

Obama: Private Sector ‘Doing Fine’

President Gets Grief From Republicans For Declaration

BY KEN THOMAS AND PHILIP ELLIOTT
Associated Press

WASHINGTON — President Barack Obama made Mitt Romney’s day by declaring “the private sector is doing fine” and opening himself to the accusation that he — not the rich Republican — is the one who is out of touch with reality. Obama quickly clarified his remark Friday but Republicans already had their teeth in it and weren’t letting go.

“Is he really that out of touch?” GOP presidential candidate Mitt Romney asked as Obama’s initial comments ricocheted through the presidential campaign.

Seeking to head off any damage, Obama backpedaled and declared it is “absolutely clear that the economy is not doing fine.” While there had been some “good momentum” in the private sector, Obama said, public sector growth lagged behind, making it imperative that Congress act on his proposals to hire more teachers and first-responders.

Obama’s original six-word sentence, even if taken out of context, amounted to an unforced political error. The economy is the single biggest issue on voters’ minds and a weak spot for him, given the nation’s stubbornly high 8.2 percent unemployment rate.

Nearly every day, Obama finds himself having to defend his stewardship of an economy that has struggled to recover from the 2008 economic downturn and pleading with voters to stick with him because, he says, Romney would pursue policies that led to the recession.

But on Friday, Obama may have given his rival an opening. The former Massachusetts governor argued anew that Obama does not understand how to jumpstart the economy and his agenda has thwarted the recovery instead of putting millions of unemployed workers back on the job.

Obama’s comments at a White House news conference were reminiscent of Republican nominee John McCain’s assertion in



POOL PHOTO BY KEVIN DIETSCH/UPI VIA ABACA PRESS/MCT
President Barack Obama holds a press conference in the Brady Press Briefing Room at the White House in Washington, DC on June 8, 2012. President Barack Obama on Friday prodded European leaders to take further steps to stabilize their financial system while urging Congress to act on his jobs proposals at home, twin moves that signaled rising concern in his administration about the impact of the Euro zone crisis on the tenuous economic recovery.

mid-September 2008 that the “fundamentals of our economy are strong,” just as the U.S. economy was melting down. Candidate Obama seized on those comments then. Now, as president, he was getting grief along similar lines.

Romney, holding a campaign event in Council Bluffs, Iowa, said Obama’s remark was “defining what it means to be detached and out of touch with the American people.” He said the comment “is going to go down in history as an extraordinary miscalculation and misunderstanding.”

But while “doing fine” is in the eye of the beholder, Obama was correct that the job picture in the private sector is brighter than in the public sector. Since the recession officially ended in June 2009, private companies have added 3.1 million jobs. Largely because of cuts at the state and local level, governments have slashed 601,000 jobs over the same period. According to the government, corporate profits have risen 58 percent since

mid-2009.

Even so, by historical standards, private job gains in the last three months have been weak after such a deep recession.

Obama pressed Congress to enact parts of his jobs agenda, including proposals to help state governments rehire teachers, police officers and firefighters.

Seconds after Obama made the remark, Republicans circulated the quote on Twitter and Romney seized on it about an hour later after meeting farmers.

Behind the scenes, Romney aides worked furiously to push what they hope could be a shift in the campaign. The Republican National Committee posted an online video by midday repeating Obama’s comment and asking: “How can President Obama fix our economy if he doesn’t understand what’s broken?”

The question was a direct rehash of the one Obama’s campaign asked voters in a very similar video four years ago.

U.S. Gen Apologizes For Afghan Deaths In Airstrike

DEB RIECHMANN
Associated Press

PATROL BASE PUL-I-ALAM, Afghanistan — The top commander of U.S. and NATO troops in Afghanistan offered a somber apology on Friday in an eastern province where officials say 18 civilians — half of them children — were killed in a coalition airstrike this week.

U.S. Marine Gen. John Allen spent several hours with local Afghans to express his regrets about Wednesday’s pre-dawn raid to capture a Taliban operative in Baraki Barak district of Logar province.

“We take these deaths very seriously and I grieve with their families,” Allen told the provincial governor, an elderly man with a long, white beard and gray turban. “I have children of my own, and I feel the pain of this.”

Hours after Allen’s visit, the U.S.-led coalition issued a statement saying that it had completed its initial assessment of the operation and confirmed that “in addition to the insurgents killed during the operation, it’s also responsible for the unintended, but nonetheless tragic, death of Afghan civilians.”

Nighttime raids on militants taking cover in villages are a major irritant in Afghan President Hamid Karzai’s relationship with the international military coalition. Karzai says the raids put civilians at risk of injury or death. Military officials say such operations are key to capturing and killing Taliban leaders.

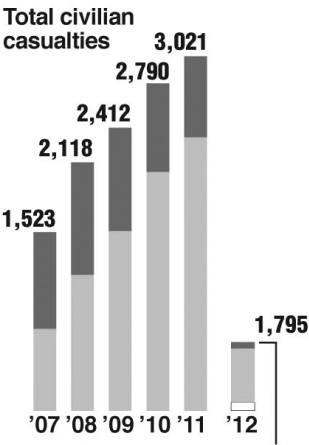
Allen left his office in the Afghan capital in the early afternoon and boarded a Blackhawk helicopter that flew him 25 minutes south to Logar.

Reduction in casualties

Civilian casualties in Afghanistan are dropping.

Who is responsible

- U.S./NATO, Afghan forces
- Taliban, other insurgents
- Unattributed



1,216 civilian injuries and 579 deaths were tallied in the first four months of 2012, a 21 percent drop from the same period last year

Source: U.N. Assistance Mission in Afghanistan
Graphic: Dallas Morning News
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He met first with the governor, Mohammad Tahir Sabari. The two sat in overstuffed chairs in Sabari’s office, each cupping the other man’s hands in his own.

“I wanted to come immediately to see you after this tragedy and to offer you, personally, my apologies, my condolences and my regrets,” Allen told the governor.

The men then moved to a large conference room where about 35

people — relatives of the victims, members of the provincial council, Afghan army and police officials and members of parliament — listened stone-faced as Allen repeated his apology.

“I have come here today to apologize to you all for the tragedy that occurred two days ago,” the general began.

“I know that no apology can bring back the lives of the children or the people who perished in this tragedy and this accident, but I want you to know that you have my apology and we will do the right thing by the families. We will do the right thing for the community.”

The governor said the anger that boiled over in the province after the airstrike had simmered, but that the residents of Logar want the military to take punitive action against those responsible for the deaths.

“We are accepting his apology, but the people who did this — whether they were foreigners or Afghans — should be punished,” the governor said. “If they are not punished, the apology means nothing and there will be no result.”

Reporters were not allowed to stay for Allen’s nearly hour-long meeting with the group, but Mohammad Akbar Stanekzai, a parliamentarian and a member of a delegation Karzai appointed to investigate the incident, recounted some of what took place behind closed doors.

“The faces of the people were very sad,” Stanekzai said. “We told the people to stay relaxed, calm

and to just talk with the general. They told him ‘These incidents don’t just happen once, but two, three, four times and they keep happening.’”

Stanekzai said the people demanded that those responsible be put on trial.

A deal signed in April was supposed to resolve the controversy surrounding night raids by putting the Afghan government in charge of such operations. Afghan troops were involved in the operation in Logar, but Karzai has put the blame squarely on the international coalition, condemning its actions and calling for it to give a fuller account of how small children were among the dead.

An Afghan doctor who examined the bodies said villagers told him that a group of Taliban fighters decided to spend the night in the house because people there were celebrating a marriage and the militants thought the wedding party would provide them cover. When NATO and Afghan troops started advancing on the house in the middle of the night, they called out for any civilians to come out, but the insurgents didn’t allow them to leave, said Dr. Wali Wakil.

“The Taliban stopped them from getting out of the house,” Wakil said.

He said the 18 dead civilians including four women; two older men, including a tribal leader; three teenage boys; and nine young children. Six Taliban fighters were also killed, Wakil said, citing the witnesses. Police had said previously that the district Taliban commander was killed.

I’ll Have Another Out Of Belmont Stakes

NEW YORK (AP) — I’ll Have Another’s bid for the first Triple Crown in 34 years ended shockingly in the barn and not on the racetrack Friday when the colt was scratched the day before the Belmont Stakes and retired with a swollen tendon.

“It’s been an incredible ride, an incredible run,” trainer Doug O’Neill said. “It’s a bummer. It’s not tragic, but it’s a huge disappointment.”

I’ll Have Another, who won the Kentucky Derby and the Preakness Stakes with stirring stretch drives, was the 4-5 favorite to win the Belmont and become the 12th Triple Crown winner and first since 1978.

Instead, he becomes the 12th horse since Affirmed, the last Triple champion, to win the first two legs but not the Belmont.

The scratch marks the first time since Bold Venture in 1936 that the Derby and Preakness winner didn’t run in the Belmont. Burgoo King skipped the race in 1932.

Mob Attacks March In Egypt

CAIRO (AP) — A mob of hundreds of men assaulted women holding a march demanding an end to sexual harassment Friday, with the attackers overwhelming the male guardians and groping and molesting several of the female marchers in Cairo’s Tahrir Square.

From the ferocity of the assault, some of the victims said it appeared to have been an organized attempt to drive women out of demonstrations and trample on the pro-democracy protest movement.

The attack follows smaller scale assaults on women this week in Tahrir, the epicenter of the uprising that forced Hosni Mubarak to step down last year. Thousands have been gathering in the square this week in protests over a variety of issues — mainly over worries that presidential elections this month will secure the continued rule by elements of Mubarak’s regime backed by the ruling military.

Earlier in the week, an Associated Press reporter witnessed around 200 men assault a woman who eventually fainted before men trying to help could reach her.

Friday’s march was called to demand an end to sexual assaults. Around 50 women participated, surrounded by a larger group of male supporters who joined to hands to form a protective ring around them. The protesters carried posters saying, “The people want to cut the hand of the sexual harasser,” and chanted, “The Egyptian girl says it loudly, harassment is barbaric.”

U.N. Observers Visit Syrian Massacre Village

BEIRUT (AP) — U.N. observers could smell the stench of burned corpses Friday and saw body parts scattered around a Syrian farming hamlet that was the scene of a massacre this week in which nearly 80 men, women and children were reported slain.

The observers were finally able to get inside the deserted village of Mazraat al-Qubair after being blocked by government troops and residents, and coming under small arms fire Thursday, a day after the slayings were first reported.

In central Damascus, rebels brazenly battled government security forces in the heart of the capital Friday for the first time, witnesses said, and explosions echoed for hours. Government artillery repeatedly pounded the central city of Homs and troops tried to storm it from three sides.

U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton met with international envoy Kofi Annan in Washington to discuss how to salvage his faltering plan to end 15 months of bloodshed in Syria. Western nations blame President Bashar Assad for the violent crackdown on anti-government protests that grew out of the Arab Spring.

The U.N. team was the first independent group to arrive in Mazraat al-Qubair, a village of about 160 people in central Hama province. Opposition activists and Syrian government officials blamed each other for the killings and differed about the number of dead.

Health Officials Probe E. Coli Outbreak

ATLANTA (AP) — A mysterious and scattered outbreak of the E. coli bacteria is linked to 14 illnesses, including a child’s death, health officials say.

No form of contaminated food or other cause has been identified in the illnesses, which occurred in April and May, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

Three people were hospitalized. One — a child in the New Orleans area — died last week.

The reported illnesses were spread across six states. Georgia had five cases, Louisiana four, Alabama two, and Tennessee, Florida and California each had one.

E. coli is a large family of bacteria and most strains are harmless. The most deadly strain is considered E. coli O157:H7, which became well-known in the early 1990s through a deadly outbreak associated with hamburger meat.

Authorities Puzzle Over Bombs In Flashlights

PHOENIX (AP) — Flick the switch on these flashlights and they don’t light up. They blow up.

Three of these bombs have exploded within the last month in the Phoenix area, causing minor injuries to five people and raising fears of more serious ones.

Police still have no idea who is behind them and have taken the unusual step of putting up 22 billboards across the sprawling metro area to warn residents about discarded flashlights.

“The nature of the bombings are so random,” said Tom Mangan, a special agent at the U.S. Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives in Phoenix.

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