

NATION/WORLD DIGEST

Every U.S. State Has Snow, Except Hawaii

By The Associated Press

Forget red and blue — color America white. There was snow on the ground in 49 states Friday. Hawaii was the holdout. It was the United States of Snow, thanks to an unusual combination of weather patterns that dusted the U.S., including the skyscrapers of Dallas, the peach trees of Atlanta and the Florida Panhandle, where hurricanes are more common than snowflakes.

More than two-thirds of the nation's land mass had snow on the ground when the day dawned, and then it snowed ever so slightly in Florida to make it 49 states out of 50.

At the same time, those weird weather forces are turning Canada's Winter Olympics into the bring-your-own-snow games. Who's the Great White North now?

"I'm calling it the upside-down winter," said David Robinson, head of the Global Snow Lab at Rutgers University in New Jersey.

Three Dead In Alabama-Huntsville Shooting

HUNTSVILLE, Ala. (AP) — A woman opened fire during a biology faculty meeting at the University of Alabama's Huntsville campus Friday, killing three people and injuring at least one more.

The shooter was in custody, but university spokesman Ray Garner said he could not identify her or the victims. Local television stations reported she is a faculty member.

Garner said three people were dead and a fourth injured. Trent Willis, chief of staff for Huntsville Mayor Tommy Battle, said several other people had been shot, but he did not have an exact number or their conditions.

Huntsville Hospital spokesman Burr Ingram said the hospital was treating three victims. Two were in critical condition and one was in stable condition. It was not clear if those three included the one injured person Garner mentioned.

Sophomore Erin Johnson told The Huntsville Times a biology faculty meeting was under way when she heard screams coming from the room.

The shooting happened in the university's Shelby Center, a science building. University police secured the building and students were cleared from it.

The Huntsville campus has about 7,500 students in northern Alabama, not far from the Tennessee line.

The university posted a message on its Web site Friday afternoon telling students the campus was closed Friday night and all students were encouraged to go home. Counselors were available to speak with students.

House Dems Offer Mixed Signals On Jobs Bill

WASHINGTON (AP) — House Democratic leaders sent mixed signals Friday on a new jobs bill supported by Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid, further complicating plans to quickly pass election-year legislation addressing huge job losses.

Senate Democrats scrapped a bipartisan jobs bill Thursday in favor of one they say is leaner and more focused on putting Americans back to work, all but daring Republicans to vote against it. Now, they might have to dare House Democrats to vote against it as well.

If the Senate passes the new bill, it will put House Democrats on the spot to hand President Barack Obama a badly needed political victory while addressing the biggest economic issue facing the country — the loss of 8.4 million jobs since the start of the recession. Supporters hope nervous lawmakers facing congressional elections in November, and an unemployment rate just below 10 percent, will feel obligated to support a jobs bill.

Reid wants to quickly pass the bill after Congress returns from a weeklong break Feb. 22.

House Democrats were at odds over the pared-down Senate bill. House Majority Leader Steny Hoyer of Maryland said he could live with it, but House Speaker Nancy Pelosi of California said she wants to pass key provisions of a much broader House-passed bill centered more on spending than tax cuts.

Despite Name, Patrick Kennedy Not Politician

WASHINGTON (AP) — It was never a perfect fit — politics and Patrick Kennedy, the latest and perhaps the last in the long line of Kennedys at the heart of American political life.

The sometimes fragile son of the late Sen. Edward Kennedy has spent all of his adult life in public office, but he has rarely seemed at ease in the spotlight. On Friday, five months after his father's death, he announced he'll retire from Congress, expressing a sense of relief. It will be the first time in six decades that Washington will be without a Kennedy in office.

"It feels like a load off my shoulders," said the Rhode Island Democrat, who started pursuing public office before he graduated from college.

"I'll have a private life and a personal life that heretofore I really haven't experienced," he said in a telephone interview. "I am looking forward to it."

Kennedy, 42, a nephew of President John F. Kennedy and of Attorney General and Sen. Robert F. Kennedy, says he will serve out his eighth term but won't seek a ninth this fall.

Unclaimed \$2.5M Prize Expires In Indiana

INDIANAPOLIS (AP) — Hoosier lottery players have been digging through their trash, scouring their cars and bringing fistfuls of old tickets, some in shoeboxes, to an Indianapolis store, hoping they would find the winning — but unclaimed — \$2.5 million jackpot ticket.

But time ran out Friday as the 5 p.m. deadline for cashing in the winning Hoosier Lotto ticket came and went with no one coming forward.

"Pretty sad for somebody if they happen to have it out there," said Hoosier Lottery spokeswoman Lucia Anderson.

The winning ticket had been all the buzz among customers this week at the Meijer convenience store where it was sold.

"I looked around. I looked in every trash can for it," Mike Tinder, a 33-year-old life coach from Indianapolis, said Friday.

Stocks Mixed; China Curbs Bank Lending

NEW YORK (AP) — Industrial stocks stumbled Friday after China said it would take more steps to keep its economy from growing too fast.

Regulators in China are trying to keep the nation's rapid economic growth from getting out of hand. But investors worry that the slowdown in China could disrupt a U.S. recovery by hurting exports and profits of companies that do business there.

The Dow Jones industrial average closed down 45 points but had been down as much as 160 points after China said its banks would have to hold on to more cash. That cuts down on how much they can lend.

Stocks ended mixed but the Dow and other major indexes posted gains for the week, their first after four losing weeks.

The surprise announcement out of China came a day after a tame inflation report there raised hopes that the country wouldn't have to do more to put the brakes on its supercharged economy.

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AFGHANISTAN

U.S., Afghan Forces Launch Assault

Offensive Toward Taliban Forces On Town Of Marjah Biggest Since 2001 Invasion

BY ALFRED DE MONTESQUIOU AND CHRISTOPHER TORCHIA
Associated Press Writers

NEAR MARIJAH, Afghanistan — Helicopter-borne U.S. Marines and Afghan troops swooped down on the Taliban-held town of Marjah before dawn Saturday, launching a long-expected attack to re-establish government control and undermine support for militants in their southern heartland.

The assault on Marjah is the biggest offensive since the 2001 U.S.-led invasion of Afghanistan and will serve as a major test of new NATO strategy focusing on protecting civilians. The attack is also the first major combat operation since President Barack Obama ordered 30,000 U.S. reinforcements here in December to try to turn the tide of the war.

Marine commanders say they expect between 400 to 1,000 insurgents to be holed up inside this southern Afghan town of 80,000 people in Helmand province, including more than 100 foreign fighters. Marjah is the biggest southern town under Taliban control and the linchpin of the militants' logistical and opium-smuggling network.

"The first wave of choppers has landed inside Marjah. The operation has begun," said Capt. Joshua Winfrey, commander of Lima Company, 3rd Battalion, 6th Marines, which was at the forefront of the attack.

Several hundred U.S. Marines and some Afghan troops were in the first wave of troops, flying over minefields the militants are believed to have planted around the town, 360 miles (610 kilometers) southwest of Kabul.

The operation, codenamed "Mosharak," or Together, was described as the biggest joint operation of the Afghan war. Maj. Gen. Nick Carter, the commander of NATO forces in southern Afghanistan, says 15,000 troops were involved in the operation, including some 7,500 troops fighting in Marjah and British forces to the north in the district of Nad Ali.

The helicopter assault was preceded by illumination flares fired over the town about 2 a.m. In the pitch darkness of a moonless night, the roar of helicopters could be heard overhead, flying in assault troops from multiple locations.

The white flash of Hellfire and Tom missiles could be seen exploding over the town as flares illuminated the darkness to help assault troops spot targets in the town.

Once the town is secured, NATO hopes to rush in aid and restore public services in a bid to win support among the estimated 125,000 people who live in Marjah and surrounding villages. The Afghans' ability to restore those services is crucial to the success of the operation and to preventing the Taliban from returning.

Tribal elders have pleaded for NATO to finish the operation quickly and spare civilians — an appeal that offers some hope the townspeople will cooperate with Afghan and international forces once the Taliban are gone.

At the Pentagon, a senior U.S. official said Afghan president Hamid Karzai had signed off on the attack.

Another defense official said



Source: ESRI © 2010 MCT

Karzai had been informed of planning for the operation well in advance. The official said it marked a first in terms of both sharing information prior to the attack and planning collaboration with the Afghan government.

Both officials spoke on condition of anonymity because there were not authorized to speak publicly.

The second official said the number of Afghan security forces in the district have roughly doubled since Obama's first infusion of some 10,000 Marines in southern Afghanistan last year.

The Marjah offensive involves close combat in extremely difficult terrain, that official said. A close grid of wide canals dug by the United States as an aid project decades ago make the territory a particularly rich agricultural prize but complicate the advance of U.S. forces.

On the eve of the attack, cars and trucks jammed the main road out of Marjah on Friday as hundreds of civilians defied militant

orders and fled the area ahead of the assault. For weeks, U.S. commanders had signaled their intention to attack Marjah in hopes that civilians would seek shelter.

Residents told The Associated Press by telephone this week that Taliban fighters were preventing them from leaving, warning the roads were planted with land mines to slow the NATO advance.

Still, many people fled anyway for the provincial capital of Lashkar Gah, 20 miles (30 kilometers) to the northeast. They told journalists they had to leave quickly and secretly to avoid recrimination from Taliban commanders.

Some said they slipped out of town when Taliban commanders weren't watching.

"We were not allowed to come here. We haven't brought any of our belongings; we just tried to get ourselves out," said Bibi Gul, an elderly woman in a black headscarf who arrived in nearby Lashkar Gah with three of her sons. She left three more sons behind in Marjah.

Police searched vehicles for any signs of militants, in one case prodding bales of cotton with a metal rod in search of hidden weapons.

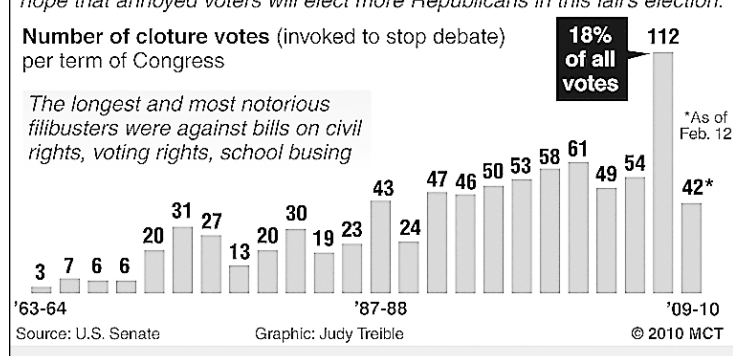
"They don't allow families to leave," Marjah resident Qari Mohammad Nabi said of the Taliban. "The families can only leave the village when they are not seen leaving."

Provincial spokesman Daoud Ahmadi said about 450 families — an estimated 2,700 people — had already sought refuge in Lashkar Gah. Most moved in with relatives but more than 100 were being sheltered by the government, he said.

White House Sends Out Invites For Health Summit

Senate tied up in knots

Republicans are using the filibuster (extended debate to block a vote) as a way to limit or derail the majority Democrats' ability to pass bills with the hope that annoyed voters will elect more Republicans in this fall's election.



House and Senate, the White House said "this is the closest our nation has been to resolving this issue in the nearly 100 years that it has been debated. The Blair House meeting is the next step."

White House Chief of Staff Rahm Emanuel and Health and Human Services Secretary Kathleen Sebelius cited the recent 39 percent rate hikes by Anthem Blue Cross in California as urgent proof the overhaul effort must be completed.

"As the president noted this week, if we don't act on comprehensive health insurance reform, this enormous rate hike will be just a preview of coming attractions," they wrote.

The letter was sent to McConnell, Boehner, Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid, D-Nev., and House Speaker Nancy Pelosi, D-Calif.

The White House named 21 lawmakers the president wants to attend the summit: the top leaders in the House and Senate and of the committees with jurisdiction over the health legislation. Obama also invited the top four leaders to invite four more lawmakers each, bringing the total to 37 — 20 Democrats and 17 Republicans.

Even prior to the invitation,

Rep. Tom Price, R-Ga., a physician and head of the Republican Study Committee, dismissed the summit in an op-ed as "simply an attempt by the president to use the White House as a political tool to intimidate his way into a government takeover of health care. The American people and Republicans in Congress will not be taken by this Chicago-style politics."

At the summit, Obama will offer opening remarks, followed

by comments from a Republican leader and a Democratic leader, according to the format detailed in Friday's letter. Obama will then moderate a discussion on four topics: insurance reforms, cost containment, expanding coverage and the impact of health legislation on the deficit.

Officials from the White House Office of Management and Budget and the nonpartisan Congressional Budget Office and the Joint Committee on Taxation also have been invited.

The letter stands as a challenge not just to Republicans but also to Democrats, who have yet to finalize a deal on sweeping overhaul legislation. They were on the verge of doing so last month before the special election victory of Republican Scott Brown in Massachusetts deprived Democrats of the filibuster-proof supermajority they need to move forward in the Senate.

That threw the whole undertaking into disarray and congressional leaders have been struggling to pick up the pieces. Some hope the summit will break the logjam one way or the other.

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