

NATION/WORLD DIGEST

Boys & Girls Clubs Funding Is Questioned

WASHINGTON (AP) — A group of Republican senators is questioning high salaries and expensive travel bills for executives at the Boys & Girls Clubs of America, raising issues that could jeopardize millions in federal funding for the national charity.

The four senators said they were concerned that the chief executive of a charity that has been closing local clubs for lack of funding was compensated nearly \$1 million in 2008. They also questioned why in the same year officials spent \$4.3 million on travel, \$1.6 million on conferences, conventions and meetings, and \$544,000 in lobbying fees.

The senators sent a letter to the head of the charity's board of governors Thursday seeking detailed financial information about executive compensation, travel and lobbying expenses, and how the national charity awards grants to local clubs.

The issues they raise could threaten the reputation of a popular charity that supports 4,300 local Boys & Girls Clubs serving about 4.8 million children. The timing threatens a bill moving through the Senate that would provide up to \$425 million in federal money to the national organization over the next five years.

43 Dead, 100 Wounded in Pakistan Blasts

LAHORE, Pakistan (AP) — Two suicide bombers killed 43 people in near-simultaneous blasts Friday, the fourth major attack in Pakistan this week and a clear sign that militants have the power to strike targets despite months of army offensives and U.S. missile strikes.

The twin bombings, which also wounded about 100 people, raised fears of a new wave of attacks by Islamic militants. With no explanation of why the violence is surging now or how long it could last, Pakistanis have been left to guess at how bloody the situation could get.

Underscoring the widespread fear, a series of small explosions injured at least three people and sparked panic in another Lahore neighborhood late Friday night. Police officials said the five low-intensity blasts apparently resulted from loose explosives scattered through the residential area of Iqbal Town. While the explosions terrified residents and sent police and rescue workers racing through town, there were no reports of deaths or major damage.

The two suicide bombers, who were on foot, set off their explosives within seconds of each other near two trucks carrying soldiers on patrol in RA Bazaar, a residential and commercial neighborhood with numerous military buildings. About 10 of those killed were soldiers, said Police Chief Parvaiz Rathore.

Court Rejects Autism Claims With Vaccines

WASHINGTON (AP) — The vaccine additive thimerosal is not to blame for autism, a special federal court ruled Friday in a long-running battle by parents convinced there is a connection.

While expressing sympathy for the parents involved in the emotionally charged cases, the court concluded they had failed to show a connection between the mercury-containing preservative and autism. "Such families must cope every day with tremendous challenges in caring for their autistic children, and all are deserving of sympathy and admiration," special master George Hastings Jr., wrote.

But, he added, Congress designed the victim compensation program only for families whose injuries or deaths can be shown to be linked to a vaccine and that has not been done in this case.

The ruling came in the so-called vaccine court, a special branch of the U.S. Court of Federal Claims established to handle claims of injury from vaccines. It can be appealed in federal court.

Clinton Stings Israeli PM With Blunt Criticism

WASHINGTON (AP) — Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton on Friday delivered a stinging rebuke to Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu for his government's announcement this week of new Jewish housing in east Jerusalem, calling it "a deeply negative signal" for the Mideast peace process and ties with the U.S.

The State Department said Clinton spoke to Netanyahu by phone for 43 minutes to vent U.S. frustration with Tuesday's announcement that cast a pall over a visit to Israel by Vice President Joe Biden and endangered indirect peace talks with the Palestinians that the Obama administration had announced just a day earlier.

The length and unusually blunt tone of Clinton's call underscored the administration's concern about prospects for the negotiations it has been trying to organize for more than a year and its anger over Israel's refusal to heed U.S. appeals not to make provocative gestures.

Clinton called "to make clear that the United States considered the announcement to be a deeply negative signal about Israel's approach to the bilateral relationship and counter to the spirit of the vice president's trip," State Department spokesman P.J. Crowley told reporters.

Texas Ed Board Vote Notes Conservative Ideals

AUSTIN, Texas (AP) — A far-right faction of the Texas State Board of Education succeeded Friday in injecting conservative ideals into social studies, history and economics lessons that will be taught to millions of students for the next decade.

Teachers in Texas will be required to cover the Judeo-Christian influences of the nation's Founding Fathers, but not highlight the philosophical rationale for the separation of church and state. Curriculum standards also will describe the U.S. government as a "constitutional republic," rather than "democratic," and students will be required to study the decline in value of the U.S. dollar, including the abandonment of the gold standard.

"We have been about conservatism versus liberalism," said Democrat Mavis Knight of Dallas, explaining her vote against the standards. "We have manipulated strands to insert what we want it to be in the document, regardless as to whether or not it's appropriate."

Following three days of impassioned and acrimonious debate, the board gave preliminary approval to the new standards with a 10-5 party line vote. A final vote is expected in May, after a public comment period that could produce additional amendments and arguments.

Decisions by the board — made up of lawyers, a dentist and a weekly newspaper publisher among others — can affect textbook content nationwide because Texas is one of publishers' biggest clients.

Ultraconservatives wielded their power over hundreds of subjects this week, introducing and rejecting amendments on everything from the civil rights movement to global politics. Hostilities flared and prompted a walk-out Thursday by one of the board's most prominent Democrats, Mary Helen Berlanga of Corpus Christi, who accused her colleagues of "whitewashing" curriculum standards.

By late Thursday night, three other Democrats seemed to sense their futility and left, leaving Republicans to easily push through amendments heralding "American exceptionalism" and the U.S. free enterprise system, suggesting it thrives best absent excessive government intervention.

HEALTH CARE REFORM

Dems Seek Agreement, Quick Vote

BY DAVID ESPINO

AP Special Correspondent

WASHINGTON — Under White House pressure to act swiftly, House and Senate Democratic leaders reached for agreement Friday on President Barack Obama's health care bill, sweetened suddenly by fresh billions for student aid and a sense that breakthroughs are at hand.

"It won't be long," before lawmakers vote, predicted Speaker Nancy Pelosi. She said neither liberals' disappointment over the lack of a government health care option nor a traditional mistrust of the Senate would prevent passage in the House.

At the White House, officials worked to maximize Obama's influence over lawmakers who control the fate of legislation that has spawned a yearlong struggle. They said he would delay his departure on an Asian trip for three days — until March 21 — and he will go to Ohio next week for a campaign-style pitch for his health care proposals.

The delay gives congressional leaders much-needed breathing room to finish the legislation and nail down support from wavering lawmakers.

"I'm delighted that the president will be here for the passage of the bill; it's going to be historic," said Pelosi, D-Calif. — though there's no guarantee the House can act by then. A procedural vote in the House Budget Committee is set for Monday afternoon, but as of late Friday lawmakers still hadn't gotten the final analysis from the Congressional Budget Office that they need to go forward.

With Democrats deciding to incorporate changes in student aid into the bill, Republicans suddenly had a new reason to oppose legislation they have long sought to scuttle.

"Well of course it's a very bad idea," said Senate Republican leader Mitch McConnell of Kentucky. "We now have the government running banks, insurance companies, car companies, and they do want to take over the student loan business."

He said it was symptomatic of Democrats' determination to have "the government expand its tentacles into absolutely everything."

At its core, the health care bill is designed to provide health care to tens of millions who lack it and ban insurance companies from denying medical coverage on the basis of pre-

existing medical conditions. Obama also wants the measure to begin to slow the rate of growth in medical costs nationwide. Most people would have to get insurance by law, and poor and middle-income Americans — including families of four earning up to \$88,000 — would receive subsidies.

Whatever the outcome, there was no doubt the issue would reverberate into this fall's elections, with control of Congress at stake.

The health care bill appeared on the cusp of passage in early January, but was derailed when Senate Republicans won a Senate seat in Massachusetts, and with it, the strength needed to sustain a filibuster and block a final vote.

In the weeks since, the White House and Democrats have embarked on a two-part strategy. It calls for the House to pass legislation that cleared the Senate in December, despite numerous objections, and for both houses to follow immediately with a second bill that makes changes to the first.

The second, fix-it bill would be drafted under rules that strip Senate Republicans of the ability to require Democrats produce a 60-vote majority.

FBI: Internet Fraud Losses Doubled Last Year

WASHINGTON (AP) — The cost of Internet fraud doubled in 2009 to about \$500 million, the FBI said Friday. The most common type of frauds reported were scams from people falsely claiming to be from the FBI.

Individual complaints of Internet scams grew more than 20 percent last year, according to a report issued by the FBI in partnership with a private fraud-fighting group, the Internet Crime Complaint Center.

The amounts taken by individual frauds ranged from less than \$30 to more than \$100,000,

officials said.

The most frequently reported e-mails were those that falsely used the FBI's name, accounting for 16 percent of the more than 300,000 complaints received last year. Some of those frauds have even featured e-mails purporting to be from FBI Director Robert Mueller, though the e-mail addresses of the senders often betray the con, authorities said.

Peter Trahon, head of the FBI's cyber division, said people should evaluate the e-mail pitches they receive "with a healthy skepticism — if something seems to good to be true, it likely is."

A BET'S A BET, EH?



Press Secretary Robert Gibbs wears a Team Canada Olympic hockey jersey as he briefs reporters at the White House in Washington, on Friday. Gibbs donned the jersey to pay off a bet after Canada defeated the U.S. in hockey in the Olympics.

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