

Tuesday Begins Conclave To Elect Next Pope

VATICAN CITY (AP) — Cardinals have set Tuesday as the start date for the conclave to elect the next pope, a milestone in this unusual papal transition and an indication that even without an obvious front-runner, the cardinals have a fairly good idea of who best among them can lead the Catholic Church and tackle its many problems.

The conclave date was set on Friday afternoon during a vote by the College of Cardinals who have been meeting all week to discuss the church's problems and priorities and the qualities a new pope must possess.

Tuesday will begin with a morning Mass in St. Peter's Basilica, followed by a solemn procession into the Sistine Chapel and the first round of secret balloting in the afternoon.

Only one vote is held the first afternoon. If black smoke is sent snaking out of the chapel chimney to indicate there is no immediate victor, the cardinals will retire for the day. They will return Wednesday for two rounds of balloting in the morning, two rounds in the afternoon until a pope has been chosen.

In the past 100 years, no conclave has lasted longer than five days.

Funeral Held For Venezuela's Chavez

CARACAS, Venezuela (AP) — President Hugo Chavez was lauded as a modern-day reincarnation of Latin American liberator Simon Bolivar and a disciple of Cuba's Fidel Castro at a fiery, foot-stomping state funeral on Friday that at times smacked of a political rally as presidents, princes and left-wing glitterati looked on.

Chavez's hand-picked successor, Nicolas Maduro, emotionally eulogized the fallen leader at the military academy where the funeral was held, his voice booming over Chavez's flag-draped casket as he pledged eternal loyalty.

"Here we are, Comandante, your men, on their feet," Maduro shouted, government officials rising behind him. "All your men and women ... loyal until beyond death."

"Chavez Lives!" he declared. "Mission Accomplished!"

But all was not peace and harmony in a country deeply divided by Chavez's 14 years in power. The opposition coalition announced it would boycott Maduro's swearing-in later Friday, calling it unconstitutional. The dispute foreshadows a bitter presidential campaign to come, with elections mandated within 30 days of Chavez's death.

Bin Laden Spokesman Pleads Not Guilty

NEW YORK (AP) — A senior al-Qaida leader and son-in-law of Osama bin Laden, captured in Jordan a week ago, pleaded not guilty Friday in a heavily secured New York courtroom to plotting against Americans before and immediately after the Sept. 11 attacks in his role as the terror network's top spokesman.

Bearded and balding, Sulaiman Abu Ghaith was escorted into the largest courtroom at the federal courthouse in Manhattan, where he entered the plea through a lawyer to one count of conspiracy to kill Americans in a case that marks a legal victory for President Barack Obama's administration.

Assistant U.S. Attorney John P. Cronan revealed that Abu Ghaith gave an "extensive post-arrest statement" that totaled 22 pages after he was arrested overseas the night of Feb. 28 and arrived in the U.S. March 1. The prosecutor said nothing about the contents of Abu Ghaith's statement.

A law enforcement official with knowledge of the case said Abu Ghaith initially agreed to be interviewed without an attorney at the FBI office in lower Manhattan immediately after his arrival. Later in the day, he requested an attorney and was interviewed with an attorney present. The official spoke on condition of anonymity because he was not authorized to talk about the case.

Police Spread Strikes Around Egypt

CAIRO (AP) — Strikes by Egyptian security forces spread swiftly around the country Friday, as police walked off the job or took to the streets, angry at being blamed for crackdowns on protests against the Islamist president and accusing his Muslim Brotherhood of trying to control them.

The wave of police discontent adds a new layer to Egypt's turmoil and political breakdown. In a sign of the disarray, a powerful hard-line Islamist group said its members would now take over policing a southern province because most security forces in the province were on strike.

The top security official in Assiut province, Gen. Aboul-Kassem Deif, said the announcement by Gamaa Islamiya — a group that in the 1990s waged an armed Islamic militant uprising but in the past two years entered politics — was illegal. But he seemed to acknowledge he could not stop it.

"I don't know what to do," he told The Associated Press.

Strikes by policemen and riot police were reported in at least 10 of Egypt's 29 provinces, including at several stations in the capital, Cairo. Even as some police went on strike, others were clashing with protesters in Cairo, the Mediterranean city of Alexandria and the Nile Delta industrial city of Mahalla el-Kubra. Dozens injured in the fighting, according to security officials and witnesses.

Job Gains Cut Unemployment To 4-Year Low

BY CHRISTOPHER S. RUGABER
 AP Economics Writer

WASHINGTON — The American job market isn't just growing. It's accelerating.

Employers added 236,000 jobs in February and drove down the unemployment rate to 7.7 percent, its lowest level in more than four years. The gains signal that companies are confident enough in the economy to intensify hiring even in the face of tax increases and government spending cuts.

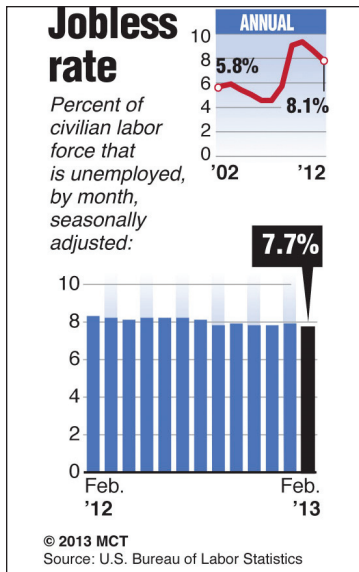
Last month capped a fourth-month hiring spree in which employers have added an average of 205,000 jobs a month. The hiring has been fueled by steady improvement in housing, auto sales, manufacturing and corporate profits, along with record-low borrowing rates.

Before the spree, employers added an average of 154,000 jobs from July through October and only 108,000 from April through June.

"The recovery is gathering momentum," Paul Ashworth, an economist at Capital Economics, said in a note to clients.

The gains could boost consumer spending, adding momentum to the U.S. recovery and helping troubled economies in Europe and Asia.

The U.S. economy is forecast to



grow a modest 2 percent this year. Growth will likely be held back by uncertainty about the federal budget, higher Social Security taxes and across-the-board government spending cuts that kicked in March 1. And unemployment remains high nearly four years after the end of the Great Recession. Roughly 12 million people remain out of work.

The unemployment rate declined in February from 7.9 percent in January mostly because more people found work. Another factor was that 130,000 people without

jobs stopped looking for work last month. The government doesn't count them as unemployed.

The last time unemployment was lower was December 2008, when it was 7.3 percent.

The unemployment rate is calculated from a survey of households. The number of jobs gained is derived from a separate survey of employers.

Hiring would be rising even faster if governments weren't shrinking their workforces, as they have been for nearly four years. Governments cut 10,000 jobs in February.

Some \$44 billion in spending cuts kicked in last week after Congress failed to reach a budget deal. The cuts are expected to shave about a half-point from economic growth this year and lower total hiring by about 30,000 jobs a month from April through September, according to Moody's Analytics.

And most workers have had to absorb higher Social Security taxes this year. Someone earning \$50,000 has about \$1,000 less to spend in 2013. A household with two high-paid workers has up to \$4,500 less.

Stock prices rose after the report was released and strengthened later in the day. The Dow Jones industrial average rose 67 points to 14,397, its fourth straight record close.

Robust auto sales and a steady housing recovery are spurring more hiring, which will trigger more consumer spending and could lead to stronger economic growth. The construction industry added 48,000 jobs in February; it's added 151,000 since September. Manufacturing gained 14,000 jobs last month and 39,000 since November.

Among industry categories, the biggest job growth in February was in professional and business services, which added 73,000. This category includes higher-paying jobs in accounting, engineering and information technology as well as temporary positions that typically pay less.

Retailers added 24,000 jobs. Education and health services gained 24,000. And the information industry, which includes publishing, telecommunications and film, added 20,000, mostly in the movie industry.

The economy is generating more higher-paying jobs. That trend is raising average pay, which will help offset the hit that Americans took from higher Social Security taxes and gas prices.

Hourly wages rose 4 cents to \$23.82 last month. Wages have risen 2.1 percent over the past year, slightly ahead of inflation. Higher pay is vital to the economy because consumer spending drives 70 percent of economic activity.

Airline CEO Opposes TSA Policy On Knives

BY JOAN LOWY AND JOSHUA FREED
 Associated Press

WASHINGTON — The head of Delta Air Lines on Friday joined the growing opposition to the Transportation Security Administration's new policy allowing passengers to carry small knives onto planes.

Delta CEO Richard Anderson said in a letter to TSA Administrator John Pistole that he shares the "legitimate concerns" of the airline's flight attendants about the new policy.

Allowing small knives to be carried on board after a ban of more than 11 years "will add little value to the customer security process flow in relation to the additional risk for our cabin staff and customers," Anderson said in the letter, which was obtained by The Associated Press.

"If the purpose is to increase security checkpoint flow, there are much more effective steps we can take together to streamline the security checkpoints with risk-based screening mechanisms," he said.

Delta, based in Atlanta, is the world's second-largest airline. It is the first major airline to join not only flight attendants but pilots, federal air marshals and insurance companies in a burgeoning backlash to the policy. Pistole announced the policy on Tuesday.

Airlines for America, a trade association representing major U.S. airlines, has been supportive of TSA without explicitly endorsing the policy.

"We support the TSA's approach of combining its vast experience with billions of passenger screenings with thorough risk-based assessments," Jean Medina, a spokeswoman for the associa-

tion, said in response to a request Friday for the association's position.

Anderson cited only small knives in his letter. The policy, which goes into effect April 25, will also allow passengers to include in their carry-on luggage novelty-size baseball bats less than 24 inches long, toy plastic bats, billiard cues, ski poles, hockey sticks, lacrosse sticks and two golf clubs. Items like box cutters and razor blades are still prohibited.

Knives permitted under the policy must be able to fold up and have blades that are 2.36 inches or less in length and are less than 1/2-inch wide. The policy is aimed at allowing passengers to carry pen knives, corkscrews with small blades and other small knives.

There has been a gradual eas-

ing of some of the security measures applied to airline passengers after the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks. The new policy conforms U.S. security standards to international standards and allows the TSA to concentrate its energies on more serious safety threats, the agency said when it announced the change this week.

The policy change was based on a recommendation from an internal TSA working group, which decided the items represented no real danger, the agency has said.

TSA has said the presence on flights of gun-carrying pilots traveling as passengers, federal air marshals and airline crew members trained in self-defense provide additional layers of security to protect against misuse of the newly allowed items.

Not all flights, however, have federal air marshals or armed pilots onboard.

The Flight Attendants Union Coalition, representing nearly 90,000 flight attendants, said Thursday it is coordinating a nationwide legislative and public education campaign to reverse the policy. A petition posted by the flight attendants on the White House's "We the People" website had nearly 12,000 signatures late Friday urging the administration to tell the TSA to keep knives off planes.

"The continued ban on dangerous objects is an integral layer in aviation security and must remain in place," the coalition, which is made up of five unions, said in a statement.

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