

Al-Qaida Leader Says He Backs Syrian Revolt

BEIRUT (AP) — Al-Qaida's leader has called for the ouster of Syria's "pernicious, cancerous regime," raising fears that Islamic extremists will try to exploit an uprising against President Bashar Assad that began with peaceful calls for democratic change but is morphing into a bloody, armed insurgency.

The regime has long blamed terrorists for the 11-month-old revolt, and al-Qaida's endorsement creates new difficulties for the U.S., its Western allies and Arab states trying to figure out a way to help force Assad from power. On Sunday, the 22-nation Arab League called for the U.N. Security Council to create a joint peacekeeping force for Syria, but Damascus rejected it immediately.

The United Nations estimates more than 5,400 people have been killed in Syria since the uprising began in March. But that figure is from January, when the U.N. stopped counting because the chaos in the country has made it all but impossible to check the figures.

Republicans Critical Of Proposed Budget

WASHINGTON (AP) — The new budget that President Barack Obama is sending to Congress aims to achieve \$4 trillion in deficit reduction over the next decade by restraining government spending and raising taxes on the wealthy. To help a weak economy, Obama's proposal Monday requests increases in transportation, education and other areas.

While administration officials on Sunday defended the plan as a balanced approach, Republicans belittled the effort as a repeat of failed policies that did too little to attack soaring costs in such programs as Medicare and threatened growth by raising taxes.

The debate is almost certain to go all the way to Election Day in November with gridlock keeping Congress from resolving many pressing issues on expiring tax cuts and across-the-board spending cuts until a lame-duck session at year's end.

Obama's spending blueprint for the budget year that begins Oct. 1 projects a deficit for this year of \$1.33 trillion. That would mean four straight years of trillion-dollar-plus deficits.

The budget will project a decline in the deficit to \$901 billion in 2013 and continued improvements shrinking the deficit to \$575 billion in 2018.

Woman Wants Dying Husband To See Birth

DALLAS (AP) — Diane Aulger was about two weeks from her delivery date when she and her husband decided there was no time to wait: Mark Aulger had only days to live, and he wanted to see his child.

Diane Aulger had her labor induced and gave birth to their daughter on Jan. 18. When tiny Savannah was placed in his arms, Mark Aulger "cried, and he just looked very sad," his wife said. He died five days later from complications related to his cancer treatment.

The 52-year-old Texas man was diagnosed with colon cancer in April. He had surgery and, as a precaution, six months of chemotherapy, Diane Aulger said. With no signs of cancer showing up in follow up tests, the treatment seemed successful.

Then in November, Mark Aulger began having trouble breathing. By Jan. 3, he was sick enough to go to the emergency room. His wife said he was told the chemotherapy had caused him to develop pulmonary fibrosis, which causes scarring and thickening in the lungs.

Initially, the Aulgers were hopeful.

Natural Gas Production Cut As Prices Drop

PITTSBURGH (AP) — As natural gas prices continue to drop, the recent nationwide boom in drilling is slowing. Drillers don't make money if prices go too low — and drilling wells isn't cheap.

"It is safe to say that there will be fewer natural gas wells drilled in 2012," said Kathryn Klaber, president of the Marcellus Shale Coalition, an industry group based in Pennsylvania.

In recent weeks, several companies have announced plans to cut gas production around the nation, but experts say the low prices are also opening up new markets.

When the shale drilling boom was starting in 2008 the average price for a unit of gas was about \$8. Two years ago it was down to \$5.50, and now it's dropped to about \$2.50. Part of the reason is that the shale gas formations became productive more rapidly than expected, as thousands of new wells have been drilled nationwide.

Industry reports note that the national count of active new gas drilling rigs fell to 775 in early February, down from about 1,500 in 2008.

U.S. Sex Abuse Lawsuit Against Vatican Dismissed

MILWAUKEE (AP) — Lawyers for a man who was sexually abused decades ago by a priest at a Wisconsin school for the deaf have withdrawn their lawsuit naming Pope Benedict XVI and other top Vatican officials as defendants, a major victory for the Holy See, which has long insisted the pope bears no liability for the actions of an abusive priest.

Attorney Jeff Anderson had filed the lawsuit with great fanfare at the peak of a European explosion of the sex abuse scandal in 2010. He alleged that the former Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger and his deputies knew about allegations of sexual abuse at St. John's School for the Deaf and prevented internal punishment of the accused priest.

The lawsuit had helped shift the blame for priestly sex abuse in the public mind away from bishops — who are responsible for their priests — to the Vatican and Benedict himself.

The Vatican at the time had rejected Anderson's lawsuit as a publicity stunt, and the Vatican's U.S. attorney said Saturday the dismissal demonstrates that the case was meritless and never should have been filed in the first place.

Anderson's firm filed a voluntary motion Friday in U.S. District Court in Milwaukee to dismiss the lawsuit.

Anderson said a key reason for the suit, which named Ratzinger as one of three defendants, had been to hold the pope and Vatican accountable for abuse.

Greece

Austerity Deal Sparks Rioting

BY NICHOLAS PAPHITIS AND DEREK GATOPOULOS
Associated Press

ATHENS, Greece — Greek lawmakers on Monday approved harsh new austerity measures demanded by bailout creditors to save the debt-crippled nation from bankruptcy, after riots in Athens and other cities left stores looted and burned and more than 120 people hurt.

The historic vote paves the way for Greece's European partners and the International Monetary Fund to release \$170 billion (euro) 130 billion) in new rescue loans, without which Greece would default on its mountain of debt next month and likely leave the eurozone — a scenario that would further roil global markets.

Lawmakers voted 199-74 in favor of the cut-backs, despite strong dissent among the two main coalition members.

In response, the Socialists and conservatives expelled 22 and 21 lawmakers, respectively, reducing their majority in the 300-seat parliament from 236 to 193.

Violence was also reported in six other cities, the worst in central Volos where the town hall and a tax office were damaged by fire, police said.

Sunday's clashes erupted after more than 100,000 protesters marched to the parliament to rally against the drastic cuts, which will ax one in five civil service jobs and slash the minimum wage by more than a fifth.

At least 45 businesses were damaged by fire, including several historic buildings, movie theaters, banks and a cafeteria, in the worst riot damage in Athens in years. Fifty police officers were injured and at least 70 protesters were hospitalized. Sixth-seven suspected rioters were arrested and a further 70 detained.

Prime Minister Lucas Papademos urged calm. "Vandalism and destruction have no place in a democracy and will not be tolerated," Papademos told Parliament just before the vote. "I call on the public to show calm. At these crucial times, we do not have the luxury of this type of protest. I think

everyone is aware of how serious the situation is."

Since May 2010, Greece has survived on a \$145 billion ((euro) 110 billion) bailout from its European partners and the International Monetary Fund. When that proved insufficient, the new rescue package was approved. The deal, which has not yet been finalized, will be combined with a massive bond swap deal to write off half the country's privately held debt.

But for both deals to materialize, Greece had to persuade its deeply skeptical creditors that it has the will to implement spending cuts and public sector reforms that will end years of fiscal profligacy and tame gaping budget deficits.

As protests raged Sunday, demonstrators set bonfires in front of parliament and dozens of riot police formed lines to keep them from making a run on the building. Security forces fired dozens of tear gas volleys at rioters, who attacked them with firebombs and chunks of marble broken off the fronts of luxury hotels, banks and department stores.

Santorum To Go On Offense Versus Romney

BY STEVE PEOPLES
Associated Press

PORTLAND, Maine — A day after Mitt Romney regained some momentum in the Republican presidential contest, his rival Rick Santorum went on the attack, calling the front-runner "desperate" while promising to compete aggressively to win the state where Romney grew up.

Santorum said Sunday he could do "exceptionally well" in Michigan, where Romney's father served as governor. The Midwestern state and Arizona host Republican presidential nominating contests on Feb. 28.



things," said Santorum, who represented Pennsylvania during his 16 years in Congress, first in the House and then in the Senate.

Maine GOP officials declared Romney the winner of Saturday's caucuses. The results ended a three-state losing streak to Santorum, who swept contests in Colorado, Minnesota and Missouri on Tuesday.

"We're going to spend a lot of time in Michigan and Arizona, and those are up next. And that's where we're really been focusing on," Santorum told ABC's "This Week." He suggested that a strong showing in those contests would make the presidential contest "a two-man race," dismissing current rivals Newt Gingrich and Ron Paul.

Santorum shrugged off his third-place finish Saturday in caucuses in Maine, where he didn't actively compete, as well as his second-place finish in a straw poll of conservative activists.

Romney has been painting Santorum as a long-time Washington insider who pursued home-state projects. Santorum on Sunday described Romney's recent criticism as "desperate."

"You reach a point where desperate people do desperate

With the next primaries more than two weeks away, the break seems unusually long in the rapid-fire race that's featured six contests in the last 14 days. Romney and his rivals now have 17 days to raise cash and bolster their organizations for what's shaping up to be a slog to the Republican nomination and the right to face President Barack Obama in November.

As Santorum eyes Michigan, Romney turns his attention to extending his huge cash advantage over his rivals.

The Massachusetts governor left Maine before the caucus results were announced to attend a West Coast fundraiser Saturday night. He issued a written statement to mark his victory in the low-turnout contest.

Top Republican Wants To Overturn New Birth Control Mandate From White House

WASHINGTON (AP) — Conservatives said Sunday the flap surrounding President Barack Obama's birth control mandate was far from over, with Senate Republican Leader Mitch McConnell saying he'll push to overturn the requirement because it was another example of government meddling.

While a senior White House official shrugged off such remarks, declaring the issue resolved and new legislation unlikely, the heated rhetoric from Republicans suggested the GOP would try to keep the debate alive in an election year to rally conservatives and seize upon voter frustration with big government.

"It's riddled with constitutional problems," McConnell said of Obama's broader health-care plan. "And this is what happens when the government tries to take over health care and tries to interfere with your religious beliefs."

Last week, Obama backed down on a mandate that religious-affiliated employers such as Catholic hospitals and colleges cover birth control in their health insurance plans. In a tweak of the rule, those employees would be offered free coverage directly from their health insurer. But employers would not provide or pay for it.

The White House says the plan won't drive up costs because birth control, similar to other preventative care measures, is less expensive than pregnancy. But opponents say that unless drug makers stop charging for contraception, the cost is likely to get passed on to employers regardless.

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