

Syrian Oil Official Defects, Blasts Regime

BEIRUT (AP) — Syria’s deputy oil minister appeared tense as he looked at the camera and announced in a video that he has defected from President Bashar Assad’s regime, acknowledging he expects government forces to “burn my home” and “persecute my family.”

Abdo Husameddine, a 58-year-old father of four, on Thursday became the highest-ranking civilian official to join the opposition, and he urged his countrymen to “abandon this sinking ship” as the nation spirals toward civil war.

In the YouTube video, Husameddine seemed to address Assad directly, accusing him of vast crimes in the past year as government forces pummel the opposition with tanks and snipers. The U.N. estimates 7,500 people have been killed since the uprising began.

“You have inflicted on those you claim are your people a full year of sorrow and sadness, denied them their basic rights to life and humanity and pushed the country to the edge of the abyss,” said Husameddine, wearing a dark suit and tie. He appeared to be reading from a script, casting his eyes down to find the words.

“I do not want to end my life servicing the crimes of this regime,” he said. “I declare that I am joining the revolution of the dignified people.”

Poll: Fewer Expect Own Healthcare To Worsen

WASHINGTON (AP) — Attacked as a rationing scheme and praised as a lifesaver, President Barack Obama’s health care law remains as divisive and confusing as ever. But a new poll finds Americans are less worried that the overhaul will undermine their own care.

As the Supreme Court prepares to hear arguments on the constitutionality of the Affordable Care Act, the Associated Press-GfK poll shows that Americans are less concerned their own personal health care will suffer as a result of it.

Shortly after the law passed in 2010, nearly half — 47 percent — said they expected the quality of their care to worsen. Now just 32 percent say that’s their worry.

Most of the law’s major changes have yet to take effect, and dire predictions — of lost jobs, soaring premiums and long waits to see the doctor — have not materialized. Provisions that have gone into effect, including extended coverage for young adults on their parents’ insurance and relief for seniors with high prescription costs, only had a modest impact on health care spending.

Lee Sisson, 63, a semi-retired businessman from Winter Haven, Fla., says he figures that he might be better off personally as a result of the overhaul. For example, it would limit how much health insurance companies can charge older adults. But self-interest hasn’t made Sisson a supporter.

Witnesses Hid Like ‘Sitting Ducks’ In Shooting

PITTSBURGH (AP) — A man who was in a waiting room when gunfire erupted at a psychiatric clinic at the University of Pittsburgh says people scrambled to hide and decided they’d rush the gunman if he entered the room.

Gregory Brant says he and six other people in the room heard Thursday afternoon’s gunfire and barricaded themselves inside but didn’t feel safe because there were doors with windows along adjacent walls. He says they felt like “sitting ducks” but luckily the gunman didn’t see them. He says the ordeal lasted about 20 minutes.

A University of Pittsburgh Medical Center spokesman briefed by police says the gunman and one other person died in the shooting and seven other people were injured.

Gingrich ‘Tired’ But Loose In Miss. Stops

TUPELO, Miss. (AP) — It was an ominous introduction for Republican Newt Gingrich, whose future as a presidential candidate rests in Mississippi and Alabama.

“I can tell you right now, he’s tired. He needs your prayers,” former state Sen. Lee Yancey told a half-full Jackson hotel ballroom before the former House speaker took the stage.

Gingrich’s aides have said the candidate needs to win Alabama and Mississippi Tuesday to justify staying in the race. He scrapped weekend plans to campaign in Kansas ahead of the Saturday caucuses to stay in the South, his adopted home and the only place he’s won in the 2012 campaign.

“I want your help next Tuesday so we can win the Republican nomination,” Gingrich flatly told the group, his voice a little rough. “This race has been a roller coaster, up and down. I believe with your help next Tuesday when we win here and we win in Alabama we’ll be back up again.”

What few in the crowd of about 100 knew is that the night before, Gingrich took some time to enjoy himself. He shed his jacket and tie, sipped some wine and danced with his wife, Callista, in the bar, a care-free respite with staff that ran into the early hours of Thursday.

New Marine Pitch Focuses On Gentler Side

WASHINGTON (AP) — They’ve long been known as devil dogs, leathernecks and “the first to fight.” But U.S. Marines, with their self-described expertise in “killing people and breaking things,” now want to promote their kinder side as well.

A new Marine Corps advertising campaign starting this weekend takes its cue from research showing today’s recruit-age generation is interested in helping people. So the campaign is crafted to show Marines not only as warriors but as humanitarians and peacekeepers; not only as courageous but also as compassionate.

Photos and videos to be distributed on television, in American movie theaters, on YouTube and elsewhere show Marines talking with children; bringing food, water and medical supplies to Haitian earthquake victims, and clearing rubble from a tsunami-devastated Japanese village. These missions aren’t a new role for the Marines, but they are ones the force expects to do more of as it’s freed from a decade of fighting land wars in Iraq and Afghanistan and returns to its seafaring, expeditionary roots.

Entitled “Toward the Sounds of Chaos,” the campaign seeks to explain that in an uncertain world, Marines “need to be ready to engage in whatever activity our country needs us to engage in,” Brig. Gen. Joseph L. Osterman, head of the Marine Corps Recruiting Command, said in a recent interview.

“That may go all the way from a combat-type environment, as we’ve been doing for the last 10 years, to what we did before ... emergent chaotic situations ... catastrophes ... natural disasters or failed-state-type situations where people need help,” he said.

Pat Robertson: War On Drugs Has Failed

RICHMOND, Va. (AP) — Religious broadcaster Pat Robertson says marijuana should be legalized and treated like alcohol because the government’s war on drugs has failed.

The outspoken evangelical Christian and host of “The 700 Club” on the Virginia Beach-based Christian Broadcasting Network he founded said the war on drugs is costing taxpayers billions of dollars. He said people should not be sent to prison for marijuana possession.

The 81-year-old first became a self-proclaimed “hero of the hippie culture” in 2010 when he called for ending mandatory prison sentences for marijuana possession convictions.

“I just think it’s shocking how many of these young people wind up in prison and they get turned into hardcore criminals because they had a possession of a very small amount of a controlled substance,” Robertson said on his show March 1. “The whole thing is crazy. We’ve said, ‘Well, we’re conservatives, we’re tough on crime.’ That’s baloney.”

Robertson’s support for legalizing pot appeared in a *New York Times* story published Thursday. His spokesman confirmed to The Associated Press that Robertson supports legalization with regulation. Robertson was not made available for an interview.

Decision 2012

Southerners Wary Of Romney

But Many Say They Would Support Him In November

BY EMILY WAGSTER PETTUS
Associated Press

JACKSON, Miss. — Mitt Romney faces a tough sell in the Deep South. With Mississippi and Alabama primaries coming up next Tuesday, there’s concern that he’s too slick, not really a conservative. In a region where the evangelical vote is important, some are skeptical about his Mormon faith.

But if Romney wins the Republican nomination and it’s a November choice between him and Democratic President Barack Obama, the former Massachusetts governor may be just good enough for some Southerners.

“If push comes to shove and he gets the nomination, I’ll go in the voting booth like this and vote for him,” says Mississippi retiree David Wilke, holding his nose.

Romney acknowledges that he faces an uphill battle in Tuesday’s Southern primaries. In an interview Thursday with Birmingham, Ala., radio station WAPI, he said the Deep South contests would be “a bit of an away game” for him.

Campaigning in Pascagoula, Miss., Romney said he is turning into an “unofficial Southerner.”

“I’m learning to say ‘y’all’ and I like grits. Strange things are happening to me,” he said jokingly.

Former House Speaker Newt Gingrich, who represented Georgia for 20 years and now lives in Virginia, needs to win every state from South Carolina to Texas to get to the convention this summer, spokesman R.C. Hammond says.

Former Pennsylvania Sen. Rick Santorum’s staff says he’ll be aggressive in states where Gingrich expects to perform well.



CURTIS COMPTON/ATLANTA JOURNAL-CONSTITUTION/MCT
Republican presidential candidate Mitt Romney speaks to supporters during a campaign stop at Brookwood High School in Snellville, Ga., Sunday.

Gingrich scored an early primary victory in South Carolina and won this week in Georgia. Romney added a Virginia win this week — Gingrich and Santorum weren’t on the ballot — to his Jan. 31 win in Florida, which is culturally not entirely a Southern state, despite its geography. Santorum won Tennessee.

After Mississippi and Alabama next week, Louisiana votes March 24, North Carolina and West Virginia May 8, Arkansas May 22 and Texas May 29.

Santorum and Gingrich are in-

voking God and country as they campaign in Mississippi and Alabama. They’re winning applause by saying Obama has been a weak ally for Israel, a point that resonates with Christian conservatives.

Romney and Obama also expressed support for Israel this week in speeches to the American Israel Public Affairs Committee in Washington, but Mary Dockery, director of a Christian youth group in central Mississippi, said she’s voting for Santorum because she believes he’s the most pro-Israel candidate.

“In God’s word, he tells us about the blessings of those people who support Israel,” Dockery said at a Santorum rally Wednesday night at the Mississippi Agriculture Museum in Jackson.

Santorum didn’t mention Gingrich during his appearance at the rally before about 400 people, but he drew parallels between Romney and Obama on the government’s role in health care. A boy at the rally hollered, “Obamneycare,” momentarily drawing attention.

“If we win in Mississippi, this will be a two-person race,” Santorum told the audience, which included several families with young children and some people wearing tea party shirts.

Roughly 200 people turned out Thursday morning to hear Gingrich at a Jackson hotel. He spoke at length about oil production but got the most applause when he said Obama has an arrogant belief in big government.

“Obamaism is a repudiation of the Declaration of Independence,” Gingrich declared.

Still, Romney is supported by top Republicans in many Southern states, including in Alabama, and he’ll speak in Birmingham on Friday. He’s been endorsed by former Alabama Gov. Bob Riley, though Riley concedes Romney is an underdog in the state.

“Mitt Romney is the only candidate with the leadership and business experience to take our country through this difficult economic situation and bring us out stronger,” Riley said. “If there was ever time to have a job creator in the White House, it is now.”

In Louisiana, which holds its primary in two weeks, state Republican Executive Director Jason Dore said support for GOP candidates seems to be fluctuating to match the national battle over the nomination. He said Romney supporters are particularly active in the New Orleans area, while Ron Paul is getting much of the attention on college campuses.

Senate Nixes GOP Environment Proposals

BY JOAN LOWY
Associated Press

WASHINGTON — The Senate killed Republican-backed attempts to overturn several of President Barack Obama’s environmental and energy policies Thursday as lawmakers worked against a March 31 deadline to keep aid flowing to more than 100,000 transportation construction projects around the country.

The two-year, \$109 billion transportation bill before the Senate has wide, bipartisan support, but has become a magnet for lawmakers’ favorite causes and partisan gamesmanship. Among the amendments batted aside were GOP proposals to bypass Obama’s concerns about the Keystone XL oil pipeline, to delay tougher air pollution standards for industrial boilers and to expand offshore oil drilling.

Action on those and other amendments came under an agree-



Reid

ment between Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid, D-Nev., and Minority Leader Mitch McConnell, R-Ky., aimed at clearing the way for passage of the transportation bill next week.

Obama lobbied some Senate Democrats by telephone ahead of the Keystone vote, urging them to oppose an amendment by Sen. John Hoeven, R-N.D., that would have prevented the president from intervening in decisions related to construction of the pipeline and would have speeded its approval. Pointing to the administration’s environmental concerns about the project, which would carry tar sands oil from Canada to the Texas Gulf Coast, Republicans accused Obama of standing in the way greater oil supplies at a time

when Americans are coping with rising gasoline prices.

But some Democrats, especially those from oil producing states, were torn between support for the pipeline and their support for the president. The amendment was defeated 56-42, even though 11 Democrats broke ranks to support it. Sixty votes were needed for passage.

Republican leaders jumped on the White House lobbying.

“Most Americans strongly support building this pipeline and the jobs that would come with it,” McConnell said in a statement.

The president’s lobbying against the Keystone provision came “a week after the president signaled to me and to Sen. McConnell that he might be willing to work with us on some bipartisan steps forward on energy legislation that the American people support,” House Speaker John Boehner, R-Ohio, told reporters. “If we’re going

to have bipartisan action on energy, the Keystone pipeline is an obvious place to start.”

White House spokesman Jay Carney said Obama felt it was “wrong to play politics” with the pipeline, especially since the company behind the project has said it still was working on a final route that might satisfy environmental concerns. He also said it was “false advertising” to suggest the amendment would have any impact on gasoline prices.

Also defeated was an amendment by Sen. Susan Collins, R-Maine, which would have forced the Environmental Protection Agency to rewrite a rule requiring boiler operators to install modern emissions controls. Boilers are the second-largest source of toxic mercury emissions after coal-fired power plants. Collins said the EPA’s rule would drive some manufacturers out of business.

Government Worried About Jobs Data Leaks

BY MARCY GORDON
AP Business Writer

WASHINGTON — The Labor Department is worried that people could leak its market-moving monthly jobs report to traders before its public release and is reviewing ways to tighten security.

Spokesman Carl Fillichio said Thursday that the department commissioned a study last year by Sandia National Laboratories, a government organization that safeguards the nation’s nuclear weapons stockpile.

Sandia was asked to examine the media’s access to the reports.

The government arranges so-called “lock-ups” to give reporters 30 to 60 minutes to review the data and prepare stories before they are released to the general public.

The lock-ups are held at the Labor Department and are supposed to be secure. Reporters turn over their cell phones to Labor staff, have no Internet access and are not allowed to leave the room.

Fillichio said the review wasn’t sparked by any specific instance of a data leak. The review was reported earlier Thursday by CNBC.

CNBC also reported that the Energy Information Administration, an independent statistical arm of the Energy Department, has blocked computers linked to some Internet

addresses from access to its website. Some computers appear to have intentionally slowed the release of EIA data to the public while accelerating it for themselves, the report said.

EIA spokesman Jonathan Cogan on Thursday confirmed the blocking, saying the agency “has taken responsible and appropriate measures to protect the integrity of its data releases.”

The EIA’s policy prohibits any automated data retrieval program, or robot, that “excessively accesses” information from the website. The EIA will block robots that gain access to the website in any way it considers “excessive or malicious, including robots that attempt to access or download survey information multiple times per second with resulting degradation of service to others,” the policy says.

The Labor Department’s Fillichio said that for more than 20 years, the lock-ups “have facilitated the news media’s ability to carefully review economic data, and provide information and analysis to the public.”

He said Sandia was asked to recommend, in light of new technologies, what steps could be taken “to maintain the integrity” of the lock-up process.

“Protecting the integrity and confidentiality of economic data is and always has been a top priority

for the Department of Labor,” Fillichio said. “We constantly take steps to safeguard sensitive information.”

Sandia spokeswoman Heather Clark in Albuquerque, N.M., confirmed that it had done the review but declined to provide details.

The jobs report can move the market strongly in a blink. If traders had advance notice of what the government numbers were going to be, they would have an unfair advantage that could net them millions of dollars in profit.

Last month’s report showed the

economy added 243,000 net jobs in January, and the unemployment rate fell to 8.3 percent — the lowest level in three years. That triggered a spasm of buying on Wall Street. The Dow Jones industrial average rose to its highest close since May 2008 — four months before the financial crisis struck.

The monthly report also has political implications: it reverberates through the presidential campaign and has a potential impact on President Barack Obama’s re-election prospects.

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