Calls For Action At Senate Immigration Hearing

BY ERICA WERNER Associated Press

WASHINGTON — Lawmakers who are shaping the fate of the millions of people in the U.S. illegally were told by one Wednesday that it's time to rewrite immigration laws so that they, too, can live the American dream.

"What do you want to do with me?" an emotional Jose Antonio Vargas demanded of senators. "How do you define American?"

The first Senate hearing on immigration policy this year pointed toward an emerging bipartisan consensus that the nation's 11 million illegal immigrants should be offered a path to citizenship. But passionate divisions over the issue also surfaced as one Republican decried amnesty and shouting protesters interrupted the proceedings.

"You really mean that we're not going to have enforcement, but we've got to have amnesty first," Sen. Jeff Sessions, a top Republican on the Senate Judiciary Committee, confronted the panel's chairman, Sen. Patrick Leahy, D-Vt.

Leahy and Homeland Security Secretary Janet Napolitano rejected the argument that border security must be the focus before a comprehensive immigration package or any pathway to legalization can be done.

An immigration overhaul is a priority for President Barack Obama and lawmakers after a brutal election in which voters again elected a divided government. Democrats control the White House and the Senate, while Republicans hold the House majority.

But for all of the division and polarization in Washington, the hearing produced evidence of bipartisan agreement to fix what all agree is a broken system — and finally dispense with a wrenching issue that has bedeviled lawmakers for years.

Vargas' testimony produced a striking moment in which one of the 11 million illegal immigrants at the center of the debate confronted the elected officials reconsidering the law.

A former journalist who acknowledged his illegal status in a high-profile piece in The New York Times Magazine in June 2011, Vargas recalled his journey to the U.S. from the Philippines in 1993. He told lawmakers that he never knew he was here illegally until he applied for a drivers' permit, and that he lived for years in fear until he decided to go public and start an advocacy group. He has so far avoided deportation.

"Too often, we're treated as abstractions, faceless and nameless, mere subjects of debate rather than individuals with families, hopes, fears, and dreams," Vargas told committee members. "We dream of a path to citizenship so we can actively participate in our American democracy." Democrats on the panel offered praise and encouragement. Republicans had little response.

For Vargas and others in his position the deliberations offered some encouraging signs mixed with unmistakable notes of caution.

Protesters interrupted the hearing several times, with some shouting and waving banners against deportations, which have increased markedly under the Obama administration despite its push to find a political accommodation for many who have been living in the U.S. Later people in another group stood and silently turned their backs to the dais where the senators sat. They wore signs on their backs reading "human rights" and "immigrant rights." Leahy chided them for interrupting proceedings.

Obama says he is determined to finally make good on his promise to the Latino community to sign into law a comprehensive immigration bill with border security, employer enforcement, improvements to legal immigration and a path to citizenship for illegal immigrants already here. Meanwhile, a bipartisan group of eight senators has been meeting to develop a bill by next month that accomplishes eventual citizenship for illegal immigrants while also containing enough border security and enforcement measures to gain conservative support.

The four Democrats in the Senate negotiating group met with Obama at the White House on Wednesday, telling him they were confident a bipartisan bill could be agreed to "in the coming weeks," a senior Democrat said later, speaking on condition of anonymity because the meeting was private. A White House statement said Obama reiterated his intention to offer legislation of his own if Congress fails to act, and told senators that continuing to strengthen the border should not be mutually exclusive from a pathway to citizenship.

The Senate bipartisan plan makes a pathway to citizenship conditional on border security first, something on which Republicans have insisted. Obama's immigration proposals don't make that linkage, and it's emerging as a point of contention.

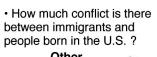
The bipartisan Senate negotiators are operating separately from the Senate Judiciary Committee, but the committee would probably vote on any legislation they produce. First, numerous thorny issues would have to be solved. Ouestions Wednesday touched on how to define border security, how to structure a future worker program, how to ensure employers can and will verify the legal status of their workers, and how to craft a path to citizenship that would not advantage illegal immigrants over those attempting the process legally.

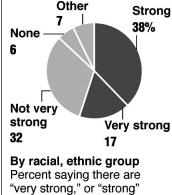
The action comes in a rapidly shifting political environment. Polls find more Americans support eventual citizenship for illegal immigrants and many Republican leaders are coming around to the same view after their party's dismal showing among Latino voters in the November elections.

But, as the hearing made clear, deep divisions exist within the GOP that could threaten any legislation in the Senate, where Republicans hold enough votes to stall

Conflict with foreign born

A majority of U.S. adults say that strong conflicts exist between immigrants and native born.





White 52 Black 56 Hispanic 61

...

African black immigrants Blacks make up only 9 percent of all U.S. immigrants, but African blacks are one of the fastest-growing 1980

64,000

2009

1.1 million Source: Pew Research Center poll of 1,506 adults, Nov. 28-Dec. 5, 2012; margin of error: +/-2.2 percentage points; Migratory Policy Institute Graphic: Judy Treible © 2013 MCT

legislation, or in the House, where majority Republicans are waiting to see what the Senate does before taking any action.

Boehner: Up To Democrats To Prevent Budget Cuts

BY ANDREW TAYLOR & JULIE PACE Associated Press

WASHINGTON — House Speaker John Boehner said Wednesday it's unlikely the Republican-controlled House and Democratic-led Senate will prevent a wave of automatic spending cuts from beginning to strike the economy in two weeks. Yet he sounded hopeful about avoiding a partial shutdown of the government when a temporary spending bill expires next month.

Cloistered in his Capitol office

frustrated that spending cuts Obama signaled he would agree to in 2011 have been taken off the table since the election.

"It hasn't been real productive the last two years, and frankly every time I've gotten into one of these high-profile negotiations, it's my rear end that got burnt," Boehner said. "It's just probably not the best way for our government to operate."

Obama stumped Wednesday in support of his minimum-wage plan, his calls for a manufacturing revival and his other State of the billion in automatic, across-theboard spending cuts — called a sequester in Washington-speak set to slam the Pentagon and domestic programs over the coming seven months. Boehner said he has no plans to resurrect legislation passed by Republicans last year to block this year's sequester.

The speaker said that until Obama puts forward a plan to avoid the sequester and Senate Democrats pass it, "we're going to be stuck with it. It's going to be a little bleak around here when this actually happens and people actually have to make decisions. Boehner noted that while plenty of GOP defense hawks are anxious about the automatic cuts, Democrats concerned with cuts to domestic programs have a lot on the line, too. And he sounded glum about prospects that the two sides will come together in the spring on a separate, long-term budget blueprint to address the government's fiscal problems. "It's hard to imagine that you could reconcile (the separate budgets) the House and Senate pass," Boehner said. "But at some point, in some manner, it almost

has to happen if we're going to deal with our long-term spending problem."

In March, the House and Senate will take up competing longterm budget blueprints. In a break with past years, House Republicans promise to balance the budget within a decade — without additional tax increases beyond the \$600 billion-plus in tax increases on wealthier earners won by Obama as part of a deal to keep the rest of the Bush-era tax cuts.

He said that an impasse with Senate Democrats, who insist their rival budget plan will raise taxes and contain softer budget cuts, is probably inevitable.

Senate Leader Sets Stage For Vote On Hagel

WASHINGTON (AP) — The Senate's top Democrat has set the stage for a full Senate vote by the end of the week on President Barack Obama's nomination of Chuck Hagel to be defense secretary. Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid filed a motion on Wednesday to

Senate Majority Leader Harry Řeid filed a motion on Wednesday to limit debate and force a vote on Hagel's nomination. Democrats hold a 55-45 edge in the Senate and have the numbers to confirm Hagel on a majority vote. But they would need the support of five Republicans before an up-or-down vote on the president's pick to head the Defense Department would be allowed if the GOP decided to filibuster. Republicans have indicated they might delay a vote.

A divided Senate Armed Services Committee on Tuesday voted to approve Hagel by a 14-11 vote along partisan lines.

Pope Celebrates Last Public Mass As Pontiff

VATICAN CITY (AP) — With a humble "Grazie" as bishops doffed their mitres and applause echoed through St. Peter's Basilica, a frail Pope Benedict XVI began his long farewell by presiding over Ash Wednesday services in a tearful, final public Mass.

"We wouldn't be sincere, Your Holiness, if we didn't tell you that there's a veil of sadness on our hearts this evening," said Cardinal Tarcisio Bertone, Benedict's longtime deputy, his voice breaking.

"Thank you for having given us the luminous example of the simple and humble worker in the vineyard of the Lord," Bertone said, quoting Benedict's own words when he first appeared before the faithful above St. Peter's Square after he was elected pope.

Smiling and clearly moved, Benedict responded, "Grazie. Now let us return to prayer" — his words bringing to an end the resounding applause that had grown in intensity over several minutes.

Then, in a rare gesture and sign of respect, the rows of bishops, some with tears in their eyes, removed their mitres. One prelate dabbed at his eyes with a handkerchief.

Airline Merger Creates World's Largest Group

DALLAS (AP) — American Airlines and US Airways will merge and create the world's biggest airline. The boards of both companies approved the merger late Wednesday, according to four people close to the situation.

The carrier keeps the American Airlines name but will be run by US Airways CEO Doug Parker. American's CEO, Tom Horton, will become chairman of the new company, these people said. They requested anonymity because the merger negotiations were private.

A formal announcement is expected Thursday morning.

The deal has been in the works since August, when creditors forced American to consider a merger rather than remain independent. American has been restructuring under bankruptcy protection since late 2011.

Together, American and US Airways will be slightly bigger than United Airlines. Travelers won't notice immediate changes. It will likely be months before the frequent-flier programs are merged, and possibly years before the two airlines are fully combined.

Israeli Media Are Silenced On Prisoner Affair

JERUSALEM (AP) — Israel's military censor, which has long served as the country's guardian of state secrets, is suddenly under the microscope following a pair of sensitive reports broken by the international media.

An Australian broadcaster's story this week about the suspicious death of an Australian-Israeli prisoner held by Israel, following foreign reports of an Israeli airstrike in Syria last month, have revealed the limits of Israel's decades-long censorship rules and court-imposed gag orders. In today's Internet age, many are now asking whether these restrictions are even relevant.

The idea behind the objections is that in today's communications environment, when everybody is essentially a publisher with a potentially worldwide audience, to censor "the media" is somehow akin to censoring conversation itself, which Israel, as a democracy, would never conceive of doing.

"(Gag orders) are a tool that can't deal with the media reality we live in: a globalized, hyper-connected, hyper-fast world. There is no real way to control the spread of information," said Yuval Dror, an expert in digital communications.

The censorship office, which emerged from an agreement between editors and the government in the 1950s, has long wielded heavy control over reporting of Israel's military and intelligence forays abroad and over domestic affairs it wants to keep under wraps.

Carnival Cancels 12 Cruises Aboard Triumph

HOUSTON (AP) - Carnival Cruise Lines has canceled a dozen more planned voyages aboard the Triumph and acknowledged that the crippled ship had been plagued by other mechanical problems in the eks before an engine-room fire left it powerless in the Gulf of Mexico. The company's announcement on Wednesday came as the Triumph was being towed to a port in Mobile, Ala., with more than 4,000 people on board, some of whom have complained to relatives that conditions on the ship are dismal and that they have limited access to food and bathrooms. The ship will be idle through April. Two other cruises were called off shortly after Sunday's fire. Debbi Smedley, a passenger on a recent Triumph cruise, said the ship had trouble on Jan. 28 as it was preparing to leave Galveston. Hours before the scheduled departure time, she received an email from Carnival stating the vessel would leave late because of a propulsion problem. Passengers were asked to arrive at the port at 2 p.m., two hours later than originally scheduled.

overlooking the National Mall, Boehner said in an interview with The Associated Press that he was skeptical of many of President Barack Obama's plans, laid out the night before in the annual State of the Union address.

Boehner voiced doubts about Obama's proposal for taxpayerfunded help for pre-school education for all 4-year-olds, and would not commit to passing a pathway to citizenship for the nation's 11 million illegal immigrants, though doing so would be "somewhat helpful" to members of his party as they seek to regain support among Hispanics. "There's no magic potion that's going to solve our party's woes with Hispanics," he said.

Boehner also refused to swing behind any of Obama's gun-control proposals and said he opposed the president's plan to raise the minimum wage to \$9 an hour.

The Ohio Republican said he gets along well with Obama but admits their relationship hasn't generated much in the way of results, pointing to two failed rounds of budget talks in 2011 and at the end of last year. Boehner is Union proposals in a trip to Ashville, N.C., where he said: "If you work full time, you shouldn't be in poverty." He takes his case to Georgia on Thursday and his hometown of Chicago on Friday, all part of his effort to build popular support for an agenda facing stiff resistance back in Washington.

"It's not a Democratic thing or a Republican thing," Obama said of his initiatives. "Our job as Americans is to restore that basic bargain that says if you work hard, if you meet your responsibilities, you can get ahead."

The immediate agenda, though, is dominated by \$85

Also looming is the need to pass legislation financing the government through the budget year ending Sept. 30. Here, at least, Boehner saw some promise, predicting a resolution will pass soon to head off a partial shutdown.

Washington's most powerful Republican was also non-committal on two of Obama's top secondterm initiatives: overhauling the nation's immigration laws and enacting stricter gun control measures.



