

Birth Control Issue May Help Democrats

WASHINGTON (AP) — Senate Democrats suffered what looked like a difficult setback on birth control Wednesday, but they hope it pays big political dividends in November. Republicans blocked a bill that was designed to override a Supreme Court ruling and ensure access to contraception for women who get their health insurance from companies with religious objections. The vote was 56-43 to move ahead on the legislation — dubbed the “Not My Boss’ Business Act” by proponents — four short of the 60 necessary to proceed. But Democrats hope the issue has enough life to energize female voters in the fall, when Republicans are threatening to take control of the Senate. GOP senators said Wednesday’s vote was simply a stunt, political messaging designed to boost vulnerable Democratic incumbents. The GOP needs to gain six seats to seize control. “Democrats are just trying to win an election,” Sen. Lamar Alexander, R-Tenn., said bluntly.

Some Doctors Say Drug Niacin Is Risky

NEW YORK (AP) — New details from two studies reveal more side effects from niacin, a drug that many Americans take for cholesterol problems and general heart health. Some doctors say the drug now seems too risky for routine use. Niacin is a type of B vitamin sold over the counter and in higher prescription doses. Some people take it in place of or in addition to statin medicines such as Lipitor for cholesterol problems. The studies previously found that niacin did not prevent heart problems better than statins alone and carried more side effects. Details in this week’s New England Journal of Medicine suggest that deaths, bleeding, infections, gastrointestinal and other problems were more common among niacin users. Heart specialists say no one should stop taking any drug without talking with a doctor.

Urban Warfare Feared In Ukraine

KIEV, Ukraine (AP) — Insurgents bade tearful farewells Wednesday as they loaded their families onto Russia-bound buses and began hunkering down for what could be the next phase in Ukraine’s conflict: bloody urban warfare. While the pro-Russian rebels in the east have lost much ground in recent weeks and were driven from their stronghold of Slovyansk, many have regrouped in Donetsk, an industrial city that had a population of 1 million before tens of thousands by some estimates fled in recent weeks for fear of a government siege. The rebels also hold the city of Luhansk. Despite the government’s desire to minimize civilian casualties, Ukraine’s forces could find themselves dragged into grueling warfare inside the cities in their battle to hold the country together. “To respond to this phase ... we evidently must change tactics,” said Valeriy Chaly, deputy head of the presidential administration. He refrained from specifying how. Insurgents in Donetsk appeared to be bracing for a bitter fight as they shipped their relatives out of the city.

Texas Charged For Ricin-Laced Letters

TEXARKANA, Texas (AP) — A Texas actress who tried to blame her husband after sending ricin-laced letters to officials including President Barack Obama was sentenced Wednesday to 18 years in prison. A federal judge gave Shannon Guess Richardson, 36, the maximum sentence under her plea deal on a federal charge of possessing and producing a biological toxin. Richardson was also ordered to pay restitution of about \$367,000. She had pleaded guilty to the charge in December. “I never intended for anybody to be hurt,” she told the court, adding later, “I’m not a bad person; I don’t have it in me to hurt anyone.” Judge Michael H. Schneider noted that she had put many lives in danger and threatened public officials. Richardson, who had minor acting roles in film and television including in the series “The Walking Dead” and the movie “The Blind Side,” said she thought security measures would prevent anyone from opening the letters addressed to Obama, then New York Mayor Michael Bloomberg and Mark Glaze, who at the time was director of Mayors Against Illegal Guns, Bloomberg’s group advocating for tougher gun control.

Feds Seek To Air Finance Complaints

WASHINGTON (AP) — The federal Consumer Financial Protection Bureau has heard from hundreds of thousands of consumers who feel wronged by banks and finance companies. Now the agency wants the public to hear from those consumers, too. On Wednesday, the Bureau proposed allowing consumers to publish online the details of their complaints against lenders and financial service providers. Those narratives would augment the Bureau’s consumer complaint database, which lists complaints about checking accounts, credit cards, student loans and other financial products. Agency director Richard Cordray said the proposal would give “consumers an opportunity to be heard by the entire world and not simply by a government agency and its officials.” Cordray’s remarks were prepared for a Thursday event in El Paso, Texas.

Former IRS Official Is Missing Emails

WASHINGTON (AP) — The Justice Department says it’s investigating the circumstances behind the disappearance of emails from a former senior Internal Revenue Service official. Deputy Attorney General James Cole says in prepared testimony to Congress that investigators are looking into missing emails from the computer of Lois Lerner. Cole is scheduled to appear Thursday before the House Oversight and Government Reform Committee. Lerner’s computer crashed in June 2011, resulting in the loss of records that are sought in investigations into whether the agency targeted conservative groups seeking tax-exempt status. At the time, the agency tried to recover Lerner’s records, without success. Lerner is at the center of the controversy and has refused to answer questions from Congress, citing her Fifth Amendment right not to incriminate herself.

US, Europe Escalate Economic Sanctions on Russia

BY JULIE PACE AND JOHN-THOR DAHLBURG
Associated Press

WASHINGTON — Struggling to defuse the persistent crisis in Ukraine, both the U.S. and European Union imposed new economic sanctions on Russia Wednesday, with President Barack Obama declaring that Russian leaders must see that their actions supporting rebels “have consequences.” Though the American and European sanctions were coordinated, they nonetheless exposed fissures in what the West has tried to project as a united front in its monthslong effort to isolate Russian President Vladimir Putin. Putin, sounding unperturbed, said the U.S. was only hurting itself. The penalties announced by the White House were broad in scope, targeting two major Russian energy firms, a pair of powerful financial institutions, eight arms firms and four individuals. Leaders in Europe, which has a far deeper economic relationship with Russia than the U.S., were more restrained, ordering investment and development banks on the continent to suspend financing agreements with Moscow. In a decision that could affect Russian oligarchs or members of the Kremlin inner circle, the EU leaders also asked the ministers to consider targeting people or companies involved in the unrest

More sanctions aimed at Russia

President Barack Obama announced more severe sanctions against Russian interests, citing evidence the Russians have not tried to ease the conflict in eastern Ukraine.



New sanctions announced by White House

- Targeting key Russian entities, including Gazprombank, Rosneft Oil Co., other energy and defense companies
 - Stop short of targeting Gazprom itself, world’s largest natural gas producer, dominant provider of Europe’s supplies
 - Russia’s second-largest natural gas producer, Novatek
 - Vnesheconombank, or VEB, a state-owned bank
 - Feodosiya Enterprises, a shipping facility in Crimea
 - Eight arms firms, including Kalashnikov, maker of AK-47
- Source: Reuters, AP © 2014 MCT

in Ukraine. Even the U.S. penalties stopped short of the most stringent actions the West has threatened, which would entail fully cutting off key sectors of Russia’s economy. But officials said those steps were still on the table if Russia fails to abide by the West’s demands to stop support for pro-Russian insurgents who

have destabilized swaths of eastern Ukraine. “What we are expecting is that the Russian leadership will see once again that its actions in Ukraine have consequences, including a weakening Russian economy and increasing diplomatic isolation,” Obama said as he announced the U.S. penalties from the White House. Publicly undismayed, Putin said the new sanctions run counter to U.S. national interests because they put American companies that want to operate in Russia at a competitive disadvantage. At a news conference in Brazil, Putin said through a translator: “They are undermining the positions of their energy companies.” He said, “They made one mistake, and now they insist on making another one.” Until now, the U.S. and Europe have limited their sanctions on Europe to travel bans and asset freezes aimed at individuals and entities, including some with close ties to Putin. But those measures have done little to change Putin’s calculus, with the Pentagon announcing Wednesday that Russian troops were again building up along the border with Ukraine. In Ukraine itself, pro-Russian rebels in the east have lost much ground but now seem to be hunkering down for what could be extended urban warfare.

Israel, Hamas Agree To Gaza ‘Humanitarian’ Pause

BY IBRAHIM BARZAK AND DANIEL ESTRIN
Associated Press

GAZA CITY, Gaza Strip— Israel and Hamas agreed to a five-hour U.N. brokered “humanitarian” pause to their 9-day-long battle, offering the most encouraging sign yet that the fierce fighting could come to an end. Israel’s bombardment of Gaza has killed more than 200 Palestinians, including four boys struck on a beach Wednesday by shells fired from a navy ship. Israel said it would hold its fire Thursday from 10 a.m. (0700 GMT, 3 a.m. EDT) under a plan to allow Palestinians to restock food, water and other necessities. But it vowed to retaliate “firmly and decisively” if Hamas or other militant groups launch attacks on Israel during that time. Later, Hamas spokesman Sami Abu Zuhri said that following consultations with various factions the Gaza militants had decided to respect the pause as well and would refrain from firing rockets during those hours as well. Robert Serry, the U.N. special coordinator for the Middle East peace process, had asked Israel to agree to a “unilateral humanitarian pause” so that the supplies can be delivered to Gaza, said U.N. deputy spokesman Farhan Haq. Serry will “urge the parties in Gaza to respect that pause,” Haq said. Israel previously had halted its fire for six hours Tuesday after Egypt put forward a cease-fire proposal that unraveled. Abu Zuhri said Wednesday his group had formally rejected the plan, bemoaning what he called little support from the Arab world. But Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas met Wednesday in Cairo with a senior official from Hamas to try to salvage the Egyptian proposal. In Washington, President Barack Obama said the U.S. supports Egypt’s continued efforts to restore the 2012 cease-fire and will use all of its diplomatic resources and

relationships to secure a deal to end the violence. Israel’s military said its forces bombed at least 150 targets in Gaza on Wednesday. It did not provide more specifics, but the Gaza Interior Ministry’s website said 30 houses, including those of senior Hamas leaders Mahmoud Zahar, Jamila Shanti, Fathi Hamas and Ismail Ashkar, were targeted. Zahar was a key figure in Hamas’ violent takeover of Gaza in 2007, while the other three were members of the Palestinian parliament elected in 2006. Many Hamas leaders have gone into hiding since Israel began its bombardment July 8 in response to rocket attacks from Gaza. Gaza health official Ashraf al-Kidra said the Palestinian death toll rose to 222, with 1,670 wounded. Only one Israeli has so far died in the conflict — a civilian distributing food to soldiers in southern Israel on Tuesday evening — largely because of the effectiveness of Israel’s Iron Dome air defense system in downing incoming rockets. The four boys, who were cousins aged 9 to 11, were killed on the beach beside a coastal road west of Gaza City, al-Kidra said. Seven oth-

ers — adults and children — were wounded in the strike, which Palestinian human rights activist Khalil Abu Shamalla and Palestinian health officials said came from an Israeli naval vessel. Hussam Abadallah, a waiter at the beachside al-Deera hotel, said the strike happened about 4 p.m. A witness who identified himself only as Abu Ahmed said the boys were scavenging for scrap metal when a first shell hit a nearby shipping container used in the past by Hamas security forces. He said the boys fled but a second rocket “hit all of them.”

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