

Obama:

Oil Supply OK To Keep Squeeze On Iran

BY JULIE PACE AND BEN FELLER
Associated Press

Obama

significant matter in a time of high election-year gas prices at home.

Obama gave his OK after considering available reserves, increased oil production by some countries and global economic conditions. The White House emphasized that he would continue to keep an eye on the oil market to make sure that it — and its consumers —

could withstand shrinking purchases out of Iran.

With oil prices already rising this year amid rising tensions over the nuclear dispute between Iran and the West, U.S. officials have sought assurances that pushing countries to stop buying from Iran would not cause a further spike in prices.

It is not yet clear, at this stage of the process, how the sanctions could affect gas prices.

The U.S. sanctions are set to take effect on June 28. A European oil embargo, approved in January, starts in July.

Put together, Obama administration officials contend Iran is about to face its most severe economic pressure ever.

The United States imports no oil from Iran.

The main importers of Iranian oil that have not received exemptions from the U.S. are China, India, Turkey, South Africa and South Korea. The administration would be loath to hit

a close friend like South Korea or India, or a NATO ally like Turkey, with sanctions, and is working with those countries to reduce their imports.

Turkey announced Friday it was shrinking oil imports from Iran by 20 percent, apparently bowing to pressure from the United States and the sanctions threat.

U.S. officials hope ratcheting up economic pressure will both push Iran to abandon its nuclear program and convince Israel to give sanctions time to take hold before pursuing a military strike on Iran's nuclear facilities.

The U.S. and allies believe that Iran is pursuing a nuclear bomb; Iran denies that.

Obama's diplomatic squeeze on Iran comes with strong bipartisan support from Congress, which approved the sanctions plan as part of a defense bill in December.

Sen. Robert Menendez, D-N.J., who co-authored the sanctions legislation with Republican Sen. Mark Kirk of Illinois, said he welcomed Obama's support in targeting Iran's Central Bank.

"Today, we put on notice all nations that continue to import petroleum or petroleum products from Iran that they have three months to significantly reduce those purchases or risk the imposition of severe sanctions on their financial institutions," Menendez said.

He predicted most countries would cut their purchase of oil from Iran, either out of fear of sanctions or a shared fear over the Iran's pursuit of nuclear weaponry.

Old Photos May Be Deceptive In Florida Shooting Case

BY MATT SEDENSKY
Associated Press

WEST PALM BEACH, Fla. — When he was shot, Trayvon Martin was not the baby-faced boy in the photo that has been on front pages across the country. And George Zimmerman wasn't the beefy-looking figure in the widely published mugshot.

Both photos are a few years old and no longer entirely accurate.

Yet they may have helped shape initial public perceptions of the deadly shooting.

"When you have such a lopsided visual comparison, it just stands to reason that people would rush to judgment," said Kenny Irby, who teaches visual journalism at the Poynter Institute, a journalism think tank in St. Petersburg, Fla.

The most widely seen picture of Martin, released by his family, was evidently taken a few years ago and shows a smiling, round-cheeked youngster in a red T-shirt. But at his death, Martin was 17 years old, around 6 feet tall and, according to his family's attorney, about 140 pounds.

Zimmerman, 28, is best known from a 7-year-old booking photo of an apparently heavyst figure with an imposing stare, pierced ear and facial hair, the orange collar of his jail uniform visible. The picture, released by police following the deadly shooting, was taken after Zimmerman's 2005 arrest on an assault-on-an-officer charge that was eventually dropped.

In a police video made public this week of Zimmerman being brought in for questioning a half-hour after the shooting, the 5-foot-9 man appears much slimmer.

In a case that has caused a nationwide furor over race and the laws of self-defense, Martin was shot to death by Zimmerman in the city of Sanford on Feb. 26 as the unarmed black teenager was walking back from a convenience store.

Zimmerman, a neighborhood watch volunteer whose father is white and whose mother is Hispanic, has claimed self-defense, saying he opened fire after Martin punched him in the face, knocked

him to the ground and began slamming his head on the sidewalk.

Black leaders and others are demanding Zimmerman's arrest on murder or manslaughter charges, but state and federal authorities are still investigating.

Betsi Grabe, a professor at Indiana University-Bloomington who has studied the effect of news images on public opinion, said photos that gain the most traction play into the desires of both journalists

and the public for a story with a distinct victim and aggressor.

"At the center of most stories we tell in our society, cross-culturally and across the centuries, is the struggle between good and evil," she said. "If the ingredients are

there, that is what journalists will grab onto and present."

Grabe said it is natural to present the most innocent-looking image of the person believed to be the victim, and the most menacing one of the suspect.

A more complex portrait of the two figures has emerged since then. A photo of a beaming Zimmerman looking sharp in a jacket and tie has come out, along with a more recent picture of Martin, with gold teeth and a white sleeveless undershirt. At the same time, it was learned that Martin had been suspended from school for marijuana residue in his backpack.

"Everyone's views seem to be gyrating back and forth with each new scrap of evidence that comes out," said David O. Markus, a prominent Miami defense attorney. "This is why we have courts and juries, and why the process is slow. No one should rush to judgment."

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PETER HALEY/TACOMA NEWS TRIBUNE/MCT
An Afghan National Army soldier stands in a guard tower as American helicopters fly away from Combat Outpost Mizan in Zabol Province, Afghanistan, March 27, 2012.

Syria Clashes, Protests Complicate Peace Mission

BY ZEINA KARAM
Associated Press

BEIRUT — Clashes and protests broke out across many parts of Syria Friday, further complicating a peace mission by U.N. envoy Kofi Annan who urged the government to lay down its weapons first to immediately end the country's yearlong crisis.

As angry protesters lamented inaction by Arab countries, U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton tried to work out how to help the opposition in talks with Saudi Arabia, the biggest advocate for arming the rebels against President Bashar Assad.

Her visit comes ahead of a 60-nation weekend gathering of the so-called "Friends of the Syrian People" in Istanbul. The meeting is an effort to find ways to aid Syria's fractured opposition, which has been frustrated by the government's military gains on the ground. The U.S. is seeking to unify Syria's opposition movement and find ways to further isolate Assad's regime.

Assad accepted a peace plan brokered by Annan earlier this week and promised Thursday to "spare no effort" to make sure it succeeds. But he demanded that armed forces battling his regime commit to halting violence as well.

Underscoring the challenges, activists reported shifting clashes, some close to the capital Damascus, and others in the northern Idlib province, the restive central province of Homs and the country's east. The reported death toll ranged from 34 to 42.

Thousands of angry protesters emerged from mosques following Friday prayers nationwide calling for Assad's ouster and protesting resolutions adopted by Arab leaders at a summit the day before in Baghdad. The leaders called for talks between the government and the opposition — not for Assad to step down, which is the key opposition demand.

Obama Could Be In Bind On Gay Marriage

BURLINGTON, Vt. (AP) — President Barack Obama could be caught in an election-year bind on gay marriage, wedged between the pressure of supporters who want him to back same-sex marriage and the political perils of igniting an explosive social issue in the midst of the campaign.

Interviews with gay rights advocates and people close to Obama's campaign suggest it is no longer a matter of if, but when the president publicly voices his support. But Obama backers are split over whether that will happen before the November elections.

Gay marriage is already a big issue in a handful of states that have it on their ballots in November, including Maine, where Obama was headlining two fundraisers Friday. He was not expected to wade into the issue during his remarks.

The president also headlined fundraisers Friday in Vermont, one of six states, plus the District of Columbia, where gay marriage is legal. He did not mention the subject during his two appearances there.

Once an opponent of gay marriage, Obama declared in 2010 that his personal views on the subject were "evolving." He has gone no further in public since then.

On The Run, Bin Laden Lived In 5 Safe Houses

ISLAMABAD (AP) — Osama bin Laden lived in five safe houses while on the run in Pakistan and fathered four children — two of them born in government hospitals, his youngest widow has told investigators.

The details of bin Laden's life as a fugitive in Pakistan are contained in the interrogation report of Amal Ahmed Abdel-Fatah al-Sada, bin Laden's 30-year-old Yemeni widow. They appear to raise fresh questions over how bin Laden was able to remain undetected for so long in Pakistan after the Sept. 11, 2001 attacks, despite being the subject of a massive international manhunt.

Details from the report were first published by the Pakistani newspaper Dawn.

The Associated Press obtained a copy on Friday.

Al-Sada is currently in Pakistani custody, along with bin Laden's two other wives and several children. They were arrested after the U.S. raid that killed bin Laden in May in his final hideout in the Pakistani army town of Abbottabad. The U.S. Navy SEALs shot her in the leg during the operation.

Aung San Suu Kyi Determined To Win Seat

YANGON, Myanmar (AP) — Opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi said Friday that Myanmar's landmark weekend elections will be neither free nor fair because of widespread irregularities, but vowed to continue her candidacy for the sake of the long-repressed nation.

Suu Kyi said opposition candidates had been targeted in stone-throwing incidents, campaign posters vandalized and members of her party intimidated during the run-up to Sunday's closely-watched parliamentary by-elections.

During a news conference on the lawn of her crumbling lakeside residence in Yangon, the 66-year-old Nobel Peace Prize laureate said government officials were involved in some of the irregularities and that they go "beyond what is acceptable for democratic elections."

Jump In Consumer Spending Brightens Outlook

WASHINGTON (AP) — U.S. consumers boosted their spending in February by the most in seven months, raising expectations for stronger growth at the start of the year.

Americans spent more even as their income barely grew. To make up the difference, many saved less.

Consumer spending rose 0.8 percent last month, the Commerce Department said Friday. The biggest increase since July coincided with the best three-month hiring stretch in two years.

The jump in consumer spending helped Wall Street close out its best first quarter since 1998. More spending also led economists to upwardly revise their economic growth estimates for the January-March quarter.

Paul Dales, an economist at Capital Economics, now expects annual growth for the first quarter to be around 2.5 percent, compared with earlier estimates of about 2 percent. Consumer spending drives roughly 70 percent of economic activity.

Some of the higher spending last month reflected surging gas prices. But consumers spent more on other goods and services, too. After excluding inflation, which was due mainly to gas prices, spending rose a solid 0.5 percent.

Many Americans are spending more freely after the economy added an average of 245,000 jobs a month from December through February. That's lowered the unemployment rate to 8.3 percent, the lowest in three years. Most economists expect similar job growth in March.

Still, the hiring gains have not resulted in bigger paychecks for most people. Income grew just 0.2 percent last month, matching January's weak increase. And when taking inflation into account, income after taxes fell for a second straight month.

Most consumers spent more of what they earned. The saving rate dropped to 3.7 percent of after-tax income in February. That was the lowest level since August 2009 and a full percentage point lower than all of last year.

That's a Wrap!
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