

NATION/WORLD DIGEST

U.S. Weighs Cuba Travel Restrictions

WASHINGTON (AP) — U.S. and congressional officials say the Obama administration is considering easing travel restrictions to Cuba and could announce a decision before the end of next week. The officials said Tuesday a decision on the move to increase "people-to-people" exchanges with the communist island has not yet been made. They said political considerations could still hold it up. But they said the administration is keen to expand opportunities for American students, educators and researchers to visit Cuba. Details of the proposed policy shift were reported Tuesday by The New York Times. The officials spoke on condition of anonymity because internal deliberations are still ongoing.

Court: Stolen Valor Act Unconstitutional

PASADENA, Calif. (AP) — A federal appeals court panel in California says people have a right to lie about receiving military medals. The Tuesday ruling involves the case of Xavier Alvarez, who falsely claimed in 2007 to have won a Congressional Medal of Honor. He was charged with violating the federal Stolen Valor Act, which makes it a crime to falsely claim to have won a military medal. Alvarez challenged the law on appeal as a violation of his free-speech rights. A panel of the 9th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals sided with him in a 2-1 decision. The majority said there's no evidence that such lies harm anybody, and there's no compelling reason for the government to ban such lies. The U.S. Attorney's Office in Los Angeles is deciding whether to appeal the ruling.

Fighters Sent After Violation Of Air Force 1

SEATTLE (AP) — The North American Aerospace Defense Command says military fighter jets were scrambled to respond to an air-space violation near Air Force One in Seattle. Spokesman John Cornelio says the jets were sent from Portland, Oregon, as the president was visiting Seattle after a report that an aircraft violated the restricted airspace. He says the aircraft left the restricted area before the Air National Guard jets arrived, and there was no intercept. Two loud noises, apparently sonic booms, were felt throughout the Puget Sound area.

One In Five Teens Has Slight Hearing Loss

CHICAGO (AP) — A new study has found a stunning increase in the rate of hearing loss among American teenagers. The report says nearly one in five teenagers has at least slight hearing loss. The cause is a mystery. But some experts are urging teenagers to protect their hearing by turning down the volume on their digital music players. They warn that slight hearing loss can cause problems in school. The researchers compared hearing loss rates from the late 1980s and early 1990s with rates in 2005 and 2006. They found hearing loss increased from about 15 percent to almost 20 percent of teens. That means about 6.5 million teenagers have at least slight hearing loss. The study appears in Wednesday's Journal of the American Medical Association.

Judge Throws Out Charges Against Somalis

NORFOLK, Va. (AP) — A judge in Virginia has dismissed piracy charges against six Somali men accused in an attack on a U.S. Navy ship off the coast of Africa. The piracy charge dismissed Tuesday was the most serious of eight charges against the defendants. It carried a mandatory life term upon conviction. U.S. District Judge Raymond A. Jackson wrote in his ruling that the government was too broad in its interpretation of piracy in its allegations about the attack USS Ashland on April 10. The six still face charges of plundering and weapons counts.

Reports Of Gunfire At Campus Near Dallas

McKINNEY, Texas (AP) — A community college about 30 miles north of Dallas has been put on lockdown after reports of gunfire. An e-mail alert, sent shortly after 9:30 a.m. Tuesday to students and staff of the Collin County Community College District, warned that shots had been fired and that the central campus in McKinney was closed. The e-mail said: "Shots fired. Campus on lockdown. Cops on the scene. Details to follow." The campus website carried a message: "Shots fired at Central Park Campus." McKinney police did not immediately return messages from The Associated Press.

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Jury Deadlocks On All But One Charge Against Blago

BY MICHAEL TARM AND DON BABWIN
Associated Press Writers

CHICAGO — A federal jury deadlocked Tuesday on all but one of 24 charges against former Illinois Gov. Rod Blagojevich, including the most explosive of all — that he tried to sell an appointment to President Barack Obama's old Senate seat. Blagojevich was convicted on a single, less serious count of lying to federal agents. Prosecutors pledged to retry the case as soon as possible. "This jury shows you that the government threw everything but the kitchen sink at me," Blagojevich said outside court. "They could not prove I did anything wrong — except for one nebulous charge from five years ago." But one juror said the panel was deadlocked 11-1 in favor of convicting Blagojevich of trying to auction off the Senate seat. Juror Erik Sarnello of Itasca, Ill., said one woman on the jury "just didn't see what we all saw." The 21-year-old Sarnello said the counts involving the Senate seat were "the most obvious." Other jurors tried to persuade the hold-out to reconsider, but "at a certain point, there was no changing," he said. Blagojevich — known for his showman-like, over-the-top personality — showed no emotion as the verdict was read. Before jurors came in, he sat with his hands folded, looking down and picking nervously at his fingernails. He and his lawyer said they would appeal the conviction. The verdict came on the 14th day of deliberations, ending an 11-week trial during which a foul-mouthed Blagojevich was heard on secret FBI wiretap tapes saying the word to name a senator was "(expletive) golden" and that he wasn't going to give it up "for

(expletive) nothing." The count on which Blagojevich was convicted included accusations that he lied to federal agents when he said he did not track campaign contributions. But the jury did not convict him on a related allegation that he kept a "firewall" between political campaigns and government work. It carries a sentence of up to five years in prison. Some of the more serious charges, such as racketeering, carried up to a 20-year penalty. Blagojevich vowed to appeal the single conviction and declared that he was a victim of persecution by the federal government. He told reporters that he wants the "people of Illinois to know that I did not lie to the FBI." It had been clear jurors were struggling with the case. Last week, they told Zigel they had reached a unanimous decision on just two counts and had not even considered 11 others. There was no immediate explanation about whether they later disagreed. Jurors appeared more haggard Tuesday than during the trial. As they filed into the courtroom, many appeared nervous, some looking down at the floor as Zigel read the verdict form to himself, then passed it to a bailiff. They had asked earlier Tuesday for advice on filling out their verdict forms and a copy of the oath they took before deliberating. The jurors did not remain at the courtroom to explain their decisions. "They're going home," said Joel Daly, a spokesman for Zigel. "A lot would like to talk to media folks, but they are plain tired." After the verdict was read, defense attorney Sam Adam Jr. rubbed his own forehead and mouth, appearing to shake his head in disgust. The former governor's wife, Patti Blagojevich, leaned over in her chair, shaking her head.

The former governor's brother and co-defendant, Robert Blagojevich, said the jury's conclusion showed he's been "an innocent target of the federal government" all along. "I feel strong. I feel confident. I don't feel in any way deterred. I've done nothing wrong," he told reporters at the courthouse. "I've got ultimate confidence in my acquittal." Defense attorneys had argued that Blagojevich was a big talker, but never committed a crime. They took a huge gamble by deciding not to call any witnesses — including Blagojevich, who had repeatedly promised to take the stand. "The jury agreed that the government did not prove its case," the former governor said. Judge James B. Zigel set a hearing for Aug. 26 to decide manner and timing of the retrial, which could unfold at the height of the fall campaign. When Zigel said he would give prosecutors time to decide whether to take Blagojevich to court again, prosecutor Reid Schar spoke up instantly — almost appearing to cut the judge off. "It is absolutely our intention to retry this," the normally reserved prosecutor said sternly, looking momentarily agitated. While Blagojevich showed little emotion, his wife Patti seemed close to tears — shutting her eyes before the verdict and exhaling slowly to keep her composure. Just before the verdict, she pulled out two knitting needles and began working on what appeared to be a sweater. For most of the trial, the 53-year-old Blagojevich, a perpetual campaigner and recent reality TV star, seemed cheerful. He often glided through the courthouse smiling and chatting with passers-by.

Factories Aid Bumpy Recovery, Housing Weak

BY MARTIN CRUTSINGER AND DANIEL WAGNER
AP Economics Writers

WASHINGTON — New government data offered a mixed picture of the economic recovery Tuesday, as U.S. manufacturing activity grew in July at the fastest pace in nearly a year while the outlook for the housing market remained dim. Auto plants stayed open when they normally close for summer renovations and businesses replaced worn-out equipment. That helped boost factory output 1.1 percent — the biggest increase since August 2009. Overall output at the nation's factories, mines and utilities rose 1.0 percent last month, the Federal Reserve reported. That followed a decline of 0.1 percent in June, the first drop in more than a year. Construction of new homes and apartments rose 1.7 percent last month, the Commerce Department said. But the gains were driven by a 32.6 percent surge in apartment and condominium construction, a small fraction of the market. Single-family home construction, which represented nearly 80 percent of the market, fell 4.2 percent. And requests for building permits, considered a good sign of future activity, slid 3.1 percent. Separately, the Labor Department said wholesale prices rose last month on higher costs of food, cars and light

trucks. Excluding volatile food and energy costs, so-called "core" producer prices rose 0.3 percent in July, the ninth straight increase. Core prices have risen 1.5 percent in the past year, a sign that inflation remains tame. The recovery has weakened in recent months. Consumers are spending less and saving more. Businesses are hiring fewer workers. The unemployment rate for July was 9.5 percent and economists expect that to stay at that level for the rest of the year. Investors appeared to be pleased with the latest economic data. All major stock indexes rose and the Dow Jones Industrial average jumped more than 170 points in afternoon trading. Manufacturing has been the strongest sector since the recession ended, growing in 11 of the past 12 months. Joshua Shapiro, chief U.S. economist at MFR Inc. in New York, cautioned that the numbers for June and July appeared more volatile because of "statistical quirks" such as the unexpected auto production.

Gov. Aims To Meet With Mosque Developers

BY MICHAEL GORMLEY AND BETH FOUHY
Associated Press Writers

ALBANY, N.Y. — Gov. David Paterson, who last week suggested that developers of a proposed Islamic center and mosque near ground zero might want to consider a different location, will meet soon with them, a spokesman said Tuesday. Paterson's office declined to say what the meeting would be about, but Rep. Peter King told The Associated Press that the governor wants to discuss possible alternate locations for the Park51 Islamic cultural center and mosque. King said he spoke with the governor Tuesday. Representatives of the project said no meeting had been scheduled. Paterson last week offered his help and the possibility that state land could be provided as an alternate site for the center. The project has ignited nationwide debate over freedom of

religion and anger over the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks. The planned \$100 million center would be built two blocks from the World Trade Center site, where nearly 2,800 people died when Islamic extremists flew jets into the twin towers. The project is headed by Imam Faisal Abdul Rauf, a Muslim cleric who has worked to improve relations between Islam and the West. Paterson spokesman Morgan Hook said talks were under way between the governor's office and representatives of Park51 to set up a meeting between Paterson and the project's leaders. "We are working with the developers on a staff level, but there have not been any formal discussions between the governor and imam or developer," Hook said. "We expect to have a meeting scheduled in the near future." Mosque spokesman Oz Sultan released a statement Tuesday saying he did not believe a meeting had been scheduled.

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