

Obama Signs Budget Deal

Plan Eases Spending Cuts For Next 2 Years

BY JOSH LEDERMAN
Associated Press

HONOLULU — President Barack Obama signed a bipartisan budget deal Thursday easing spending cuts and a defense bill cracking down on sexual assault in the military, marking a modest end to a challenging year for the White House and Congress.

Obama put his signature on both hard-fought bills while vacationing in Hawaii, where the president has been laying low since Saturday as he re-groups for the midterm election year ahead. The bill signing marks one of Obama's last official acts in a year beset by a partial government shutdown, a near-default by the Treasury, a calamitous health care rollout and near-perpetual congressional gridlock.

Although the budget deal falls short of the grand bargain that Obama and congressional Republicans once aspired to, it ends the cycle of fiscal brinkmanship — for now — by preventing another shutdown for nearly two more years.

But the rare moment of comity may be short-lived. Hanging over the start of the year is a renewed fight over raising the nation's borrowing limit, which the Treasury says must be resolved by late February or early March to avert an unprecedented U.S. default. Both sides are positioning behind customary hard-line positions, with Republicans insisting they want concessions before raising the debt limit and Obama insisting he won't negotiate.

The last vestiges of 2013's legislative wrangling behind him, Obama's atten-

tion turns now to major challenges and potential bright spots in the year ahead. In late January, Obama will give his fifth State of the Union address, setting his agenda for the final stretch before the 2014 midterm elections render him less able to focus Washington's attention on his own priorities.

Obama signed the two bills and several others in private, without reporters present, after an early-morning trip to the gym at the Marine Corps base near his vacation rental in Oahu.

The product of intensive talks before lawmakers left Washington for Christmas, the budget deal alleviates the harshest effects of automatic budget cuts on the Pentagon and domestic agencies. It reduces those cuts, known as the sequester, by about one-third, restoring approximately \$63 billion over two years.

A projected \$85 billion in savings are located elsewhere in the deal, including increases in an airport security tax and a fee corporations pay to have pensions guaranteed by the government. Also included: a contentious provision to pare down annual cost of living increases in benefits for military retirees under age 62. Those cuts will save the government about \$6.3 billion over a decade.

With lawmakers eager to leave town for the holidays and Republicans hoping to keep the focus on problems with Obama's health care law, the deal passed with bipartisan support in both the Democratic-controlled Senate and the Republican-controlled House — despite opposition from tea party groups that lined up to oppose it, arguing the deal would raise spending.



Obama

The comprehensive defense bill Obama signed will give military personnel a 1 percent pay raise and also covers combat pay, ships, aircraft and bases. But it was a year-long campaign led by the women of the Senate to address the scourge of rape and sexual assault in the military that dominated congressional debate over the military bill.

Commanders will no longer be permitted to overturn jury convictions for sexual assault, which the Pentagon estimates may have affected 26,000 members of the military last year. The law also requires a civilian review when commanders decline to prosecute, requires dishonorable discharge or dismissal for those convicted, eliminate the statute of limitations for courts-martial in rape and sexual assault cases and criminalizes retaliation against victims who report an assault.

Still, it stops short of a contentious proposal from Sen. Kirsten Gillibrand, D-N.Y., to remove commanders' authority by giving victims an independent route outside the chain of command for prosecuting attackers.

Both chambers of Congress passed the bill with strong bipartisan margins. The White House had expressed support for the legislation, which reflects deficit-driven efforts to trim spending and the drawdown in Afghanistan after more than a decade of fighting there. The bill provides \$552.1 billion for the regular military budget and \$80.7 billion for the war in Afghanistan and other overseas operations.

Late Shoppers Catch Companies Off Guard

BY MAE ANDERSON
AND SCOTT MAYEROWITZ
AP Business Writers

Americans waited until the last minute to buy holiday gifts, but retailers weren't prepared for the spike.

Heavy spending in the final days of the mostly lackluster season sent sales up 3.5 percent between Nov. 1 and Tuesday, according to MasterCard Advisors SpendingPulse, which tracks payments but doesn't give dollar figures.

Online shopping led the uptick, with spending up 10 percent to \$38.91 billion between Nov. 2 and Sunday, research firm comScore said.

"We always have last-minute Charlies, but this year even people who normally complete shopping earlier completed shopping later," said Marshal Cohen, chief retail analyst at market research firm NPD Group.

The late surge caught companies off guard. UPS and FedEx failed to deliver some packages by Christmas due to a combination of poor weather and overloaded systems, leaving some unhappy holiday shoppers.

Justin Londagin and his wife ordered their 7-year-old son a jersey of Russell Wilson of the Seattle Seahawks from NFL's web site on Dec. 19. They paid \$12.95 extra for two-day shipping to get it to their Augusta, Kan., home before Christmas, but it didn't arrive in time.

"We had to get creative and wrote him a note from Santa to tell him that the jersey fell out of the sleigh and Santa will get it to him as soon as he could," he said.

Amazon is offering customers with delayed shipments a refund on their shipping charges and \$20 toward a future purchase. And other retailers such as Macy's said they are looking into the situation.

The last-minute surge this year solidifies the increasing popularity of online shopping, which accounts for about 10 percent of sales during the last three months of the year. It also underscores the challenges that companies face delivering on the experience, particularly during the holiday shopping season that runs from the beginning of November through December.

Egypt Hikes Assault On Muslim Brotherhood

BY MAGGIE MICHAEL
Associated Press

CAIRO — Egypt's security authorities launched a sweep of arrests of Muslim Brotherhood members on Thursday and warned that holding a leadership post in the group could now be grounds for the death penalty after it was officially declared a terrorist organization, stepping up the government's confrontation with its top political nemesis.

The announcement came as a bomb exploded in a busy intersection in Cairo Thursday morning, hitting a bus and wounding five people. Though small, the blast raised fears that a campaign of violence by Islamic militants that for months has targeted police and the military could turn to civilians in retaliation for the stepped up crackdown.

The terrorist labeling of the Brotherhood — an unprecedented step even during past decades when the group was banned — takes to a new level the government's moves to crush the group, which rode on elections to dominate Egypt's politics the past three years until the military removed Islamist President Mohammed Morsi in July after massive protests against him.

The Brotherhood vowed to "qualitatively" escalate its protests against the new military-backed interim government, whose authority it rejects. The group has struggled to bring numbers into the streets in past months under a crackdown that has already killed hundreds of its members and put thousands more in prison, including Morsi and other top leaders — and there was little sign of any protests on Thursday.

The moves — all playing out before the backdrop of increasing violence by al-Qaida-inspired militants — raise the potential for greater turmoil as the country nears a key Jan. 14-15 referendum on a revised constitution, a milestone in the post-Morsi political transition. The government is pushing for overwhelming passage of the new document, while the Brotherhood vows to stop it with protests.

Ahmed Imam, spokesman for the Strong Egypt Party founded by ex-Brotherhood member Abdel-Moneim Abolfotoh, warned that the terrorism label "leaves the Muslim Brotherhood and its supporters only one choice, which is violence."

Both sides are showing "a great deal of stupidity," he said, blaming the Brotherhood for failing to firmly distance itself from militant violence and the government for closing doors to reconciliation.

Speaking to military graduates Thursday, military chief Gen. Abdel-Fattah el-Sissi, the man who removed Morsi and is now Egypt's most powerful

The Muslim Brotherhood

Egypt's oldest Islamist organization, the Muslim Brotherhood, has grown into a worldwide Sunni Islamist movement with branches in more than 70 countries. Its stated goal is to create states ruled by Islamic law, or Sharia.

History in Egypt

1928 Founded by Hassan al Banna to spread Islamic morals, charitable works; became involved in politics to drive British from Egypt

1948 Dissolved by Egyptian government for attacking British, Jewish interests; accused of assassinating Prime Minister Mahmoud al Nuqrashi

1952 Plays supporting role in coup ending colonial rule

1954 Banned after failed attempt to assassinate President Gamal Abdul Nasser; grows underground

1964 Writings of one prominent member, Sayyid Qutb, who advocated jihad (struggle), inspire founding of radical groups, including Islamic Jihad and al-Qaida

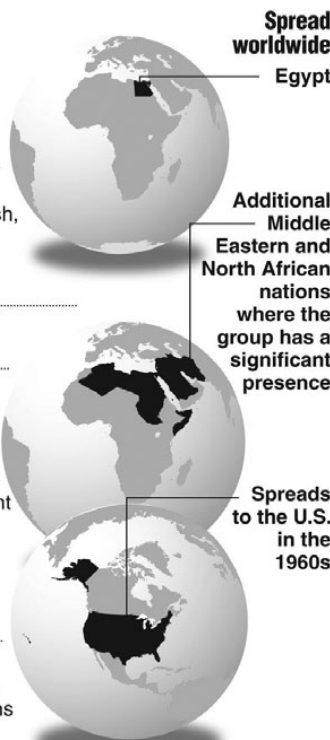
1980s Tries to rejoin political mainstream, forming alliances with major political parties, wins seats in parliament

2005 Wins 20 percent of seats, leading President Hosni Mubarak to have constitution rewritten, banning religious political parties

2010-2011 Brotherhood-aligned candidates win no parliamentary seats, leading to accusations of fraud; Arab Spring protests ensue, leading to ouster of Mubarak

2012 Muslim Brotherhood candidate Mohammed Morsi elected president

2013 Morsi ousted by the country's military after widespread protests call for him to step down; later the military-backed interim government declares the Muslim Brotherhood a terrorist group



figure, vowed the country will "stand steadfast in confronting terrorism."

"Don't let any of the incidents happening now affect the will of Egyptians. Never," he said. "Anyone harms you will be wiped from the face of Earth."

In past months, authorities have used penal code's various legal justifications for arresting Morsi supporters, from inciting violence to blocking roads. But Wednesday's terror designation means the Brotherhood's hundreds of thousands of members can be arrested for simple membership under a tough, years-old anti-terrorism law that outlines death penalties or long prison sentences for some crimes. The government says it will leave leeway

for those who renounce the group's ideology and membership, but didn't explain how since members don't carry IDs to prove they belong.

The government said it urged other Arab governments to take similar steps under a 1998 regional anti-terrorism treaty, to increase pressure on Brotherhood branches, especially in Gulf countries already known for longtime enmity to the group.

Police on Thursday arrested 16 Brotherhood members in the Nile Delta province of Sharqiya on charges of belonging to a terrorist group, the state news agency MENA said. Another 54 were arrested on accusations they attacked police stations or incited violence.

Insurance Policies' Future Still Unclear

RALEIGH, N.C. (AP) — A month after President Barack Obama announced people could keep insurance policies slated for cancellation under the federal health overhaul, the reversal has gotten a mixed response from insurers, state regulators and consumers.

Many consumers complained in October and November after insurers notified them that their individual policies were being canceled because they did not cover pre-existing conditions, hospitalization, prescription drugs or seven other basic benefits required under the law. In pitching the overhaul, Obama had long promised that people who liked their policies could keep them.

Then Obama announced Nov. 14 that companies could continue existing policies that don't meet the minimum requirements if state regulators approved.

Reporting by The Associated Press shows that older policies are being allowed to continue in 36 states, either because officials allowed it after Obama's announcement, decided not to intervene in any way or had made a decision earlier in the year to extend non-compliant policies for a period of time.

Even so, insurers were given a choice of whether to continue the policies, and some declined to do so.

Poll: Americans Hopeful For 2014

WASHINGTON (AP) — Large number of Americans see 2013 as anything but a banner year and aren't reluctant to wave goodbye on New Year's Eve, a new AP-Times Square poll says, reflecting anxiety stretching from the corridors of power in Washington to corporate boardrooms, statehouses, and city and town halls.

Although the poll shows that people generally are looking forward to the new year with optimism and no blatant sense of foreboding, it also unearths pent-up worries about international crises and instability, and concerns at home about the standard of living, health care and schools.

On the whole, Americans rate their own experience in 2013 more positively than negatively. But when asked to assess the year for the United States or the world at large, things turn sour.

—All told, 32 percent say 2013 was a better year for them than 2012, while 20 percent say it was worse and 46 percent say the two years were really about the same. Young people were more apt to see improvement: 40 percent of people under age 30 called 2013 a better year than 2012, compared with 25 percent of people age 65 or older.

—The public splits evenly on how the year turned out for the country, 25 percent saying it was better than 2012, 25 percent saying it was worse. As with most questions about the state of affairs in the U.S. these days, there's a sharp partisan divide. Democrats are more apt to say the U.S. turned out better in 2013 than 2012 (37 percent) than are Republicans (17 percent).

—Thinking about the world at large, 30 percent say 2013 was worse than 2012, while just 20 percent say it was better.

But the outlook for the new year is positive: 49 percent think their own fortunes will improve in 2014, 14 percent are anticipating the new year to be a downgrade from the old. Thirty-four percent say they don't expect much to change.

Probe: Arafat's Death Was Natural

MOSCOW (AP) — A Russian probe into the death of Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat has found that his death wasn't caused by radiation — a finding that comes after a French probe found traces of the radioactive isotope polonium and a Swiss investigation said the timeframe of his illness and death was consistent with that of polonium poisoning.

Vladimir Uiba, the head of the Federal Medical and Biological Agency, said Thursday that Arafat died of natural causes and the agency had no plans to conduct further tests.

Teams of scientists from France, Switzerland and Russia were asked to determine whether polonium, a rare and extremely lethal substance, played a role in Arafat's death in a French military hospital in 2004.

French experts found traces of polonium but said it was "of natural environmental origin," according to Arafat's widow, Suha Arafat. Swiss scientists, meanwhile, said they found elevated traces of polonium-210 and lead, and that the timeframe of Arafat's illness and death was consistent with poisoning from ingesting polonium.

"It was a natural death; there was no impact of radiation," Uiba said, according to Russian news agencies.

Mass Grave Found In C. African Republic

BANGUI, Central African Republic (AP) — Elodiane Baalbe hid underneath her bed as gunfire echoed around her on Christmas Day in the capital of Central African Republic. When it finally died down on Thursday, she made a dash for safety, hiding behind houses as she fled her neighborhood.

On her way out she passed the charred car of a unit of Chadian peacekeepers, the charred body of one soldier still upright in the vehicle inside. The sight was so horrifying that she looked away immediately. "I had my 3-year-old on my back. I looked for a second, and then I kept running," she said.

A total of six Chadian soldiers from the African Union peacekeeping force were killed on Christmas Day in the Gombang neighborhood of the capital. Their destroyed car, with at least one body still inside, had not been removed a day later, underscoring how dangerous this chaotic country has become, even for the international forces tasked with pacifying it, said African Union spokesman Eloi Yao.

As the African Union was struggling to secure the crime scene, they discovered another: Close to the presidential palace, peacekeepers discovered a mass grave.

"We found around 20 bodies in a state of decomposition in an area that we call Panthers' Hill. The 20 were scattered in different graves in a small area. You found five bodies in one hole, three in another, two in yet another and so on. The bodies were wearing civilian dress, but we cannot know if they really were civilians or if they were militiamen," said Yao.

Happy New Year

from the
Doctors and Staff of
Willcockson Eye Associates
& The Spectacle Shop

Our offices will be closed all day
Wednesday, January 1st
so our staff can enjoy
the holidays with their families.

Willcockson Eye Associates, P.C.
415 W. 3rd, Yankton, South Dakota

Speed Queen.

Laundry
it's all we do!

Only available at...

Larry's APPLIANCE

920 Broadway Yankton, SD • 665-9461 • 1-800-491-9461