

NATION/WORLD DIGEST

Haitian Judge Frees U.S. Baptist Missionary

PORT-AU-PRINCE, Haiti (AP) — One of two U.S. Baptist missionaries still held on kidnapping charges in Haiti was released Monday, but the group's leader remained in custody.

Charisa Coulter was taken from her jail cell to the airport by U.S. Embassy staff more than a month after she and nine other Americans were arrested for trying to take 33 children out of Haiti after the earthquake.

Coulter, wearing a red tank top and sunglasses, declined comment as she quickly got into an SUV that took her to the airport.

Defense attorney Louis Ricardo Chachoute said she was released because there was no evidence to support the charges of kidnapping and criminal association. He predicted Laura Silsby, the leader of the Idaho-based missionary group, would be released soon as well.

Hundreds Slaughtered In Nigeria Violence

DOGO NAHAWA, Nigeria (AP) — The killers showed no mercy: They didn't spare women and children, or even a 4-day-old baby, from their machetes. On Monday, Nigerian women wailed in the streets as a dump truck carried dozens of bodies past burned-out homes toward a mass grave.

Rubber-gloved workers pulled ever-smaller bodies from the dump truck and tossed them into the mass grave. A crowd began singing a hymn with the refrain, "Jesus said I am the way to heaven." As the grave filled, the grieving crowd sang: "Jesus, show me the way."

At least 200 people, most of them Christians, were slaughtered on Sunday, according to residents, aid groups and journalists. The local government gave a figure more than twice that amount, but offered no casualty list or other information to substantiate it.

An Associated Press reporter counted 61 corpses, 32 of them children, being buried in the mass grave in the village of Dogo Nahawa on Monday. Other victims would be buried elsewhere. At a local morgue the bodies of children, including a diaper-clad toddler, were tangled together. One appeared to have been scalped. Others had severed hands and feet.

The horrific violence comes after sectarian killings in this region in January left more than 300 dead, most of them Muslim. Some victims were shoved into sewer pits and communal wells.

Earthquake Kills 51 In Eastern Turkey

OKCULAR, Turkey (AP) — Hundreds of earthquake survivors huddled in aid tents and around bonfires Monday in eastern Turkey, seeking relief from the winter cold after a strong tremor knocked down stone and mud-brick houses in five villages, killing 51 people.

The damage appeared worst in the Kurdish village of Okcular, which was almost razed. At least 15 of the village's 900 residents were killed, the Elazig governor's office said, and the air was thick with dust from crumpled homes and barns.

The pre-dawn earthquake caught many residents as they slept, shaking the area's poorly made buildings into piles of rubble. Panicked survivors fled into the narrow streets of this village perched on a hill in front of snow-covered mountains, with some people climbing out of windows to escape.

"I tried to get out of the door but it wouldn't open. I came out of the window and started helping my neighbors," Ali Riza Ferhat of Okcular told NTV television. "We removed six bodies."

The Kandilli seismology center said the 6.0-magnitude quake hit at 4:32 a.m. (0232 GMT, 9 p.m. EST Sunday) near the village of Basyurt in a remote, sparsely populated area of Elazig province. The region is 340 miles (550 kilometers) east of Ankara, the capital.

Iraqi PM's Coalition Predicted To Lead Vote

BAGHDAD (AP) — Early estimates from a range of Iraqi parties on Monday predicted a coalition led by Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki would take the lead in the parliamentary election, though official results were not expected for a few days.

A win by al-Maliki could signal Iraqis' rejection of the religious parties that have dominated the country since the U.S.-led invasion in 2003. The prime minister has been trying to distance himself from his party's religious roots and portray himself as more of a nationalist.

Sunday's voting was the latest test of Iraq's fragile democracy and will determine whether the country can overcome the deep sectarian divides that have plagued it for the past seven years.

Turnout for Iraq's second election for a full parliamentary term was 62 percent of about 19 million eligible voters, the election commission said. That is lower than the last full parliamentary election in December 2005, in which roughly 76 percent of eligible voters turned out.

Officials attributed the drop to a combination of voter intimidation, more stringent ID requirements at the polls and a drop in voter excitement. A spate of attacks on election day — some directly on voters and polling stations — killed 36 people.

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HEALTH CARE REFORM

Obama Appeals For Public Support

President Accuses Insurance Companies Of Negligence During Town Meeting

BY JULIE PACE
Associated Press Writer

GLENSIDE, Pa. — President Barack Obama accused insurance companies of placing profits over people and said Republicans ignored long-festering problems when they held power as he sought to build support Monday for swift passage of health care legislation stalled in Congress.

"Let's seize reform, the need is great," Obama said at an appearance that had the feel of a campaign rally.

"How much higher do premiums have to rise before we do something about it?" said Obama, making the first in an expected string of out-of-town trips to pitch his plan to remake the health care system.

The president said dismissively that Republican critics in Congress contend they want to do something about rising health care costs but failed when they held power. "You had 10 years. What happened? What were you doing?" he said to applause from an audience at Arcadia University.

Obama made his appeal as Democratic leaders in Congress



ALEJANDRO A. ALVAREZ/PHILADELPHIA DAILY NEWS/MCT
President Barack Obama speaks on health reform at Arcadia University in Glenside, Penn., on Monday.

worked on a rescue plan for sweeping changes in health care that seemed earlier in the year to be on the brink of passage.

The current two-step approach calls for the House to approve a Senate-passed bill despite opposition to several of its provisions, and for both houses to follow immediately with a companion measure that makes a series of changes.

The White House has said it wants the legislation wrapped up by March 18, but that seems unlikely. The companion bill has

not yet been made public, and a protracted debate is expected in the Senate, where Republicans vow to resist even though they will not be able to block passage by filibustering.

Obama's stated goals across more than a year of struggle have been to extend coverage to millions who lack it, ban insurance industry practices such as denying coverage on the basis of pre-existing conditions and cut costs.

Republicans dismissed Obama's argument instantly.

"The American people have heard all this rhetoric from the president before, and they continue to say loudly and clearly they do not want a massive government takeover of health care," said House Republican Leader John Boehner of Ohio, who added the president's plan was "heavy on snake oil."

Obama has long identified the insurance industry as an obstacle to changes along the lines he seeks, but the administration's actions and rhetoric seem to have escalated in recent days.

The president's proposal would give the government the right to limit excessive premium increases — a provision included after one firm announced a 39 percent increase in the price of individual policies sold in California. Kathleen Sebelius, the secretary of health and human services, convened a White House meeting with insurance executives last week, and followed up with a letter released in advance of Obama's speech.

It asks companies to "post on your Web sites the justification for any individual or small group rate increases you have implemented or proposed in 2010."

Toyota Disputes Critic Who Blames Electronics

WASHINGTON (AP) — Toyota gave detailed evidence Monday that it says disproves claims that electronics may cause the unwanted acceleration that led to the recall of more than 8 million cars and trucks.

Toyota was attempting to counter tests by an Illinois engineering professor who said Toyota engines could rev without a driver pressing on the gas. The automaker says mechanical problems, not electronics, are to blame.

Chris Gerdes, director of Stanford University's Center for Automotive Research, and a consulting firm, Exponent Inc., said the professor had tampered with wiring to create electronic glitches that could never occur on the road.

The professor's work "could result in misguided policy and unwarranted fear," Gerdes said.

The work of David W. Gilbert, an automotive technology professor at Southern Illinois University-Carbondale, has been the basis of many doubts that Toyota's mechanical fixes for unwanted acceleration will truly solve the problem.

Gilbert told a congressional hearing Feb. 23 that he recreated sudden acceleration in a Toyota Tundra by short-circuiting the electronics behind the gas pedal — without triggering any trouble codes in the truck's computer.

"We do not believe that electronics are at the root of this issue," Mike Michels, a Toyota spokesman, said during a

demonstration at the automaker's North American headquarters in Torrance, Calif.

Toyota says faulty gas pedals and floor mats, not electronics, are the cause. It is fixing millions of vehicles to correct those problems. But some drivers have reported continued problems in vehicles that have already been supposedly fixed.

Federal safety regulators are investigating complaints over Toyota's repairs. Michels said the automaker is also reviewing the complaints, and that some were the result of bad repairs or other factors.

Gilbert told Congress he made a "startling discovery" that showed the electronic throttle control system could have a problem without producing a trouble code. The code sends the computer into a failsafe mode that allows the brake to override the gas.

House lawmakers seized on the testimony as evidence Toyota engineers missed a potential problem with the electronics that could have caused the unwanted acceleration.

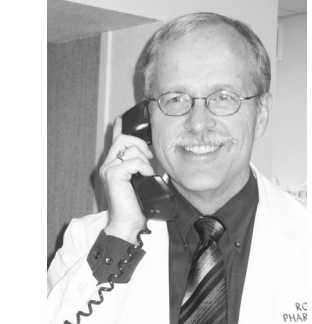
According to Exponent, Gilbert connected sensor wires from the pedal of a 2010 Toyota Avalon to an engineered circuit, revving the engine without using the pedal. Gilbert demonstrated

the method in an ABC News story last month.

Exponent said it reproduced the test on the same model year Avalon and a 2007 Camry and was able to rev the engine. But it concluded the electronic throttle system would have to be tampered with significantly to create

the right conditions.

"Dr. Gilbert's scenario amounts to connecting the accelerator pedal sensors to an engineered circuit that would be highly unlikely to occur naturally, and that can only be contrived in a laboratory," an Exponent report said.



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