

NATION/WORLD DIGEST

U.S., Russia Agrees To Cut Nuclear Arsenals

WASHINGTON (AP) — After long and trying negotiations, the U.S. and Russia have reached agreements for a historic new treaty to reduce the nuclear arsenals of former Cold War rivals, officials said Wednesday. President Barack Obama and Russian President Dmitry Medvedev are to sign the pact in two weeks in Prague.

The deal is seen as an important step toward rolling back global nuclear dangers and sealing an increased level of trust and cooperation between the U.S. and Russia, who possess the vast majority of the world's nuclear arms and have labored under strained relations in recent years.

Obama and Medvedev are expected to seal the deal when they talk by telephone this week, setting the stage for a White House campaign to win Senate ratification. The treaty also must win approval by the Russian Duma, and the two legislative processes are likely to take months.

Robert S. Norris, a longtime analyst of U.S. and Russian nuclear arsenals, said Senate ratification would not be easy.

"Hard negotiations with the Russians will now be followed by hard negotiations with Republican senators to achieve ratification," Norris said.

House Passes Bill On Construction Spending

WASHINGTON (AP) — Local governments would receive billions of dollars for construction projects and welfare programs under a bill passed Wednesday in the House, the latest in a series of election-year jobs bills Democrats are pushing in Congress.

The bill combines \$13.2 billion in interest subsidies for local construction bonds with \$3.6 billion in tax cuts for small businesses and \$2.5 billion in aid to states to pay for expanded welfare programs through September 2011.

The House passed the measure 246-178, with nearly all Republicans opposed. It now goes to the Senate.

The Democrats aim to pass a series of modest measures to address unemployment as congressional elections approach in November. With unemployment hovering near 10 percent, jobs and the economy are sure to be big issues in elections.

Last week, President Barack Obama signed a bill that offers tax breaks to companies that hire unemployed workers. On Wednesday, the House also passed a bill that would provide \$5.1 billion to fund local disaster relief projects, including some that date back to Hurricane Katrina, and \$600 million for summer jobs programs. The bill passed 239-175.

Facebook, Google's Tagging Draws Scrutiny

GENEVA (AP) — You have been tagged in 12 photos — even if you're not signed up to the Web site.

European regulators are investigating whether the practice of posting photos, videos and other information about people on sites such as Facebook without their consent is a breach of privacy laws.

The Swiss and German probes go to the heart of a debate that has gained momentum in Europe amid high-profile privacy cases: To what extent are social networking platforms responsible for the content their members upload?

The actions set the stage for a fresh battle between American Web giants and European authorities a month after an Italian court held three Google executives criminally responsible for a user-posted video.

U.S. Census: 20 Percent So Far Has Replied

WASHINGTON (AP) — Roughly 100 million households to go. One week after U.S. census forms were mailed to 120 million households, about 20 percent of the nation has completed those forms and sent them back. That number puts the government on its way to matching or surpassing mail participation rates in 2000 of 72 percent, the Census Bureau said Wednesday.

The figures are part of daily data the bureau is publishing on 2010 mail-back participation for the U.S., broken down by state, county, city and zip code. Officials are hoping that state and local governments will use the data to promote friendly competitions as to who can get the best response by the end of the census mail-back period in late April.

"We're off to a pretty good start," said Census Bureau director Robert Groves.

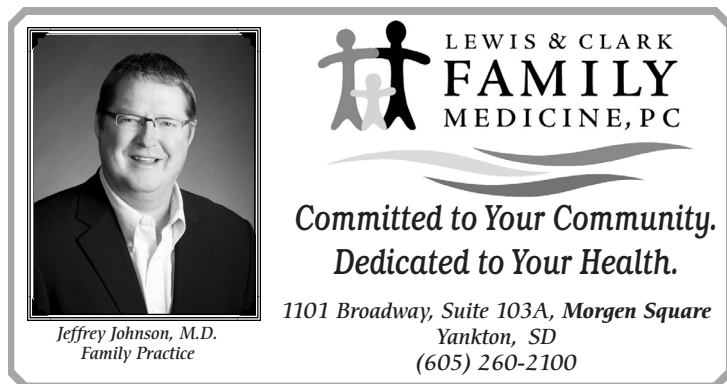
The census data, available on interactive Google maps, reflect forms received as of Tuesday. Lower responses in some areas could be caused, at least partly, because parts of the U.S. may not have received their forms until late last week.

Montana, Wisconsin, Iowa, Missouri and South Dakota ranked at the top, with participation rates of between 31-33 percent. These states have rural areas that were hand-delivered forms earlier in the month, so people there had a longer period to respond.

Broken down by city, places in Iowa, Nebraska and Minnesota dominated the top 50, with Leighton in Iowa topping the list at 75 percent.

At the other end of the scale, Florida ranked at the bottom among states, with just 9 percent of households returning their form. It was followed by Washington and Alaska, each with 10 percent.

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HEALTH CARE REFORM

Obama Issues Quiet Order On Abortions

Pro-HCR Dems Allegedly Receiving Threats; Senate Battling Over Reconciliation Bill

BY DAVID ESPO
AP Special Correspondent

WASHINGTON — Anything but jubilant, President Barack Obama awkwardly kept a promise Wednesday he made to ensure passage of historic health care legislation, pledging the administration would not allow federal funds to pay for elective abortions covered by private insurance.

Unlike Tuesday, when a beaming Obama signed the health care law in a nationally televised ceremony interrupted repeatedly by applause, the White House refused to permit coverage of the event. It occurred in the Oval Office in the presence of a small group of anti-abortion Democratic lawmakers who had extracted the commitment over the weekend. The president supports abortion rights.

The political maneuvering occurred as the FBI announced it was investigating threats received by about 10 Democratic lawmakers in recent days in apparent connection with the intensely controversial health care law.

"All threats and incidents directed against members of Congress are taken seriously and are being investigated," the bureau's Washington field office said in a statement.

At the same time, Senate Democrats drove toward final passage of a second health care bill, drafted to supplement the first by sweetening benefits for seniors with

high prescription drug costs and for lower-to-middle income families who cannot afford the cost of insurance.

The follow-up bill before the Senate included a second triumph for the administration on domestic policy. It generally strips banks and other private insurers of their ability to originate loans to students, in favor of direct government lending.

The government's savings would raise the maximum amount needy students could receive in Pell Grants, and pump about \$2.6 billion over a decade into historically black and Hispanic colleges. The changes would mean the loss of billions of dollars for student lending giant Sallie Mae as well as large financial institutions such as Citigroup, JPMorgan Chase and Bank of America.

The bill passed the House on Sunday and it appeared Reid had as many as 57 votes in hand for its approval, far more than needed. Among 59 Senate Democrats, only Sens. Blanche Lincoln of Arkansas and Ben Nelson of Nebraska announced in advance they would oppose it.

Far outnumbered, Senate Republicans sought votes on politically-charged proposals that, while potentially troublesome for Democrats, were doomed to defeat. The first, to roll back the bill's Medicare cuts, was jettisoned on a vote of 56-42; the second, to strip out special projects, by 54-43.

Sen. Tom Coburn, R-Okla., proposed an amendment barring federal expenditures for

supplying Viagra and other erectile dysfunction drugs to sex offenders and cracking down on fraudulent health spending. Coburn said it would save \$650 million a year. Sen. Max Baucus, D-Mont., called it "a crass political stunt," and Democrats turned it aside 57-42.

By 56-43, the Senate rejected an amendment by Sen. Charles Grassley, R-Iowa, to force Obama and others in the government to obtain insurance coverage through new purchasing exchanges the law will create in 2014, as members of Congress and some staff would. The White House said the move was unnecessary because the president would do so voluntarily, but it was unclear whether the day-old law permitted him to.

Taken together, the day's events amounted to mop-up actions by the White House and Senate Democrats, one day after Obama signed into law far-reaching changes in the nation's health care system that had eluded presidents and lawmakers for a century.

At its core, the new law would expand health care to 32 million who lack it while cracking down on the insurance industry and cutting federal deficits by an estimated \$143 billion over a decade. Most of the bill's estimated \$938 billion cost for coverage would pay for assistance to help families with annual incomes of up to \$88,000 pay for insurance, although small businesses also would receive subsidies as an incentive to cover their employees.

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