

Syria: Western Pressure On Assad Grows

BEIRUT (AP) — The U.S. closed its embassy in Syria and Britain recalled its ambassador to Damascus on Monday in a new Western push to get President Bashar Assad to leave power and halt the murderous grind in Syria — now among the deadliest conflicts of the Arab Spring. Although the diplomatic effort was stymied at the U.N. by vetoes from Russia and China, the moves by the U.S. and Britain were a clear message that Western powers see no point in engaging with Assad and now will seek to bolster Syria's opposition.

"This is a doomed regime as well as a murdering regime," British Foreign Secretary William Hague told lawmakers as he recalled his country's ambassador from Syria. "There is no way it can recover its credibility internationally."

President Barack Obama said the Syrian leader's departure is only a matter of time.

"We have been relentless in sending a message that it is time for Assad to go," Obama said during an interview with NBC. "This is not going to be a matter of if, it's going to be a matter of when."

FAA Bill Passes; Speeds Up Switch To GPS

WASHINGTON (AP) — A bill to speed the nation's switch from radar to an air traffic control system based on GPS technology, and to open U.S. skies to unmanned drone flights within four years, received final congressional approval Monday.

The bill passed the Senate 75-20, despite labor opposition to a deal cut between the Democratic-controlled Senate and the Republican-controlled House on rules governing union organizing elections at airlines and railroads. The House had passed the bill last week, and it now goes to President Barack Obama for his signature.

The bill authorizes \$63.4 billion for the Federal Aviation Administration over four years, including about \$11 billion toward the air traffic system and its modernization. It accelerates the modernization program by setting a deadline of June 2015 for the FAA to develop new arrival procedures at the nation's 35 busiest airports so planes can land using the more-precise GPS navigation.

Instead of time-consuming, fuel-burning, stair-step descents, planes will be able to glide in more steeply with their engines idling. Planes will also be able to land and take off closer together and more frequently, even in poor weather, because pilots will know the precise location of other aircraft and obstacles on the ground. Fewer planes will be diverted.

Eventually, FAA officials want the airline industry and other aircraft operators to install onboard satellite technology that updates the location of planes every second instead of radar's every six to 12 seconds. That would enable pilots to tell not only the location of their plane, but other planes equipped with the new technology as well — something they can't do now.

Authorities: Powell Had Planned Deadly Fire

GRAHAM, Wash. (AP) — Josh Powell planned the deadly house fire that killed him and his young sons for some time, dropping toys at charities and sending final emails to multiple acquaintances before the blaze, authorities said Monday.

Powell, the husband of missing Utah woman Susan Powell, died along with his children Sunday.

He had been named a person of interest in his wife's disappearance and just last week was denied custody of his children. The fire happened when a social worker dropped them off for what was supposed to be a supervised visit.

Pierce County sheriff's spokesman Sgt. Ed Troyer said authorities found two, five-gallon gasoline cans inside the home. A five-gallon can was spread throughout the house and used as an accelerant in the huge blaze.

Another can was found by the bodies, he said.

Romney Works To Thwart Santorum Challenge

GRAND JUNCTION, Colo. (AP) — Sensing a possible threat, Mitt Romney criticized Rick Santorum's time in the Senate as "not effective" because of his past support for spending on pork-barrel projects as he worked to fend off an unexpected challenge in the next states to vote.

Santorum countered that Romney, the front-runner in the GOP presidential race, "should not be our nominee" because he was "dead wrong on the most important issue of the day" when, as governor, he signed a health care overhaul into law in Massachusetts.

The two sparred from afar one day before Republicans in Colorado and Minnesota hold nominating caucuses, the latest contests in what's become almost a plodding race for the GOP nomination compared to the rapid-fire campaign of last month. Newt Gingrich and Ron Paul also are competing but neither was expected to have a breakout performance in either state.

Romney, who won both states four years ago, hopes to extend his winning streak though advisers acknowledged that a first-place finish would be more likely to come by in Colorado than in Minnesota. The Republican Party in Minnesota has become more conservative in recent years and Santorum's strong conservative positions on social issues could resonate with the state's strong contingent of evangelical voters.

Santorum, a Catholic, has a strong anti-abortion record and consistently focuses on the issue. Romney, who once supported abortion rights, has struggled to win over those voters. But in a sign that he's trying to do just that, Romney's campaign on Monday rolled out a petition focusing on religious liberty. The move was intended to challenge a recent Obama administration decision to require hospitals to distribute free birth control, a policy at odds with the religious teachings followed at many Catholic health care facilities.

Tea Party Activists Slowly Turning To Romney

DENVER (AP) — Long skeptical of Mitt Romney, tea party activists are either warming up to the GOP presidential front-runner or reluctantly backing him after abandoning hope of finding a nominee they like better.

Whatever the reason, the former Massachusetts governor who is coming off of back-to-back victories in Florida and Nevada now is picking up larger shares of the tea party vote than he did when the Republican nomination fight began. And that fact alone illuminates the struggles of the nearly three-year-old movement to greatly influence its first presidential race.

"We haven't gone away," insisted Amy Kremer, chairwoman of the national Tea Party Express. But, in the same breath, she acknowledged lower expectations and a shift in focus to Senate races over the White House campaign. She also pleaded for patience, saying: "Anybody that thinks we are going to change things in one cycle or two cycles is fooling themselves."

Tea party activists across the country entered their first presidential contest this year expecting to hold major sway over the Republican race following a 2010 congressional election year in which their favored candidates successfully knocked off a string of insiders in GOP primaries in Colorado and elsewhere.

The movement influenced the presidential race early on, with candidates from Romney on down parroting the movement's language and promoting its agenda of restrained spending to curry favor with its adherents.

Palestinian Chief Takes Step Toward Unity

RAMALLAH, West Bank (AP) — After months of wavering, Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas took a decisive step Monday toward reconciliation with the Islamic militant group Hamas, a move Israel promptly warned would close the door to any future peace talks.

In a deal brokered by Qatar, Abbas will head an interim unity government to prepare for general elections in the Palestinian territories in the coming months. The agreement appeared to bring reconciliation — key to any statehood ambitions — within reach for the first time since the two sides set up rival Palestinian governments in the West Bank and Gaza in 2007.

Monday's deal, signed in the Qatari capital of Doha by Abbas and Hamas chief Khaled Mashaal, put an end to recent efforts by the international community to revive long-stalled negotiations between Israel and the Palestinians on the terms of Palestinian statehood. Abbas appears to have concluded that he has a better chance of repairing relations with Hamas, shunned by the West as a terror group, than reaching an agreement with Israel's hardline prime minister, Benjamin Netanyahu.

Netanyahu quickly condemned the Doha deal. "It's either peace with Hamas or peace with Israel. You can't have them both," he said in a warning to Abbas, who has enjoyed broad international support.

In moving closer to Hamas, Abbas risks losing some of that backing and hundreds of millions of dollars a year in aid.

U.S. Puts New Sanctions On Iran

BY JULIE PACE  
Associated Press

WASHINGTON — President Barack Obama levied tough new sanctions on Iran's Central Bank Monday amid increased tensions over Tehran's nuclear program and the specter of an Israeli attack on the Islamic republic.

In a letter to Congress, Obama said more sanctions were warranted, "particularly in light of the deceptive practices of the Central Bank of Iran and other Iranian banks." He said the problems included the hiding of transactions of sanctioned parties, the deficiencies of Iran's anti-money laundering regime and the unacceptably high risk posed to the entire international financial system posed by Iran's activities.

The Central Bank sanctions were included as an amendment in the wide-ranging defense bill that Obama signed into law at the end of the year. The White House said Obama signed the executive order enforcing the sanctions on Sunday.

The stronger sanctions come as the White House tries to ratchet up pressure on Iran to abandon its nuclear program and dissuade Israel from launching a unilateral strike on Iran, a move that could roil the Middle East and jolt the global economy.

Obama said Sunday he does not believe Israel has yet decided whether to attack Iran and still believes a diplomatic solution is possible.

Iran insists that its nuclear pursuit is for peaceful purposes, but the West accuses Tehran of developing the know-how to build a nuclear bomb. Defense Secretary Leon Panetta last week would not dispute a report that he believes Israel may attack Iran this spring in an attempt to set back the Islamic republic's nuclear program.

The White House said Monday that the timing of the stricter sanctions was unrelated to the prospect of an Israeli attack.

"There has been a steady increase in our sanctions activity and



Obama

this is part of that escalation," White House spokesman Jay Carney said.

A Treasury Department statement said Monday the new sanctions underscore that the administration is determined to hold Iran accountable for meeting international obligations over its nuclear program. The statement said Iran should get the message that "it will face ever-increasing economic and diplomatic pressure" until it answers the world's well-founded concerns about its nuclear intentions.

The department also said foreign financial institutions engaged in "arms-length transactions" with the Central Bank would not be impacted by the sanctions that Obama ordered Sunday, but remain at risk of such penalties if they undertake significant transactions

with the bank or other Iranian financial institutions.

The sanctions amendment in the defense bill compels U.S. punishment of foreign financial institutions that conduct transactions through Iran's Central Bank in order to import petroleum. Several U.S. allies in Europe and Asia engage in such business with Iran.

The bill gives Obama six months to implement those sanctions.

The administration expressed concern at the time that the sanctions could lead to a spike in global oil prices, hampering the American economic recovery and perhaps perversely enabling Iran to reap even greater revenues from its oil exports. That would defeat the purpose of the bill, which is to hamper Tehran's alleged support for international terrorism and its ability to fund its nuclear enrichment program.

Under the law, Obama had the option of waiving penalties for na-

tional security reasons.

In an interview that aired Monday, Obama said the U.S. has a "very good estimate" of when Iran could complete work on a nuclear weapon, but cautioned that there are still many unanswered questions about Tehran's inner workings.

"Do we know all of the dynamics inside of Iran? Absolutely not," Obama said during an interview with NBC that aired on the "Today" show. "Iran itself is a lot more divided now than it was. Knowing who is making decisions at any given time inside of Iran is tough."

Despite Obama's insistence that diplomacy is the best course to pursue, he has long said all options are on the table — an allusion to military intervention. On Monday, he said the U.S. has done extensive planning for that range of options.

"We are prepared to exercise these options should they arise," Obama said.

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