

NATION/WORLD DIGEST

Snow Warning Sends Mid-Atlantic Scrambling

WASHINGTON (AP) — Life in the nation's capital ground to a halt Friday as steady snow fell, the beginning of a storm that forecasters said could be the biggest in modern history.

A record 2 1/2 feet or more was predicted for Washington, where snow was falling heavily by evening, with big amounts expected elsewhere throughout the Mid-Atlantic. Authorities already were blaming the storm for hundreds of accidents and the deaths of father-son Samaritans in Virginia.

The region's second snowstorm in less than two months could be "extremely dangerous," the National Weather Service said. Heavy, wet snow and strong winds threatened to knock out power, clog roads and paralyze the region's transportation and retail.

Airlines canceled flights, schools closed and the federal government sent workers home, where they could be stuck for several days in a region ill-equipped to deal with so much snow. Some area hospitals asked people with four-wheel-drive vehicles to volunteer to pick up doctors and nurses to take them to work.

The National Zoo closed at noon and the Smithsonian museums were to close Saturday, as they did during a major storm in December. U.S. Park Police spokesman Sgt. David Schlosser said the Lincoln Memorial and other monuments in Washington would remain open as long as conditions allowed.

Toyota Chief Apologizes For Auto Recalls

TOKYO (AP) — Toyota's president emerged from seclusion Friday to apologize and address criticism that the automaker mishandled a crisis over sticking gas pedals. Yet he stopped short of ordering a recall for the company's iconic Prius hybrid for braking problems.

Akio Toyoda, appointed to the top job at Toyota Motor Corp. last June, promised to beef up quality control, saying, "We are facing a crisis."

Toyoda, grandson of the company's founder, said he personally would head a special committee to review checks within the company, go over consumer complaints and listen to outside experts to come up with a fix.

"I apologize from the bottom of my heart for all the concern that we have given to so many customers," said Toyoda, speaking at his first news conference since the Jan. 21 global recall of 4.5 million vehicles.

Toyota's failure to stem its widening safety crisis has stunned consumers and experts who'd come to expect only streamlined efficiency from a company at the pinnacle of the global auto industry.

Twin Blasts Kill 40 Shiite Pilgrims In Iraq

BAGHDAD (AP) — A car bomb ripped through a crowd of Shiite pilgrims outside the holy city of Karbala Friday, sending many fleeing into the path of a suicide attacker who detonated a second bomb in coordinated blasts that killed at least 40 people and wounded 150.

The twin bombing came on the final day of an annual Shiite religious observance, which has been the target of three large-scale attacks in Iraq this week alone. In Pakistan, two bombs targeting Shiites observing the same holy day Friday killed at least 25 people and wounded around 100 more.

The bloodshed in Iraq is likely to further stoke tensions between the Shiite-led government and Sunnis over the push to ban some candidates from March 7 parliamentary elections. The U.S. is concerned the ban could destabilize Iraq, crippling efforts to reconcile majority Shiites and Sunnis who dominated Iraq until Saddam Hussein's ouster in 2003.

There was no immediate claim of responsibility for Friday's blasts, but Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki blamed al-Qaida and Saddam loyalists, saying in a statement the two groups failed to ignite sectarian strife and destabilize the country with the attacks on pilgrims.

Haitians Who Fled Capital Begin To Return

PORT-AU-PRINCE, Haiti (AP) — A half-million Haitians who fled their shattered capital after the earthquake are starting to return to a maze of rubble piles, refugee camps and food lines, complicating ambitious plans to build a better Haiti.

Haitian and international officials had hoped to use the devastation of Port-au-Prince — a densely packed sprawl of winding roads and ramshackle slums that is home to a third of Haiti's 9 million people — to build an improved capital and decentralize the country.

An estimated 500,000 people fled to the countryside in the days after the quake, many on buses paid for by the government to move quake survivors away from the heart of the destruction. Hundreds of thousands more are camped atop the rubble of their homes, or packed into makeshift camps.

Now some of those who fled are beginning to return after enduring the rural misery that drove them to Port-au-Prince in the first place.

The government is largely powerless to keep people from returning, though Prime Minister Max Bellerive protested this week that Port-au-Prince cannot withstand another influx of people.

E-Mails: Palin's Husband Key In Governorship

JUNEAU, Alaska (AP) — E-mails obtained by The Associated Press suggest Todd Palin was intimately involved in decisions related to state government when his wife was governor of Alaska. The e-mails show Todd Palin was included in messages on a wide range of government and political issues. Aides to then-Gov. Sarah Palin regularly sought Todd Palin's advice on such things as state board appointments.

In one e-mail, Todd Palin advocates having an Alaska newspaper removed from a press release list after Sarah Palin complained about an editor's fairness.

The e-mails, first reported by MSNBC.com, were accompanied by a 19-page list detailing those withheld, citing executive privilege, privacy or other reasons.

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U.S. Jobless Rate Drops Slightly

Obama, Economists Quietly Praise Stats, Still Note Long Way To Go

BY JEANNINE AVERSA
AND CHRISTOPHER S. RUGABER
AP Economics Writers

WASHINGTON — The job market is lurching toward improvement. It just has a long way to go.

The outlook for jobs became a bit less bleak Friday when the government released January's unemployment rate showing an unexpected decline from 10 percent to 9.7 percent. It was the first drop in seven months.

Still, the government now estimates 8.4 million jobs vanished in the Great Recession. And economists say the nation will be lucky to get back 1.5 million of them this year. They also warn it will take until the middle of the decade for the job market to return to normal.

The economy is growing, and normally job creation would be strengthening. But the job market is weighed down by employers who remain slow to hire because consumers are not spending enough. Companies worry about their prospects once government stimulus aid fades. They also fret about possibly higher costs related to taxes or health care measures from Congress and statehouses.

The unemployment rate fell to

its lowest level since August because a Labor Department survey of households found a sharp rise in the number of Americans with jobs. The survey found that 541,000 more Americans had jobs last month.

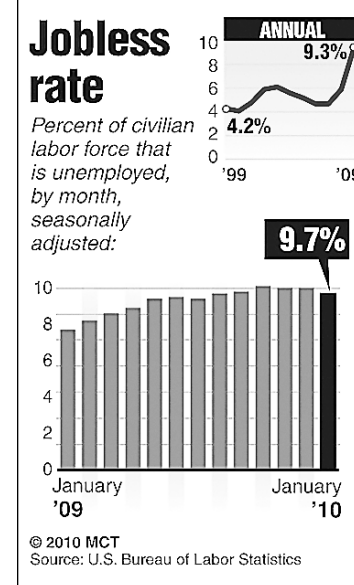
But those gains resulted from seasonal adjustments to the data. Without those adjustments, the data show fewer people had jobs last month.

Such adjustments are made each month and are especially large in January because of heavy seasonal changes in hiring, including holiday-season jobs, according to Tom Nardone, an assistant commissioner at the department's Bureau of Labor Statistics.

President Barack Obama said the unexpected drop in the unemployment rate was "cause for hope but not celebration."

Speaking at a small business in a Washington suburb, Obama said the figures show modest progress, but he cautioned that the data will continue to fluctuate for months.

By the White House's own forecast, the unemployment rate will average 10 percent this year, up from 9.3 percent last year, a 26-year high. By the 2012 presidential election, the jobless rate will still be elevated — averaging 8.2



percent. Normal is around 5.5 percent or 6 percent.

Seasonal adjustments tend to have a big effect on the January data. Retailers typically lay off temporary holiday-season employees. Construction firms temporarily cut jobs due to cold weather. The data are adjusted so the figures will show underlying trends.

The department uses separate surveys of households and businesses to gauge employment. The

two differed this month. Households showed a jump in employment. But businesses reported 20,000 fewer jobs.

From month to month, the household survey is more volatile than the business survey, Nardone said. In December, it reported a 589,000 drop in employment. But over time, the two surveys tend to track each other. In the past 12 months, both show a net loss of about 4 million jobs.

The prospects of high unemployment heading into this year's congressional elections are a liability for Obama's Democratic Party.

This year the monthly unemployment rate is likely to stay high — and possibly creep up — as more people who had left the work force see an improving economy and start looking for jobs again. The jobless rate includes only those who are looking for work.

"I'd be surprised to see the jobless rate heading down in a straight line from here," said Nigel Gault, economist at IHS Global Insight. "It will be a very, very tough labor market. You'll be battling with a lot of other people for the relatively small number of jobs that will be created."

Bankers Try To Put Better Face Before Congress

WASHINGTON (AP) — Looking to douse public and congressional anger, chief executives at some of the biggest financial institutions are on a mission to repair their image and gain more influence over legislation that would overhaul regulations that govern their industry.

They have their work cut out for them.

Attempts to reach a bipartisan agreement on new regulations hit an impasse in the Senate Banking Committee on Friday, a day after Chairman Christopher Dodd accused the financial industry of deploying "an army of lobbyists whose only mission is to kill the common-sense financial reforms we have been working so hard to achieve."

Eager to change that tone, top bankers fanned out across Capitol Hill this week, meeting with House and Senate members involved in banking policies and assuring them that they, too, want to prevent another financial meltdown.

"The No. 1 goal we have is to be relevant to this fix," said Richard Davis, the chairman and CEO of U.S. Bancorp.

The breakdown in the Senate negotiations, however, is a setback for the bill. A priority of the Obama administration, the legislation intends to address weaknesses in the financial system that led to the crisis that gripped Wall Street in fall 2008. The legislation aims to increase consumer protections on loans and credit cards, add restrictions to previously unregulated financial products and find ways to dismantle failing firms without resorting to taxpayer bailouts. The House has already passed its version of the bill.

But Dodd, D-Conn., has been unable to find common ground over consumer protections with Sen. Richard Shelby of Alabama, the top Republican on the committee. Nonetheless, Dodd said he will incorporate compromises into the bill that were agreed on by other committee members from both parties.

Shelby, siding with banks,

opposes creation of a new entity that would have authority to write its own regulations.

Currently, consumer protections are carried out by the various bank regulators, who also watch over the safety and soundness of banks.

"In order to strike the appropriate balance, they must be integrated with each other, not separated from each other," Shelby said Friday.

If the banking industry lobbyists have been the combat troops in the effort to influence regulatory legislation, then these bankers are casting themselves

as the diplomats, seeking to assure lawmakers that they share more in common than not.

Their effort is part of an industry-wide push to put a face on banking that is not defined by Wall Street giants such as Goldman Sachs and Citigroup, institutions that have borne the brunt of public and congressional criticism.

"The word 'bank' covers a lot of ground; part of our role is to provide some differentiation," said James Smith, chairman and CEO of Webster Bank, a regional New England bank based in Connecticut, Dodd's home state.

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