

Romney Accuses President Of Cronyism

CINCINNATI (AP) — Using unusually vivid language, Mitt Romney tried to take the political offensive against President Barack Obama on Monday, accusing Obama of cronyism that “stinks” in steering federal contracts to supporters. He also dropped hints through a spokesman that a vice presidential pick could come any day.

Unfazed, Obama needled his Republican rival for finally having a job-creation plan — for people overseas.

At the same time, though Romney endeavored to switch the campaign focus, questions about his tenure at Bain Capital, a venture capital company, seemed destined to shape the conversation at least a while longer. On a day devoted mainly to raising money, Romney went on Fox News to complain that all Obama can do “is attack me” on Bain and other subjects rather than taking useful steps to improve the economy.

Sure enough, the Democratic incumbent showed no sign of letting up. Rallying for support in crucial Ohio, Obama said Romney’s proposal to free companies from taxes on their foreign holdings would displace American workers. The president cited a study he said concluded that “Gov. Romney’s economic plan would in fact create 800,000 jobs. There’s only one problem, the jobs wouldn’t be in America.”



Romney

Syrian Rebels Push War Into Damascus

BEIRUT (AP) — Syrian rebels fired grenades at tanks and troops while regime armor shelled Damascus neighborhoods on Monday, sending terrified families fleeing the most sustained and widespread fighting in the capital since the start of the uprising 16 months ago.

A ring of fierce clashes nearly encircled the heavily guarded capital as rebels seeking to overthrow President Bashar Assad pushed the civil war that has been building in Syria’s impoverished provinces closer to the seat of power.

While the clashes were focused in a string of neighborhoods in the city’s southwest, for many of its 4 million people the violence brought scarcely close to home the strife that has deeply scarred other Syrian cities.

In high-end downtown cafes frequented by the business and government elite tightly bound to the Assad regime, customers watched as black smoke billowed on the horizon and the boom of government shells reverberated in the distance.

“Without a doubt, this is all anyone is talking about today,” a Damascus activist who gave his name as Noor Bitar said via Skype. “The sounds of war are clear throughout the city. They are bouncing off the buildings.”

U.S. Retail Sales Dropped 0.5 Percent In June

WASHINGTON (AP) — The outlook for the U.S. economy appeared dimmer Monday after a report that Americans spent less at retail businesses for a third straight month in June.

The report led some economists to downgrade their estimates for economic growth in the April-June quarter. Many now think the economy grew even less than in the first quarter of the year, when it expanded at a sluggish 1.9 percent annual rate.

Spending in June fell in nearly every major category — from autos, furniture and appliances to building, garden supplies and department stores. Overall, retail sales slid 0.5 percent from May to June, the Commerce Department said.

Retail sales hadn’t fallen for three straight months since the fall of 2008, at the height of the financial crisis.

The weak U.S. spending figures were released on the same day that the International Monetary Fund slightly lowered its outlook for global growth over the next two years.

U.S. Jewish Leaders Urge Rejection Of Report

JERUSALEM (AP) — Dozens of American Jewish leaders and scholars have made a rare appeal to Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, asking him to make sure his government rejects a report that denies Israel is occupying the West Bank.

In a letter to Netanyahu, more than 40 prominent Jewish figures predicted the report authored by former Supreme Court Justice Edmond Levy would tarnish Israel’s image and jeopardize prospects for peace with the Palestinians.

“We recognize and regret that the Palestinian Authority has abdicated leadership by not returning to the negotiating table,” they wrote in the letter, obtained Monday by The Associated Press. “Nonetheless, our great fear is that the Levy Report will not strengthen Israel’s position in this conflict, but rather, add fuel to those who seek to delegitimize Israel’s right to exist.”

Signatories included businessmen and philanthropists Charles Bronfman and Stanley Gold, the former head of the pro-Israel lobby AIPAC, Tom Dine, and former Jewish Agency board chairman Richard Pearlstone.

Another signatory, Rabbi Daniel Gordis of the Shalem Institute think tank in Jerusalem, said the question was not whether Levy’s legal opinion was correct.

American Vessel Fires On Boat Off Dubai

DUBAI, United Arab Emirates (AP) — U.S. Navy gunners aboard a refueling ship opened fire on a small boat racing toward them in broad daylight Monday near the Gulf city of Dubai, killing one person and injuring three.

The rare shooting not far from approaches to the Strait of Hormuz comes at a period of heightened tensions between the United States and nearby Iran.

A UAE official said the vessel was a fishing boat. It was unclear why it might have veered so close to an armed American vessel.

There was no immediate sign of Iranian involvement, or any indication that the incident was a reprise of al-Qaida’s 2000 bombing of the USS Cole in Yemen. But the incident will likely focus further attention on the risks American vessels face in the Gulf even as the Navy beefs up its presence in the region.

Lt. Greg Raelson, a spokesman for the Navy’s Bahrain-based 5th Fleet, said a security team aboard the USNS Rappahannock issued a series of warnings before resorting to lethal force about 10 miles (15 kilometers) off the coast of Dubai’s Jebel Ali port.

Kitty Wells, 1st Female Country Superstar, Dies

NASHVILLE, Tenn. (AP) — Singer Kitty Wells, whose hits such as “Making Believe” and “It Wasn’t God Who Made Honky Tonk Angels” made her the first female superstar of country music, died Monday. She was 92.

The singer’s family said she died peacefully at home after complications from a stroke.

Her solo recording career lasted from 1952 to the late 1970s and she made concert tours from the late 1930s until 2000. That year, she announced she was quitting the road, although she performed occasionally in Nashville and elsewhere afterward.

Her “It Wasn’t God Who Made Honky Tonk Angels” in 1952 was the first No. 1 hit by a woman soloist on the country music charts and dashed the notion that women couldn’t be headliners. Billboard magazine had been charting country singles for about eight years at that time.

She recorded approximately 50 albums, had 25 Top 10 country hits and went around the world several times. From 1953 to 1968, various polls listed Wells as the No. 1 female country singer. Tammy Wynette finally dethroned her.

Report: NY Trans Fat Ban Had Healthy Impact

WASHINGTON (AP) — Turns out it’s possible to make a fast-food lunch a bit healthier even without skipping the fries.

New York City now has hard evidence that its ban on trans fat in restaurant food made a meaningful dent in people’s consumption of the artery clogger and wasn’t just replaced with another bad fat.

The findings being published Tuesday have implications beyond heart health, suggesting another strategy to curb the nation’s obesity epidemic fueled by a high-calorie, super-sized environment.

Conger: Americans get more than a third of their daily calories from foods prepared outside the home. By year’s end, the Food and Drug Administration hopes to finalize long-awaited rules that would make many restaurant chains post the calorie counts of their products right on the menu. Maybe the guilt would make you forego the french fries for a salad. Maybe not.

Now contrast New York’s trans-fat ban — later copied by more than a dozen other state and local governments — which didn’t put all the onus on the consumer to do the right thing.

Drought Grips Much Of U.S.

BY JIM SUHR AND STEVE KARNOWSKI

Associated Press

WALTONVILLE, Ill. — The nation’s widest drought in decades is spreading, with more than half of the continental United States now in some stage of drought and most of the rest enduring abnormally dry conditions.

Only in the 1930s and the 1950s has a drought covered more land, according to federal figures released Monday. So far, there’s little risk of a Dust Bowl-type catastrophe, but crop losses could mount if rain doesn’t come soon.

In its monthly drought report, the National Climatic Data Center in Asheville, N.C., announced that 55 percent of the country was in a moderate to extreme drought at the end of June. The parched conditions expanded last month in the West, the Great Plains and the Midwest, fueled by the 14th warmest and 10th driest June on record, the report said.

Topsil has turned dry while “crops, pastures and rangeland have deteriorated at a rate rarely seen in the last 18 years,” the report said.

The percentage of affected land is the largest since December 1956, when 58 percent of the country was covered by drought, and it rivals even some years in the Dust Bowl era of the 1930s, though experts point out that this year’s weather has been milder than that period, and farming practices have been vastly improved since then.

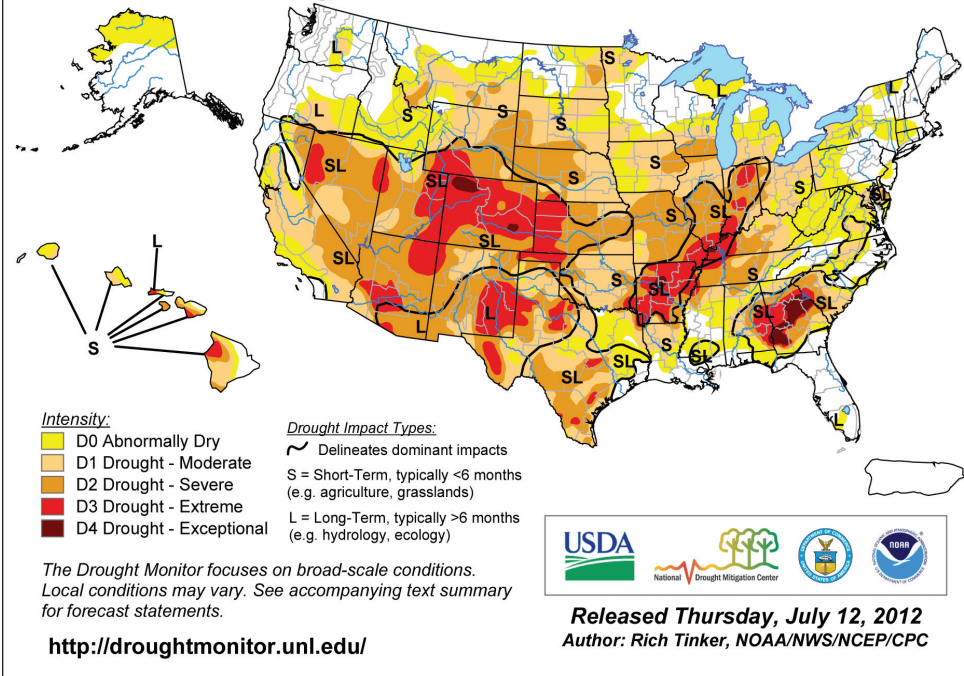
In southern Illinois, Kenny Brummer has lost 800 acres of corn that he grows to feed his 400 head of cattle and 30,000 hogs. Now he’s scrambling to find hundreds of thousands of bushels of replacement feed.

“Where am I going to get that from? You have concerns about it every morning when you wake up,” said Brummer, who farms near Waltonville. “The drought is bad, but that’s just half of the problem on this farm.”

Around a third of the nation’s corn crop has been hurt, with some of it so badly damaged that farmers have already cut down their withered plants to feed to cattle. As of Sunday, the U.S. Department of Agriculture said, 38 percent of the

U.S. Drought Monitor

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Valid 7 a.m. EDT



corn crop was in poor or very poor condition, compared with 30 percent a week earlier.

“This is definitely the epicenter — right in the heart of the Midwest,” said climatologist Mark Svoboda with the Nebraska-based National Drought Mitigation Center.

It’s all a huge comedown for farmers who had expected a record year when they sowed 96.4 million acres in corn, the most since 1937. The Department of Agriculture initially predicted national average corn yields of 166 bushels per acre this year.

The agency has revised that projection down to 146, and more reductions are possible if conditions don’t improve.

The lower projection is still an improvement

over the average yields of around 129 bushels a decade ago. But already tight supplies and fears that the drought will get worse before it gets better have been pushing up grain prices, which are likely to translate into higher food prices for consumers, particularly for meat and poultry.

Monday’s report was based on data going back to 1895 called the Palmer Drought Index. It feeds into the widely watched and more detailed U.S. Drought Monitor, which reported last week that 61 percent of the continental U.S. was in a moderate to exceptional drought. However, the weekly Drought Monitor goes back only 12 years, so climatologists use the Palmer Drought Index for comparing droughts before 2000.

Aide Says Romney May Make VP Pick This Week

BY STEVE PEOPLES

Associated Press

BATON ROUGE, La. — Republican presidential candidate Mitt Romney could name his running mate by the end of the week, a top adviser said Monday.

The announcement, if it happens according to the adviser’s timetable, would come several weeks before presidential candidates traditionally reveal their picks for the second slot on the ticket. It would also come as Romney’s campaign seeks to deflect intensifying criticism from President Barack Obama, other Democrats and some Republicans over Romney’s business record and refusal to release years of personal income tax filings.

Outside a Louisiana fundraiser on Monday, senior adviser Eric Fehrnstrom said Romney hadn’t finalized his decision but that an announcement could come within days.

Asked specifically whether Romney could announce his vice presidential pick this week, Fehrnstrom said: “Technically it could, but the governor hasn’t made a decision. It will only happen after he makes a decision.”

Romney traveled to Louisiana to attend a private fundraiser alongside Louisiana Gov. Bobby Jindal, who is among those on Romney’s short list for vice president. Romney raised an estimated \$2 million at the event, where 40 donors paid \$50,000 to attend.

Fehrnstrom said Romney and Jindal met privately earlier Monday but did not discuss the vice presidential selection process.

Jindal has been campaigning aggressively for Romney in recent weeks, as have others thought to be under consideration. They include Ohio Sen. Rob Portman, former Minnesota Gov. Tim Pawlenty, Wisconsin Rep. Paul Ryan and Florida Sen. Marco Rubio, among others.

“Maybe you’ve noticed, our president has run an increasingly desperate and negative campaign. It seems like every time you turn on the TV you hear another false and malicious attack,” Jindal told Romney’s donors. “This president cannot run on his record. He has to lie about Gov. Romney’s record.”

Romney did not address speculation about his running mate, but praised Jindal’s work in Louisiana.

“What I have seen watching this governor in the short years he’s been here has really opened my eyes,” Romney said.

Choosing a running mate is perhaps the most important decision Romney will make before the Nov. 6 general election, now less than four months away. In the 2008 presidential race, Sen. John McCain’s selection of Alaska Gov. Sarah Palin helped define his losing bid.

Romney has emphasized experience as the most important attribute in a running mate. Careful and risk averse, he’s expected to make a relatively safe pick that won’t shake up the race or overshadow his candidacy.

Senate GOP Blocks Campaign Disclosure Act

WASHINGTON (AP) — Democratic-backed legislation requiring organizations pouring hundreds of millions of dollars into campaign ads to disclose their top donors and the amounts they spend.

GOP opposition prevented Democrats from getting the 60 votes needed to bring what is known as the Disclose Act to the Senate floor. The vote was 51-44.

Democrats revived the act during a presidential election campaign in which political action commit-

tees and nonprofit organizations, funded by deep-pocketed and largely anonymous contributors, are dominating the airwaves with largely negative political ads.

Another version of the Disclose Act passed the then-Democratic-controlled House in 2010 but was similarly blocked by Republicans in the Senate. Republicans cite First Amendment rights and say the bill favors unions in opposing the legislation.

Senate Republican Leader Mitch

McConnell of Kentucky accused Democrats of wasting time on bills “they know won’t pass but which give them a chance to make a fuss about a problem that doesn’t exist and blow a kiss to the unions for good measure.”

The bill, which would not have gone into effect until next January, would have required any organization that spends \$10,000 or more during an election cycle to file a report within 24 hours identifying any donors who gave \$10,000 or more.

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