

NATION DIGEST

Obama Signs Jobs Bill As Health Care Looms

WASHINGTON (AP) — President Barack Obama has said he wants to focus laser-like on the public's top concern: jobs. But the ongoing effort to remake the nation's health care system keeps getting in the way. The White House held a ceremony Thursday in the sunny Rose Garden where Obama signed into law a \$38 billion jobs bill containing a modest mix of tax breaks and spending designed to encourage the private sector to start hiring again. Even with jobs on his immediate agenda, Obama's opening remarks were about health care. Health care looms so large in the political calculus that Obama on Thursday postponed a long-planned trip to the Pacific so he could remain in Washington for the final health care votes. His scheduled Sunday departure, already pushed back by several days, was delayed until June.

Obama Backing Immigration Measure

WASHINGTON (AP) — President Barack Obama is backing an immigration bill outline drafted by two senators that says illegal immigrants must admit they broke the law to become citizens. Obama says in a statement that the outline of a bill Sen. Chuck Schumer and Sen. Lindsey Graham are crafting addresses border security and demands accountability from illegal immigrants and employers who hire them. He says the critical next step is to translate their outline into legislation. Obama's statement comes just three days before tens of thousands of immigrants and their supporters plan to rally in Washington to press the administration and Congress to pass immigration reform.

Clinton Urges Delay For Iranian Nuclear Plant

MOSCOW (AP) — U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton and her Russian counterpart clashed openly Thursday over the planned launch this summer of Iran's first, Russian-built nuclear power plant, highlighting a split in views over how to steer Iran away from nuclear weapons. Clinton did not criticize the long-delayed project directly but said the Obama administration is opposed to the timing of the nuclear plant's startup. Russian Prime Minister Vladimir Putin announced the summer startup plans on Thursday, shortly after Clinton arrived for a two-day visit. The nuclear plant is an example of Russian-Iranian economic ties and technical cooperation, on terms that have long made the United States uncomfortable. It was a background issue during a difficult period in U.S.-Russian relations last year and in the ongoing U.S.-led effort to bring new United Nations economic penalties against Iran over suspicions that part of its nuclear program is aimed at building a bomb. Putin's announcement adds another complication to the already long list of issues on which Clinton and her Russian hosts don't agree. Clinton is seeing Putin in Friday.

Congressman: 'Jihad Jane' Was In Probe

PHILADELPHIA (AP) — A Pennsylvania congressman says the U.S. terrorism suspect known as "Jihad Jane" cooperated in an international probe of radical Muslims. Republican Rep. Charles Dent says his information about Colleen LaRose is based on meetings with the FBI and other briefings. The 46-year-old LaRose lives in Dent's district in Pennsylvania and is accused of conspiring with jihadist fighters and pledging to murder a Swedish artist. She pleaded not guilty Thursday in Philadelphia to four counts. Dent believes the indictment was filed this month after investigators learned what they could from LaRose.

Militant Rocket Kills Thai Worker In Israel

GAZA CITY, Gaza Strip (AP) — A rocket fired by Gaza militants smashed into a greenhouse in an Israeli border village Thursday, killing a Thai worker in the first such death since Israel's massive offensive against Hamas-ruled Gaza more than a year ago. The launch defied a longstanding ban by the Hamas on such attacks and highlighted the growing challenge to the Islamic militant group from more radical rivals, including al-Qaida-inspired firebrands. The rocket also raised the specter of Israeli retaliation and renewed international focus on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Israel has drawn tough U.S. criticism in recent days for plans to build hundreds more homes for Jews in disputed east Jerusalem.

HEALTH CARE REFORM

Democrats Set Critical Vote For Sunday

BY DAVID ESPO AP Special Correspondent

WASHINGTON — Historic health care change in the balance, Democrats plowed fresh billions into insurance subsidies for consumers on Thursday and added a \$250 rebate for seniors facing high prescription drugs, last-minute sweeteners to sweeping \$940 billion legislation headed for a climactic weekend vote. President Barack Obama scuttled an Asian trip in favor of last-minute lobbying at the White House on his signature issue, playing host to a procession of wavering Democrats seeking favors. "It will make history and we will make progress by passing this legislation," predicted House Speaker Nancy Pelosi as Democrats unveiled final alterations to a bill — 16 tumultuous months in the making — meant to expand health care to 32 million uninsured, bar the insurance industry from denying coverage on the basis of pre-existing medical conditions, and trim federal deficits by an estimated \$138 billion over

the next decade. The health care portions of the bill would affect nearly every American and remake one-sixth of the national economy. Beginning in 2014, most Americans would be required for the first time to purchase insurance, and face penalties if they refused. Millions of families with incomes up to \$88,000 a year would receive government help to defray their costs. Large businesses would face fines if they did not offer good-quality coverage to their workers. As Democrats trumpeted their bill, particularly its potential impact on the deficit, Republicans attacked it relentlessly as a government takeover of the health care industry financed by ever higher Medicare cuts and tax increases, including a new Medicare payroll tax on upper income wage earners. Democrats set a Sunday showdown in the House, and while Pelosi and others expressed confidence about the outcome, Obama's decision to put off a scheduled Asian trip until later in the year was a confession that the votes were not yet secured. In Washington's time-honored tradition, the conversations with the president ranged

widely. Rep. Luis Guterrez of Illinois said he agreed to vote for the health care overhaul on the understanding that Obama and congressional Democrats would begin attempts quickly to pass comprehensive immigration legislation. Within hours, Senate Democrats unveiled a bill, and the president praised it in a written statement. Obama and Democratic leaders focused their lobbying on two groups of Democrats, 37 who voted against an earlier bill in the House and 40 who voted for it only after first making sure it would include strict abortion limits that now have been modified. After weeks of secrecy-shrouded meetings, Democrats unveiled 153 pages of last-minute changes that included another of Obama's top priorities. Federally guaranteed student loans would now be made only by the government, ending a role for banks and other for-profit lenders who charge fees. The savings, an estimated \$60 billion over a decade, would increase the maximum Pell grants for needy college students as well as support for programs such as aid to historically black colleges, a priority of the Congressional Black Caucus.

As for health care, the additions fell generally into three categories. — To address concerns of House Democrats, subsidies were raised by an estimated \$25 billion over a decade for consumers who would face a first-ever requirement to purchase coverage. — To ease concerns among governors, about \$8 billion was added for 11 states and the District of Columbia, which already provide the level of Medicaid coverage that is required under the bill. — Seniors who experience a gap in coverage in the Medicare prescription drug program would receive a \$250 rebate this year — an election-year bragging point for Democrats as they look toward the fall campaign with control of Congress at stake. Beginning in 2011, pharmaceutical industry discounts would cover 50 percent of the costs of drugs that seniors buy once they enter the gap in coverage. That share would rise to 75 percent over a decade. That would bring it into line with the program's basic benefit, in which Medicare recipients generally pay 25 percent of their costs and the program picks up the rest.

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