

Deficit Rose In Feb., On Pace To Top \$1T Again

WASHINGTON (AP) — The U.S. federal deficit was slightly smaller through the first five months of the budget year than the previous year. Still, the imbalance is on pace to exceed \$1 trillion for the fourth straight year, which could be an issue in this year’s presidential election.

The Treasury Department said Monday that the deficit grew by \$232 billion in February. That increased the imbalance through the first five months of the budget year to \$581 billion, or 9 percent less than the same period in fiscal 2011.

The Obama administration expects the deficit will reach \$1.3 trillion when the budget year ends on Sept. 30. That would nearly match last year’s gap. The government ran a record deficit of \$1.41 trillion in 2009 and a \$1.29 trillion gap in 2010.

The deficit was slightly lower at the start of the year in part because the government took in more taxes from corporations.

And the gap was smaller even after the government paid out more money in February in tax refunds. February is typically a big month for refunds. This year’s payout was 50 percent higher than last year’s, partly because of the leap year.

Activists: 16 Civilians Shot In Syrian City

BEIRUT (AP) — Syrian activists said Monday that pro-government gunmen killed at least 16 people, including some children, in a rebel stronghold recaptured by the government, fueling concerns the government is carrying out reprisals in territory it has taken back.

State media in Damascus, which often ignores activists’ claims, confirmed killings in Homs but blamed “armed terrorists,” as it frequently calls those behind the yearlong uprising against President Bashar Assad’s regime.

At the United Nations, the U.S. and Russia clashed after Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon appealed to the divided Security Council to speak with one voice and help Syria “pull back from the brink of a deeper catastrophe.”

Washington and Moscow both called for an end to the bloody conflict — but on different terms, leaving prospects for U.N. action in doubt.

The reports of killings in the battered city of Homs added to concerns that the hundreds of civilian deaths caused by the fighting would be compounded by reprisals against opposition supporters in recaptured towns and neighborhoods.

Israel’s Missile Shield Aces First Serious Test

JERUSALEM (AP) — Israel’s Iron Dome rocket shield has aced its first serious test. Gaza’s Hamas rulers have been careful to stay on the sidelines. And Islamic Jihad — now closer to Iran than is its larger rival Hamas — is taking the lead in this round against Israel.

These are some of the trends emerging from four days of fighting between Israel’s air force and Gaza rocket squads, triggered by Israel’s killing of a militant leader last week. Twenty-four Palestinians have been killed, including seven on Monday, and about 1 million Israelis in rocket range have seen their lives disrupted by the threat of rocket attacks, with frequent sirens warning them to run for cover.

Egyptian truce efforts appeared to stall, as both sides said they were willing to keep fighting.

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu warned that Israel would keep striking those trying to harm Israeli civilians and that Israel is “ready to broaden its operation.”

Gaza militants insisted that Israel stop firing first and that it promised to halt airstrikes aimed at killing Gaza militants for good, a guarantee Israel is unlikely to give. Egypt sided with the Palestinians in their demands.

Health Care Blueprint Stresses State Flexibility

WASHINGTON (AP) — Fifty million people in America lack health insurance and the law says most of them must soon be provided coverage. But how to deliver?

The Obama administration Monday finalized an ambitious blueprint for new state-based markets that will offer consumers one-stop shopping along the lines of amazon.com.

It may sound simple enough, but getting there will be like running an obstacle course. The rule comes just two weeks before the Supreme Court takes up a challenge to the constitutionality of the law in a case brought by states. Many governors and legislators are on the sidelines awaiting the outcome, even as time is running out to act.

Starting Jan. 1, 2014, new health insurance markets called “exchanges” must be up and running in every state, the linchpin of a grand plan to make health insurance accessible and affordable to those who now struggle to find and keep coverage. Individual consumers and small businesses will be able to shop online for competitively priced coverage, and many will receive government subsidies to help pay premiums.

“More competition will drive down costs and exchanges will give individuals and small businesses the same purchasing power big businesses have today,” Health and Human Services Kathleen Sebelius said in a statement.

Fired NASA Specialist Alleges Discrimination

LOS ANGELES (AP) — A computer specialist at NASA’s Jet Propulsion Laboratory is going to court over allegations that he was wrongfully terminated because of his belief in intelligent design.

Opening statements in the lawsuit by David Coppedge were expected Monday afternoon in Los Angeles Superior Court.

Coppedge, who worked as a team lead on the Cassini mission exploring Saturn and its many moons, claims he was discriminated against because he engaged his co-workers in conversations about intelligent design and handed out DVDs on the idea while at work.

Intelligent design is the belief that a higher power must have had a hand in creation because life is too complex to have developed through evolution alone.

Coppedge lost his team lead title in 2009 and was let go last year after 15 years on the mission.



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Decision 2012

GOP Courts Southern Support

BY DAVID ESPO AND BETH FOUHY  
Associated Press

BILOXI, Miss. — Republican presidential contenders and their super PAC supporters campaigned aggressively on land, through the mail and over the airwaves Monday on the eve of primaries in Alabama and Mississippi with the potential to solidify or shake Mitt Romney’s standing as front-runner.

In the Deep South, one of the most conservative regions of the country, Romney and his Republican rivals polished their credentials with attacks on President Barack Obama’s handling of the economy and the nation’s use of energy. “The dangers of carbon dioxide? Tell that to a plant, how dangerous carbon dioxide is,” said Rick Santorum.

But those criticisms were mere warm-up for the candidates going after each other. Gingrich is struggling for survival in Tuesday’s primaries, and Santorum is laboring to redeem his claim that Romney can’t secure the support of conservatives, particularly evangelicals who are part of the party’s key base.

“If the opportunity provides itself in an open convention, they’re not going to nominate a moderate Massachusetts governor who has been outspending his opponent 10-1 and can’t win the election outright,” Santorum said in a television interview as he campaigned across Alabama and Mississippi.

Romney countered, also on television. “We’re closing the deal, state by state, delegate by delegate,” he said, emphasizing his lead in the category that matters most.

He has more delegates than his rivals combined, and is amassing them at a rate that puts him on track to clinch control of nomination before the convention opens next summer, a prospect that his rivals prefer not to dwell on. AP’s tally shows him with 454 of the 1,144 delegates needed to win the nomination, Santorum with 217, Gingrich with 107 and Ron Paul with 47.

The Republican contenders pointed toward the next primaries as a pair of national polls indicated Obama’s support has fallen after recent gains. A *Washington Post*-ABC News poll found that 46 percent of those surveyed approve the way the president is handling his job, and 50 percent disapprove. A *New York Times*/CBS poll found 41 percent approval, and 47 percent disapproval.

Evangelical voters play an outsized role in both state primaries. Four years ago, 77 percent of GOP primary voters in Alabama and 69 percent in Mississippi said they were born again or evangelicals, a group that Romney has struggled



TIM ISBELL/BILOXI SUN HERALD/MCT  
**GOP presidential candidate Rick Santorum holds a piece of oil shale stating it was a means of getting oil produced in America during Gulf Coast Energy Summit in Biloxi, Miss., Monday.**

to bring to his side in the primaries. His best showing in a contested primary was 38 percent in Florida.

Hoping to establish a connection with Southerners, the former Massachusetts governor campaigned in Mobile, Ala., with comedian Jeff Foxworthy, whose trademark jokes that begin “You might be a redneck if...”

Romney isn’t — he was born in Michigan, educated at Harvard and elected governor of Massachusetts. And he drew laughter from his audience when he poked fun at himself by saying he hoped to go hunting with an Alabama friend who “can actually show me which end of the rifle to point.”

“We have a moral responsibility not to spend more than we take in,” he says in an ad his campaign ran in both primary states, although not all the commercials were as self-deprecating as his rhetoric or as positive as his on-air message.

Restore Our Future, a super PAC that supports Romney, aired ads critical of Santorum for having voted in Congress to provide federal funding for Planned Parenthood, and attacking Gingrich for supporting action to combat climate change through cleaner sources of energy.

A radio ad the group aired across both states

makes use of Santorum’s own voice, including him saying in a debate last month that he was proud of the earmarks he has supported and that he had voted for federal education mandates even though they are against his principles.

“But you know, when you’re part of the team, sometimes you take one for the team,” he says.

The same organization hit Santorum in mail sent to thousands of homes in Alabama.

“Rick Santorum voted with Hillary Clinton to allow felons to vote. Typical behavior from Washington insider,” says one mailing, which makes no mention of Romney.

Red, White and Blue Fund, which backs Santorum, was hardly kinder. It aired commercials saying that Romney and Obama “aren’t much different” on key issues such as federal spending and supporting a requirement for individuals to purchase health care coverage. That’s a reference to a Massachusetts law that Romney signed in his home state that bears similarities to the legislation Obama won from Congress.

Gingrich, who said over the weekend that Romney is the weakest Republican front-runner in nearly a century, is backed by a super PAC airing ads, as well.

Report: U.S. Brings New Trade Case Vs. China

BY JULIE PACE  
Associated Press

WASHINGTON — Aiming to level the playing field for U.S. companies, the Obama administration on Tuesday will bring a new trade case against China that seeks to pressure the rising economic power to end its export restrictions on key materials used to manufacture hybrid car batteries, flat-screen televisions and other high-tech goods.

Senior Obama administration officials said the U.S. will ask the World Trade Organization to facilitate talks with China over its curtailment of exports of rare earth minerals. The U.S. is bringing the case to the WTO along with the European Union and Japan, the officials said.

The fresh action is part of President Barack Obama’s broader effort to crack down on what his administration sees as unfair trading practices by China that have put American companies at a competitive disadvantage. Obama was to announce the

WTO action from White House Tuesday, according to the officials, who requested anonymity in order to speak ahead of the president.

China has a stranglehold on the global supply of 17 rare earth minerals that are essential for making high-tech goods, including hybrid cars, weapons, flat-screen TVs, mobile phones, mercury-vapor lights, smart phones and camera lenses. They also are used in the manufacture of tiny motors, such as those used to raise and lower car windows and in consumer electronics.

China has reduced its export quotas of these rare earth minerals over the past several years to cope with growing demand at home, though Chinese officials also site environmental concerns as the reason for the restrictions. U.S. industry officials suggest it is an unfair trade practice, against rules established by the WTO, a group that includes China as a member.

The senior administration officials said Beijing’s export restrictions give Chinese companies a

competitive advantage by providing them access to more of these rare materials at a cheaper price, while forcing U.S. companies to manage with a smaller, more costly supply.

With the U.S. economy slowing inched its way out of recession, Obama has sought to bring a renewed focus to Chinese policies that could hinder U.S. growth.

Obama used an executive order last month to create a new trade enforcement agency — the Interagency Trade Enforcement Center — to move aggressively against China and other nations. In announcing the new agency, Obama said it would bring “the full resources of the federal government to bear” in order to level the playing field for U.S. workers.

Under the terms of the WTO complaint, China has 10 days to re-

spond and must hold talks with the U.S., E.U. and Japan within 60 days. If an agreement cannot be reached within that time frame, the U.S. and its partners could request a formal WTO panel to investigate Chinese practices.


The WTO, the only global international organization dealing with the rules of trade between nations, has sided with the U.S. in previous trade disputes with China.

In 2009 the Obama administration imposed a three-year tariff, starting at 35 percent, on U.S. imports of low-grade Chinese tires. The tariff was approved after imports of those tires rose threefold to about 46 million tires between 2004 and 2008. Last year the WTO rejected an appeal from China and found that the United States acted consistently with its obligations in imposing the duties.

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*“Our Canteen Lady” by Sondra Jonson — one of the new 2012 RiverWalk sculptures.*