

N. Korea Executes Leader's Uncle

PYONGYANG, North Korea (AP) — North Korea on Friday announced the execution of Kim Jong Un's uncle, calling the leader's former mentor a traitor who tried to overthrow the state.

The announcement came only days after Pyongyang announced through state media that Jang Song Thaek — long considered the country's No. 2 power — had been removed from all his posts because of allegations of corruption, drug use, gambling, womanizing and leading a "dissolute and depraved life."

The state news agency KCNA said a tribunal examined Jang's crimes, including "attempting to overthrow the state by all sorts of intrigues and despicable methods with a wild ambition to grab the supreme power of our party and state."

The report called him "a traitor to the nation" and "worse than a dog."

Jang was seen as helping Kim Jong Un consolidate power after the death of his father, Kim Jong Il, two years ago. Jang was the latest and most significant in a series of personnel reshuffles that Kim has conducted in an apparent effort to bolster his power.

Fake Interpreter Says He Hallucinated

JOHANNESBURG (AP) — The sign language interpreter at Nelson Mandela's memorial says he suffers from schizophrenia and hallucinated and saw angels while gesturing incoherently just 3 feet away from President Barack Obama and other world leaders, outraging deaf people worldwide who said his signs amounted to gibberish.

South African officials scrambled Thursday to explain how they came to hire the man and said they were investigating what vetting process, if any, he underwent for his security clearance.

"In the process, and in the speed of the event, a mistake happened," deputy Cabinet minister Hendrietta Bogopane-Zulu said.

She apologized to deaf people around the world who were offended by the incomprehensible signing.

However, she declined to say whether a government department, the presidency or the ruling African National Congress party was responsible for hiring the sign interpreter, telling reporters it isn't the time to "point fingers and vilify each other and start shouting."

Health Coverage Disparities Emerging

JEFFERSON CITY, Mo. (AP) — Residents in some parts of the U.S. are signing up for health care coverage at a significantly greater rate than others through the new online insurance marketplaces now operating in every state.

The discrepancy may trace back to the political leanings of their elected leaders.

Newly released federal figures show more people are picking private insurance plans or being routed to Medicaid programs in states with Democratic leaders who have fully embraced the federal health care law than in states where Republican elected officials have derisively rejected what they call "Obamacare."

On one side of the political divide are a dozen mostly Democratic leaning states, including California, Minnesota and New York. They have both expanded Medicaid for lower-income adults and started their own health insurance exchanges for people to shop for federally subsidized private insurance.

On the other side are two dozen conservative states, such as Texas, Florida and Missouri. They have both rejected the Medicaid expansion and refused any role in running an online insurance exchange, leaving that entirely to the federal government.

Yemeni Officials: US Drone Strike Kills 13

SANAA, Yemen (AP) — Missiles fired by a U.S. drone slammed into a convoy of vehicles traveling to a wedding party in central Yemen on Thursday, killing at least 13 people, Yemeni security officials said.

The officials said the attack took place in the city of Radda, the capital of Bayda province, and left charred bodies and burnt out cars on the road. The city, a stronghold of al-Qaida militants, witnessed deadly clashes early last year between armed tribesmen backed by the military and al-Qaida gunmen in an attempt to drive them out of the city.

There were no immediate details on who was killed in the strike, and there were conflicting reports about whether there were militants traveling with the wedding convoy.

A military official said initial information indicated the drone mistook the wedding party for an al-Qaida convoy. He said tribesmen known to the villagers were among the dead.

One of the three security officials, however, said al-Qaida militants were suspected to have been traveling with the wedding convoy.

Many Cutting Back On Holiday Shopping

NEW YORK (AP) — Many Americans are watching the annual holiday spending ritual from the sidelines this year.

Money is still tight for some. Others are fed up with commercialism of the holidays. Still others are waiting for bigger bargains.

And people like Lark-Marie Anton Menchini are more thoughtful about their purchases. The New York public relations executive says in the past she'd buy her children up to eight Christmas gifts each, but this year they're getting three apiece. The leftover money is going toward their college savings.

"We told them Santa is ... being very conscious of how many gifts he puts on his sleigh," Menchini, 36, says.

Despite an improving economy, most workers are not seeing meaningful wage increases. And some of those who can splurge say the brash commercialism around the holidays — many more stores are opening for business on Thanksgiving — is a turnoff.

House Passes Farm Law Extension

WASHINGTON (AP) — The House has passed an extension of farm law until the end of January as lawmakers try to finish work on a new five-year farm bill.

Both the Senate and the House have passed farm bills this year, but they differ on how much to cut the nation's food stamp program and how to restructure farm subsidies.

The House passed the extension amid fears that the expiration of dairy subsidies at the end of the year will cause milk prices to rise. But Agriculture Secretary Tom Vilsack has assured Congress that will not happen before the end of January.

Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid has said the Senate will not pass an extension because it is unnecessary. Some senators argue an extension could reduce pressure to pass a farm bill.

Missing American In Iran Was On Unapproved Mission

BY MATT APUZZO AND ADAM GOLDMAN
Associated Press

WASHINGTON — An American who vanished nearly seven years ago in Iran was working for the CIA on an unapproved intelligence-gathering mission that, when it came to light inside the government, produced one of the most serious scandals in the recent history of the CIA — but all in secret, an Associated Press investigation found.

The CIA paid Robert Levinson's family \$2.5 million to head off a revealing lawsuit. Three veteran analysts were forced out of the agency and seven others were disciplined.

The U.S. publicly has described Levinson as a private citizen.

"Robert Levinson went missing during a business trip to Kish Island, Iran," the White House said last month.

That was just a cover story. In an extraordinary breach of the most basic CIA rules, a team of analysts — with no authority to run spy operations — paid Levinson to gather intelligence from some of the world's darkest corners. He vanished while investigating the Iranian regime for the U.S. government.

Details of the disappearance were described in documents obtained or reviewed by the AP, plus interviews over several years with dozens of current and former U.S. and foreign officials close to the search

for Levinson. Nearly all spoke on condition of anonymity because they were not authorized to discuss the sensitive case.

There is no confirmation who captured Levinson or who may be holding him now. Although U.S. authorities have investigated possible involvement of drug traffickers or terrorists, most officials say they believe Iran either holds him or knows who does.

The AP first confirmed Levinson's CIA ties in 2010 and continued reporting to uncover more details. It agreed three times to delay publishing the story because the U.S. government said it was pursuing promising leads to get him home.

The AP is reporting the story now because, nearly seven years after his disappearance, those efforts have repeatedly come up empty. The government has not received any sign of life in nearly three years. Top U.S. officials, meanwhile, say his captors almost certainly already know about his CIA association.

There has been no hint of Levinson's whereabouts since his family received proof-of-life photos and a video in late 2010 and early 2011. That prompted a hopeful burst of diplomacy between the United States and Iran, but as time dragged on, promising leads dried up and the trail went cold.

Immediately after Levinson's disappearance in March 2007, the CIA acknowledged to Congress that Levinson had previously

done contract work for the agency. But the agency had no current relationship with Levinson and there was no connection to Iran, the CIA assured lawmakers.

But in October 2007 Levinson's lawyer discovered emails between Levinson and his friend Anne Jablonski, who worked at the CIA. Before his trip, Levinson had told Jablonski that he was developing a source with access to the Iranian regime and could arrange a meeting in Dubai or an island nearby.

Problem was, Levinson's contract was out of money and, though the CIA was working to authorize more, it had yet to do so.

"I would like to know if I do, in fact, expend my own funds to conduct this meeting, there will be reimbursement sometime in the near future, or, if I should discontinue this, as well as any and all similar projects until renewal time in May," Levinson wrote.

There's no evidence that Jablonski ever responded to that email. And she says she has no recollection of ever receiving it. She said she had no idea he was going to Iran.

In a later email exchange, Jablonski advised Levinson to keep talk about the money "among us girls" until it had been officially approved.

Jablonski signed off: "Be safe." Levinson said he understood. He said he'd try to make this trip as successful as previous ones. And he promised to "keep a low profile."

Boehner Takes On GOP Critics

BY ANDREW TAYLOR
Associated Press

WASHINGTON — After years of bitter friction within Republican circles, House Speaker John Boehner is lashing out against hard-line conservative and tea party groups — the latest GOP establishment figure to join the increasingly public battle railing the party.

For the second day in a row — but at greater length and with more passion — the Ohio Republican on Thursday lit into groups such as Heritage Action and Club for Growth. Though naming no names, he accused such groups and others of stirring up opposition on the right to a budget bill worked out with Democrats that would replace some across-the-board spending cuts now in place with longer-term savings.

"When groups come out and criticize an agreement that they've never seen, you begin to wonder just how credible those actions are," he told reporters. That was just hours before the House was to vote on the bill, which also would raise government fees on airline tickets as well as pension insurance premiums on employers.

"Frankly, I just think they've lost all credibility," he said of the foes.

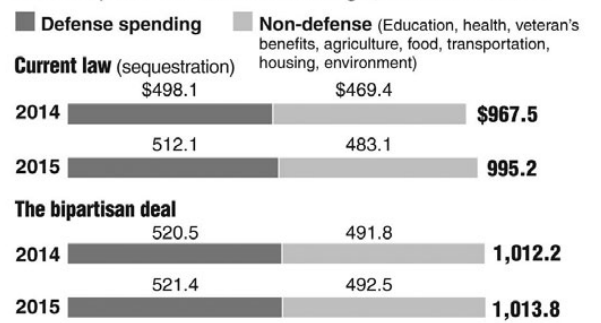
Heritage Action was a key force behind the "defund Obamacare" effort that swept the right earlier this year and steamrolled stumbling House GOP leaders into October's government shutdown fiasco. "They're pushing our members into places where they don't want to be," Boehner complained Thursday.

Boehner is the latest in a line of establishment Republicans and their allies to mount counterattacks against tea party purists who are pushing the party to the right by stoking intra-GOP battles and primary challenges against longstanding incumbents such as Senate Minority

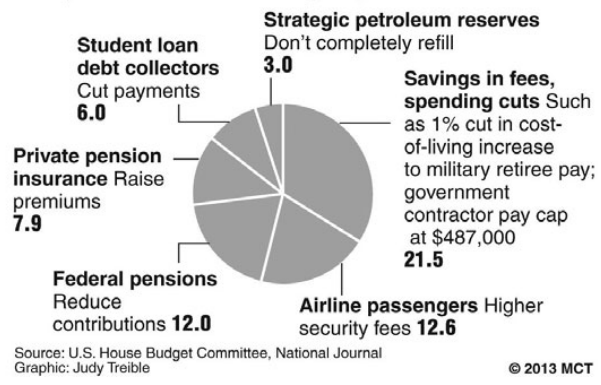
What's in the budget deal

The bipartisan budget deal could end years of fiscal standoffs and keep the government running beyond Jan. 15, if both the House and Senate pass it. How the deal eases the automatic spending cuts of sequestration:

Current law vs. the deal
Both the deal and sequestration effect only discretionary spending, about 30 percent of the total U.S. budget; amounts in billions



Where the extra money comes from
No taxes would be raised to cover the budget deal's estimated \$63 billion of sequester relief for two years; here's where the money would come from over 10 years, in billions:



Leader Mitch McConnell of Kentucky and Rep. Mike Simpson of Idaho.

"Yesterday, when the criticism was coming, frankly I thought it was my job and my obligation to stand up for conservatives here in the Congress who want more deficit reduction," Boehner said.

Club for Growth, which bundles contributions for the free-market conservatives it endorses and runs ads on their behalf, is supporting Simpson's primary opponent.

Another group, the Senate Conservatives Fund started by former GOP Sen. and now Heritage Foundation President Jim DeMint, is raising money to run ads against McConnell and Sens. Thad Cochran, R-Miss., and Pat Roberts, R-Kan., each of whom is facing a tea party primary challenge.

McConnell orchestrated a boycott of a consulting firm that does business for the Senate Conservatives Fund after the group endorsed his primary opponent, businessman Matt Bevin.

Last week, the U.S. Chamber of Commerce launched an ad backing Simpson, an

eight-term Republican.

The Chamber's involvement marked the second time in recent months that the group has taken the side of GOP establishment against conservative activists. The group backed Bradley Byrne over tea party favorite Dean Young in a special congressional runoff primary in Alabama, pumping at least \$200,000 into the race. Byrne won the Nov. 5 contest.

Simpson's primary challenger in Idaho, Bryan Smith, is being supported by the Club for Growth, a group that has helped topple Republican incumbents in past primaries, including longtime Sen. Richard Lugar of Indiana. But Democrat Joe Donnelly ended up winning Lugar's seat in the general election, underscoring one of the complaints by mainstream Republicans — that hewing too far to the right is costing elections.

Conservative groups have taken on outsized importance as more GOP House members represent solidly Republican districts in which the only real threat the GOP feels is from tea party candidates running to their right.

Budget

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their followers," the Republican speaker said of the groups, whom he pointedly also blamed for last fall's politically damaging partial government shutdown. "I think they're pushing our members in places where they don't want to be. And frankly, I just think that they've lost all credibility" by opposing legislation before the details are known.

He mentioned no organizations by name, although it appeared he was referring to Heritage Action and Club for Growth, both of which have sought to push the House further to the right than the Republican leadership has been willing to go.

Rep. Paul Ryan, R-Wis., a chief GOP architect of the deal, made the conservatives' case for support. The measure "reduces the deficit by \$23 billion. It does not raise taxes and it cuts spending in a smarter way," said the Budget Committee's chairman, whose handiwork could well be challenged in the 2016 Republican presidential primaries.

The second-ranking Democrat, Rep. Steny Hoyer of Maryland, joined other party leaders in swinging behind the measure, even though he noted that he represents 62,000 federal workers and said future government employees will pay higher pensions costs because of the bill. "This agreement is better than the alternative" of ever deeper across-the-board cuts, he said.

The agreement, negotiated by Ryan and Democratic Sen. Patty Murray of Washington — and endorsed by the White House — would set overall spending levels for the current budget year and the one that begins on Oct. 1, 2014. That straightforward action would probably eliminate the possibility of another government shutdown and reduce the opportunity for the periodic brinkmanship of the kind that has flourished in the current three-year era of divided government.

The measure would erase \$63 billion in across-the-board cuts set for January and early 2015 on domestic and defense programs, leaving about \$140 billion in reductions in place. On the other side of the budget ledger, it projects savings totaling \$85 billion over the coming decade, enough to show a deficit reduction of about \$23 billion over the 10-year period.

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