

Romney, Gingrich 'Neck And Neck'

BY DAVID ESPO

AP Special Correspondent

CHARLESTON, S.C. — On the eve of a Southern showdown, Mitt Romney conceded Friday he's in a tight race with Newt Gingrich for Saturday's South Carolina primary in a Republican campaign suddenly turned turbulent.

It's "neck and neck," Romney declared, while a third presidential contender, former Sen. Rick Santorum, swiped at both men in hopes of springing yet another campaign surprise.

Several days after forecasting a Romney victory in his state, Sen. Jim DeMint said the campaign's first Southern primary was now a two-man race between the former Massachusetts governor, who has struggled in recent days with questions about his personal wealth and taxes, and Gingrich, the former House speaker who has been surging in polls after a pair of well-received debate performances.

The stakes were high as Republicans sought a challenger to Democratic President Barack Obama. Television advertising by the candidates and their supporters exceeded \$10 million here, much of it spent in the past two weeks, and mailboxes were stuffed with campaign flyers.

In a bit of home-state boosterism, DeMint said the primary winner was "likely to be the next president of the United States."

Indeed, the winner of the state's primary has gone on to capture the Republican nomination each year since 1980.

A victory by Romney would place him in a commanding position heading into the Florida primary on Jan. 31. He and an organization supporting him are already airing television ads in that state, which is one of the country's costliest in which to campaign.

If the former Massachusetts governor stumbles in South Carolina, it could portend a long, drawn-out battle for the nomination stretching well into spring and further expose rifts inside the party between those who want a candidate who can defeat Obama more than anything else, and those whose strong preference is for a solid conservative.

Romney sounded anything but confident as he told reporters that in South Carolina, "I realize that I had a lot of ground to make up and Speaker Gingrich is from a neighboring state, well known, popular ... and frankly to be in a neck-and-neck race at this last moment is kind of exciting."

Reid Postpones Test Vote On Anti-Piracy Bill

BY JIM ABRAMS

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — Yielding to strong opposition from the high tech community, Senate and House leaders said Friday they will put off further action on legislation to combat online piracy.

Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid, D-Nev., said he was postponing a test vote set for Tuesday "in light of recent events." Those events included a petition drive by Google that attracted more than 7 million participants and a one-day blackout by the online encyclopedia Wikipedia.

House Judiciary Committee chairman Lamar Smith, R-Texas, quickly followed suit, saying consideration of a similar House bill would be postponed "until there is wider agreement on a solution."

The Senate's Protect Intellectual Property Act and the House's Stop Online Piracy Act have strong support from the entertainment industry and other businesses that lose billions of dollars annually to intellectual property theft and online sales of counterfeit products. But they also have strong opposition from Internet-related companies that argue the bill would lead to over-regulation and censorship of the Internet.

Reid has also seen at least a

Tiny Baby Leaves L.A. Hospital Amid Fanfare

BY RAQUEL MARIA DILLON

Associated Press

LOS ANGELES — One of the world's smallest surviving babies was discharged Friday from the hospital where she spent nearly five months in an incubator — but not before getting the Hollywood treatment.

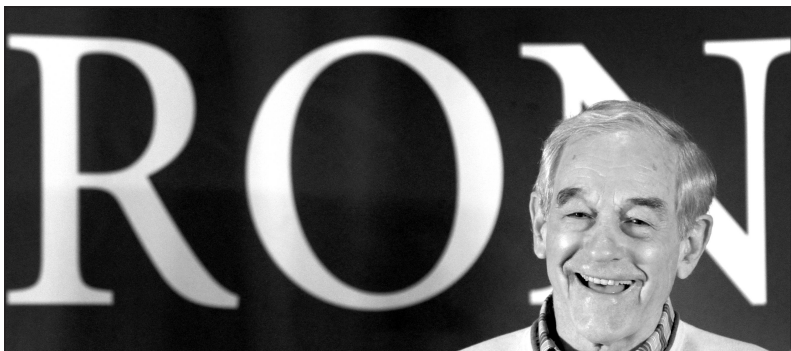
Wearing a pink knit hat and wrapped in a pink princess blanket, Melinda Star Guido was greeted by a mob of television cameras and news photographers outside the Los Angeles County-USC Medical Center.

"I'm just happy that she's doing well," said her 22-year-old mother Haydee Ibarra. "I'm happy that I'm finally going to take her home ... I'm just grateful."

Melinda was born on August 30 weighing just 9 1/2 ounces, less than a can of soda. She was so tiny that she fit into her doctor's hand. Melinda is believed to be the world's third-smallest surviving baby and second smallest in the U.S.

Now weighing 4 1/2 pounds and breathing through an oxygen tube as a precaution, doctors said Melinda has made enough progress to go home.

It's too early to know how she will do developmentally and physically, but doctors planned to monitor her for the next six years.



STEVE JESSMORE/MYRTLE BEACH SUN-NEWS/MCT
Republican presidential candidate Ron Paul speaks during a whistle-stop tour at the Grand Strand Airport in North Myrtle Beach, South Carolina, Friday, January 20, 2012. Paul vowed that his fight will go on, despite what happens in Saturday's Republican primary vote.

Paul's Place In South Carolina Uncertain Given Lighter Effort

BY BETH FOUHY

AND THOMAS BEAUMONT

Associated Press

GRANTEVILLE, S.C. — Supporters of Republican presidential candidate Ron Paul didn't seem to mind Friday that he has campaigned less aggressively in South Carolina than he did in other early voting states.

But it was far from clear during a whirlwind circuit around the state the day before the crucial Southern primary whether the libertarian-leaning Texas congressman would send a message here as his outsider candidacy did in Iowa and New Hampshire.

"I took a day off of the campaign trail," Paul told an audience of about 200 in a packed banquet hall outside Aiken. "I wanted to make sure I was recorded voting against the national debt limit."

The remark, explaining Paul's temporary departure in the campaign Wednes-

day to vote in Congress, ignited cheers from the audience in southwestern South Carolina.

Paul drew a crowd of several hundred in Greenville despite heavy rain and frigid temperatures.

"When we were flying and the weather was getting bad, I thought, is anyone going to show up?" Paul said, clearly buoyed by the turnout. The audience cheered.

It was a far different scene early Friday, before Paul began a six-city tour of South Carolina in a small plane. He drew fewer than 100 people to a cavernous airplane hangar in North Charleston, although the audience did include some die-hard supporters.

"When you hear the word principle, you think of Ron Paul. He's the embodiment of that," said Derek Smith, a 26-year-old engineer for the Navy in Charleston. "If he were to run as a third-party candidate, I would vote for him unconditionally."

The Tuesday vote was on whether to move the legislation to the Senate floor for debate. With the recent desertions and a statement Thursday by Senate Republican leader Mitch McConnell that it is too early to consider the bill, it appeared supporters lacked the 60 votes needed to advance the measure.

France Threatens Early Exit From War

KABUL, Afghanistan (AP) — France's threat Friday to withdraw early from Afghanistan after an Afghan soldier killed four French troops and wounded 15 is a setback for the U.S.-led coalition's efforts to build a national army and allow foreign troops to go home.

The deadly shooting — the second against French forces in a month — is the latest in a rising number of disturbing attacks in which Afghan security forces or infiltrators have turned their guns on coalition forces.

It came during an especially deadly 24 hours for the international coalition, with six U.S. Marines killed in a helicopter crash Thursday night in southern Afghanistan.

French President Nicolas Sarkozy, who faces a potentially tough re-election campaign this spring, reacted swiftly and sternly to the killing of the French troops, who were unarmed when they were shot during a physical training exercise.

He ordered French forces to stop training Afghan forces and suspended joint patrols.

"The French army is not in Afghanistan so that Afghan soldiers can shoot at them," Sarkozy said in Paris. "From now on, all the operations of training and combat help by the French army are suspended."

U.S. Considering Closing Embassy In Syria

WASHINGTON (AP) — The State Department said Friday it "may have no choice" but to close the U.S. embassy in Damascus and remove all US personnel from the country wracked by a 10-month revolt against the regime of President Bashar Assad unless Assad's government takes extra steps to protect the mission.

The department issued a statement late Friday noting that the Obama administration has "serious concerns about the deteriorating security situation in Damascus, including the recent spate of car bombs and about the safety and security of embassy personnel."

The uprising against Assad has killed an estimated 5,400 people since March. Although the revolt began with mostly peaceful protests, an increasingly strong armed element has developed, and many people are now fighting the regime.

The department said the administration has asked Syria to take additional security measures to protect the U.S. embassy and that the Syrian government "is considering that request."

But it also said it warned Assad's government that "unless concrete steps are taken in the coming days we may have no choice but to close the mission."

Costa CEO: Captain Didn't Relay Correct Info

ROME (AP) — The cruise captain who grounded the Costa Concordia off the Tuscan coast with 4,200 people on board did not relay correct information either to the company or crew after the ship hit rocks, the cruise ship owner's CEO said Friday as the search resumed for 21 missing passengers.

CEO Pierluigi Foschi told Italian state TV that the company spoke to the captain at 10:05 p.m. (21:05 GMT; 4:05 p.m. EST), some 20 minutes after the ship ran aground on Jan. 13, but could not offer proper assistance because the captain's description "did not correspond to the truth."

Capt. Francesco Schettino said only that he had "problems" on board but did not mention hitting a reef.

Likewise, Foschi said crew members were not informed of the gravity of the situation.

Passenger video shown on Italian TV indicates crew members telling passengers to go to their cabins as late as 10:25 p.m. (21:25 GMT; 4:25 p.m. EST). The abandon ship alarm sounded just before 11:00 p.m. (22:00 GMT; 5:00 p.m. EST).

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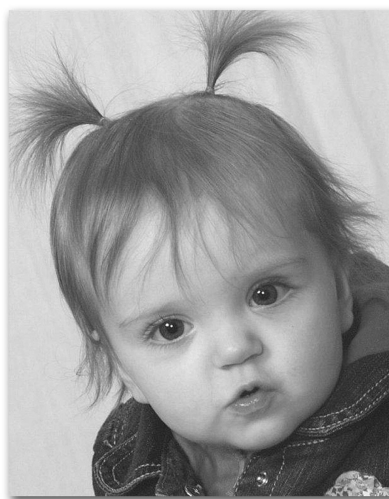
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Reid

and "there is no reason that the legitimate issues raised by many about this bill cannot be resolved." He said he was optimistic about reaching a compromise in the coming weeks.

The main Senate sponsor, Judiciary Committee chairman Patrick Leahy, D-Vt., said he respected Reid's decision to postpone the vote but lamented the Senate's unwillingness to debate the bill.

"The day will come when the senators who forced this move will look back and realize they made a knee-jerk reaction to a monumental problem," he said. Criminals in China, Russia and other countries "who do nothing but peddle in counterfeit products and stolen American content are smugly watching how the United States Senate decided" it was not worth debating the bill.

The two bills would allow the Justice Department, and copyright holders, to seek court orders against foreign websites accused of copyright infringement. They would bar online advertising networks and payment facilitators such as credit card companies from doing business with an alleged violator. They also would forbid search engines from linking to such sites.



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