a \$100 million Islamic center two blocks from where nearly 3,000 people perished when hijacked jetliners slammed into the World Trade Center towers on Sept. 11, 2001. Press secretary Robert Gibbs had insisted it was a local matter.

It was already much more than that, sparking debate around the country as top Republicans including Sarah Palin and Newt Gingrich announced their opposition. So did the Anti-Defamation League, a Jewish civil rights group.

Obama elevated it to a presidential issue Friday without equivocation.

While insisting that the place where the twin towers once stood was indeed "hallowed ground," Obama said that the proper way to honor it was to apply American values.

"Our capacity to show not merely tolerance, but respect towards those who are different from us — and that way of life, that quintessentially American creed, stands in stark contrast to the nihilism of those who attacked us on that September morning, and who continue to plot against us today," he said.

Obama harkened back to earlier times when the building of synagogues or Catholic churches also met with opposition. "But time and again, the American people have demonstrated that we can work through these issues, and stay true to our core values and emerge stronger for it," he said. "So it must be and will be today."

New York City Mayor Michael Bloomberg, an independent who has been a strong supporter of the mosque, welcomed Obama's words as a "clarion defense of the freedom of religion."

But some Republicans were quick to pounce.

"President Obama is wrong," said Rep. Peter King, R-N.Y. "It is insensitive and uncaring for the Muslim community to build a mosque in the shadow of ground zero. While the Muslim community has the right to build the mosque they are abusing that right by needlessly offending so many people who have suffered so much."

Entering the highly charged election-year debate, Obama surely knew that his words would not only make headlines but be heard by Muslims worldwide. The president has

made it a point to reach out to the global Muslim community, and the over 100 guests at Friday's dinner included ambassadors and officials from numerous Muslim nations, including Saudi Arabia and Indonesia. Seated around candlelit tables, they listened closely as Obama spoke, then stood and applauded when the president finished his remarks.

While his pronouncement concerning the mosque might find favor in the Muslim world, Obama's stance runs counter to the opinions of the majority of Americans, according to polls. A CNN/Opinion Research poll released this week found that nearly 70 percent of Americans opposed the mosque plan while just 29 percent approved. A number of Democratic politicians have shied away from the controversy.

The group behind the \$100 million project, the Cordoba Initiative, describes it as a Muslim-themed community center. Early plans call not only for prayer space but for a swimming pool, culinary school, art studios and other features. Developers envision it as a hub for interfaith interaction, as well as a place for Muslims to bridge some of their faith's own schisms.

Opponents, including some Sept. 11 victims' relatives, see the prospect of a mosque so near the destroyed trade center as an insult to the memory of those killed by Islamic terrorists in the 2001 attacks. Some of the Sept. 11 victims' relatives, however, are in favor.

The mosque has won approval from local planning boards but faces legal challenges, and New York's Conservative Party is planning a television ad campaign to pressure a New York City utility to use its power to block the project.

FDA OKs New, Five-Day Emergency Contraceptive

BY MATTHEW PERRONE
AP Business Writer

WASHINGTON — Federal health officials on Friday approved a new type of morning-after contraceptive that works longer than the current leading drug on the market.

The pill ella from HRA Pharma reduces the chance of pregnancy up to five days after sex. Plan B, the most widely used emergency contraceptive pill, begins losing its ability to prevent pregnancy within three days of sex.

The Food and Drug Administration approved the drug Friday as a prescription-only birth control option. The ruling clears the way for U.S. sales of the drug, which is already approved in Europe.

Morristown, N.J.-based Watson Pharmaceuticals will market the drug in the U.S. under an agreement with HRA. Watson said it will launch the pill in the fourth quarter.

Studies of ella by its manufacturer showed the drug prevented pregnancies longer and more consistently than Plan B.

In a head-to-head trial between the two drugs, women who took ella had a 1.8 percent chance of becoming pregnant, while women who took Plan B had a 2.6 percent chance. Experts tracked nearly 1,700 women who randomly received one of the two pills within three to five days of having unprotected sex.

Plan B is made by Teva Pharmaceuticals and is also marketed in several generic versions. Unlike ella, Plan B and other generic versions are available without a prescription for women 17 years and older.

HRA Pharma did not request over-the-counter status for its drug.

Ella uses the hormone progesterone to delay ovulation, a key step in the fertilization process.

Despite this, the drug has drawn criticism from anti-abortion groups who say it is closer to an abortion pill than an emer-

gency contraception pill.

Groups including the Family Research Council argue the drug is chemically similar to the abortion drug mifepristone, which can be taken to end a pregnancy up to 50 days into the gestation period. That drug has been associated with severe infections and bleeding after abortion. However, FDA reviewers reported no life-threatening medical side effects with ella.

The most common side effects with the drug included headache, nausea and abdominal pain, according to an FDA release.

Abortion rights groups hailed the approval as an important step for the FDA, which was criticized in 2006 for its handling of Plan B's approval.

Last year a federal judge ruled that the FDA deliberately delayed making a decision on whether to permit over-the-counter sales of Plan B to teenage girls, at the behest of the Bush administration.

"Approval of ella is another indication that the FDA is committed to restoring scientific integrity in its decisions," said Kirsten Moore, president of the advocacy group Reproductive Health Technologies Project.

Privately held HRA Pharma is based in Paris and specializes in women's health products.

Investigators Talk With Survivors Of Plane Crash

BY BECKY BOHRER
Associated Press Writer

JUNEAU, Alaska — The float plane that crashed in southwest Alaska this week was equipped with a distress beacon and a technology meant to alert the pilot if he was headed dangerously toward terrain, the chairwoman of the National Transportation Safety Board said Friday.

But no beacon alert was detected after the crash and it still wasn't clear whether the system meant to alert the pilot to dangerous terrain was on or working at the time of the crash, Deborah Hersman said at a news conference.

Monday's crash killed former U.S. Sen. Ted Stevens and four others.

The terrain-alert technology wasn't the system Stevens himself championed to help improve air safety in Alaska but it was part of what Hersman had previously called a "nicely equipped" and updated cockpit in the 1957 model plane.

Hersman said one of the survivors interviewed by investigators Friday said: "They were flying along, and they just stopped flying."

Hersman said investigators haven't ruled anything out as a possible cause.

On Friday, officials interviewed two of the four survivors. Other investigators were working to bring the wreckage off the hillside for closer inspection at a hangar.

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