

NATION/WORLD DIGEST

Toyota Gives Doubt On Runaway Prius Story

SAN DIEGO (AP) — Toyota cast doubt Monday on a California man's claim that his Prius sped out of control, saying the report is inconsistent with the findings of the company's preliminary investigation.

Toyota said in a statement that the accelerator pedal was tested and found to be working normally and a backup safety system worked properly. The automaker said the front brakes showed severe wear and damage from overheating, but the rear brakes and parking brake were in good condition.

The motorist, James Sikes, said his car raced to 94 mph on a freeway near San Diego last week. The March 8 incident ended when Sikes stopped the car with help from a California Highway Patrol officer.

"While a final report is not yet complete, there are strong indications that the driver's account of the event is inconsistent with the findings of the preliminary analysis," the statement said.

A telephone message seeking comment on Toyota's assertions was left by The Associated Press at the office of Sikes' attorney, John H. Gomez.

Afghan Pres 'Very Angry' At Taliban Arrest

KABUL (AP) — The Afghan government was holding secret talks with the Taliban's No. 2 when he was captured in Pakistan, and the arrest infuriated President Hamid Karzai, according to one of Karzai's advisers.

The detention of Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar — second in the Taliban only to one-eyed Mullah Mohammed Omar — has raised new questions about whether the U.S. is willing to back peace discussions with leaders who harbored the terrorists behind the Sept. 11 attacks.

Karzai "was very angry" when he heard that the Pakistanis had picked up Baradar with an assist from U.S. intelligence, the adviser said. Besides the ongoing talks, he said Baradar had "given a green light" to participating in a three-day peace jirga that Karzai is hosting next month.

The adviser, who had knowledge of the peace talks, spoke on condition of anonymity because of their sensitivity. Other Afghan officials, including Abdul Ali Shamsi, security adviser to the governor of Helmand province, also confirmed talks between Baradar and the Afghan government. Several media reports have suggested that Baradar had been in touch with Karzai representatives, but these are the first details to emerge from the discussions.

Talking with the Taliban is gaining traction in Afghanistan as thousands of U.S. and NATO reinforcements are streaming in to reverse the Taliban's momentum. That has prompted Pakistan and others to stake out their positions on possible reconciliation negotiations that could mean an endgame to the eight-year war.

U.S. Demands Israel Scrap Construction Plan

JERUSALEM (AP) — The Obama administration is demanding that Israel call off a contentious building project in east Jerusalem and make a public gesture toward the Palestinians to help defuse one of the worst U.S.-Israeli feuds in memory, officials on both sides said Monday.

But Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu showed little sign of yielding, saying Jewish construction in east Jerusalem "in no way" hurts Palestinians. A Jerusalem city spokesman suggested Jewish building there would continue.

Announcement of the plan to build 1,600 apartments for Jews in the Ramot Shlomo neighborhood came during Vice President Joe Biden's visit last week, embarrassing him and the Obama administration, angering Palestinians and endangering the start of indirect peace negotiations that are to be mediated by a U.S. envoy.

Adding to tensions was a ceremony Monday in the walled Old City in east Jerusalem, where Jews rededicated an ancient synagogue destroyed after the war that followed Israel's creation in 1948. Israeli police sent in reinforcements to prevent riots. The synagogue is in the Jewish Quarter, but Palestinians still saw the colorful celebration as an affront.

After a weekend of rare broadsides from top U.S. officials, including Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton, American demands became clear Monday. The U.S. wants Israel to cancel the construction plan, U.S. and Israeli officials said, speaking on condition of anonymity because no announcement was made.

NASA Catches Shrimp Below The Arctic Ice

WASHINGTON (AP) — In a surprising discovery about where higher life can thrive, scientists for the first time found a shrimp-like creature and a jellyfish frolicking beneath a massive Antarctic ice sheet.

Six hundred feet below the ice where no light shines, scientists had figured nothing much more than a few microbes could exist. That's why a NASA team was surprised when they lowered a video camera to get the first long look at the underbelly of an ice sheet in Antarctica. A curious shrimp-like creature came swimming by and then parked itself on the camera's cable. Scientists also pulled up a tentacle they believe came from a foot-long jellyfish.

"We were operating on the presumption that nothing's there," said NASA ice scientist Robert Bindaschler, who will be presenting the initial findings and a video at an American Geophysical Union meeting Wednesday. "It was a shrimp you'd enjoy having on your plate."

"We were just gaga over it," he said of the 3-inch-long, orange critter starring in their two-minute video. Technically, it's not a shrimp. It's a Lyssianasid amphipod, which is distantly related to shrimp.

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HEALTH CARE REFORM

Dems Start Countdown Toward Vote

President, House Leaders Remain Confident They Will Have Enough For Passage

BY DAVID ESPO

AP Special Correspondent

WASHINGTON — House Democrats triggered the countdown Monday for the climactic vote on President Barack Obama's fiercely contested remake of the health care system, even though the legislation remained incomplete and lacked the votes needed to pass.

Obama expressed optimism Congress would approve his call for affordable and nearly universal coverage as he pitched his plan on a trip to Ohio, and congressional leaders showed signs of progress in winning anti-abortion Democrats whose votes are pivotal.

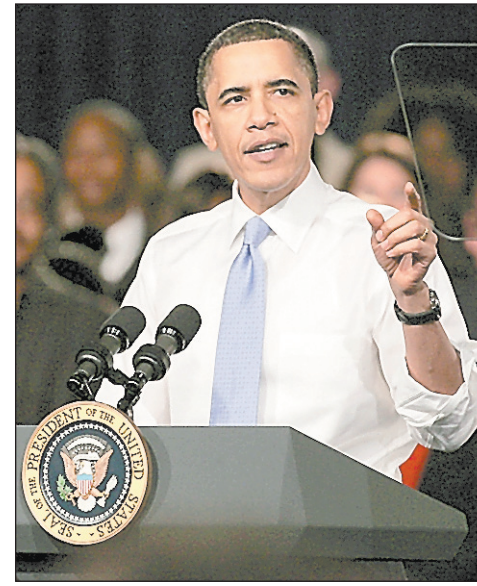
Some of the pressure was aimed at Rep. Dennis Kucinich, D-Ohio, who flew aboard Air Force One with President Barack Obama during the day, then walked into a senior citizen center with the chief executive in time to hear a voice from the audience yell out, "Vote yes."

A smiling Obama turned to the liberal lawmaker and said, "Did you hear that, Dennis?" Then, turning back to the audience, he added, "Go ahead, say that again."

"Vote yes!" came back the reply.

Kucinich, who said later he remains uncommitted, is one of 37 Democrats currently in the House who voted against Obama's legislation when it cleared the House last fall.

In addition, the White House is laboring to hold the support of several other Democrats who voted for the earlier bill, but



MIKE CARDEW/AKRON BEACON JOURNAL
President Barack Obama delivers a speech on health care insurance reform at the Walter F. Ehrnfelt Recreation and Senior Center, Monday in Strongsville, Ohio.

only after first supporting strict anti-abortion limits that would be altered the second time around.

At least two have signaled they are open to supporting the president when the vote comes. One of them, Rep. James Oberstar of Minnesota, is "in the leaning yes column," said a spokesman, John Schadt.

"When we bring the bill to the floor, then

we will have the votes," said Speaker Nancy Pelosi.

Obama sounded similarly confident in an interview with ABC News. "I believe we're going to get the votes, we're going to make this happen," said the president, who has traveled to three states and lobbied numerous lawmakers in recent days.

Outside interests on both sides sought to prevail on wavering lawmakers.

The National Right to Life Committee, which opposes abortions, wrote to lawmakers that support for the Senate bill would be a "career-defining pro-abortion vote."

Union groups and other supporters announced a \$1.3 million advertising campaign urging 17 House Democrats to vote for the measure, and officials at the Service Employees International Union threatened to withdraw support from Democrats who vote against the bill if it loses.

The lobbying came as the House Budget Committee, on a 21-16 vote, took an essential first step toward the House vote, which could come by the weekend.

It was more than a year ago that Obama asked Congress to approve legislation extending health coverage to tens of millions who lack it, curbing industry practices such as denying coverage on the basis of pre-existing medical conditions, and beginning to slow the growth of health care nationally. His plan would require most Americans to buy health insurance, fine most who fail to do so and provide government subsidies to help middle-income earners and the working poor afford it.

Dodd Unveils Sweeping Financial Regulation Plan

WASHINGTON (AP) — A new Democratic Senate bill to tame the financial markets would give the government new powers to break up firms that threaten the economy, force the industry to pay for its failures and create an independent consumer watchdog within the Federal Reserve.

Legislation unveiled Monday by Senate Banking Committee Chairman Chris Dodd falls shy of the ambitious restructuring of federal financial regulations envisioned by President Barack Obama or contained in legislation already passed in the House.

But the 1,336-page bill, which includes provisions negotiated with Republicans, would still be the biggest overhaul of regulations since the New Deal. It comes 18 months after Wall Street's failures helped plunge the nation into a deep recession.

In its sweep, the bill would touch all corners of the financial sector, from small-town mortgage brokers to the highest penthouse office suites on Wall Street.

Lobbyists were already mobilizing to change several of its features.

In announcing his bill at a news conference, Dodd stood alone, a sign of the difficult task ahead of him in forging a bill that can pass the Senate. None of the 10 Republicans on his committee endorsed his plan. Several Democrats have voiced dismay at Dodd's decision to reject a plan for a freestanding consumer agency, an Obama regulatory centerpiece.

The bill would create a powerful nine-member Financial Stability Oversight Council, chaired by the treasury secretary, to look out for the systemwide health of the financial sector and to stop financial firms from becoming "too big to fail." The council could place large,

interconnected financial institutions under the supervision of the Federal Reserve. And it would have the authority to approve the breakup of large complex companies if they pose a threat to the nation's financial system.

Dodd partially embraced Obama's call for a so-called Volcker Rule. Named after former Fed Chairman Paul Volcker, the proposal would limit the size of some of the largest financial institutions and ban commercial banks from conducting certain trades on their own accounts.

Dodd's bill sets a goal for ending risky trading and hedge-fund investments by depository banks but calls for a study before any regulations are written and enforced.

Like the House bill, Dodd's proposal would create a mechanism to shut down large, failing firms, with shareholders and unsecured creditors bearing the losses. Management also would be removed. The costs of such a shutdown would be covered by a \$50 billion fund financed by the largest financial firms.

The Federal Reserve, under Dodd's plan, emerges as a leaner institution with new powers to regulate the size and the activities of the nation's largest financial firms. The Fed, once threatened with the loss of all its regulatory powers, will now oversee all bank holding companies with assets of \$50 billion or more. But it would also be given power to regulate and even break up large interconnected companies, such as the insurance conglomerate American International Group, whose failure could pose a risk to the economy.

Financial overhaul bills

How the House and Senate bills to overhaul regulation of the financial sector compare:

	House bill	Senate bill
Consumer protection panel	Would create a stand-alone Consumer Financial Protection Agency to regulate credit cards, mortgages, payday loans	Would be independent but within Federal Reserve; would write rules on credit cards, mortgages
Conflict of interest	Regulators could stop large banks from trading on behalf of customers and themselves	Would limit banks trading on behalf of customers and themselves
End to too big to fail bailouts	Fund would collect \$150 billion from largest banks to dissolve a troubled big bank	Would limit large, financial companies; unwind failing firms using \$50 billion fund collected from banks
Systemic risk	Regulators would empower Federal Reserve; could break up large companies; would oversee entire financial system	Nine-member Financial Stability Oversight Panel led by the Treasury Dept.; could break up large companies; would oversee entire financial system

Source: McClatchy Washington Bureau, U.S. Senate
Graphic: Judy Treibler

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