

### Syrian Rebel Chief Says They Won't Give Up

BEIRUT (AP) — The chief of Syria's main, Western-backed rebel group marked the second anniversary of the start of the uprising against President Bashar Assad on Friday by pledging to fight until the "criminal" regime is gone.

Gen. Salim Idris, the head of the Supreme Military Council, called on Syrian soldiers to join the rebels in a "fight for freedom and democracy," and said: "Dear friends, the Free Syrian Army (fighters) will not give up."

In Damascus, authorities beefed up security measures as rebel groups called for stepped-up attacks on government troops and state institutions on the anniversary.

The revolt against Assad's authoritarian rule began in March 2011 with protests in the southern city of Daraa, after troops arrested teenagers who scrawled anti-regime graffiti on a wall. It has since morphed into a civil war that has killed an estimated 70,000 people, according to the U.N.

"We want (a) Syria where every Syrian can live in peace and liberty. This is our dream. This is what we are fighting for," Idris said in a video address obtained by The Associated Press from the military council's media office.

### Hugo Chavez's Coffin Parades Past Slums

CARACAS, Venezuela (AP) — The road from the military academy where Hugo Chavez's body has been lying in state to the hilltop museum where he'll be displayed indefinitely is lined with some of the most dangerous slums on the planet. It runs under bridges in dire need of repair and past grocery stores with no groceries.

Tens of thousands of Venezuelans gathered along that route Friday to watch the late president's body cross the city in yet another choreographed show designed to keep Chavez supporters in thrall, at least until an April 14 election scheduled to replace him. Afterward, people will have to go on living with the problems that Chavez left behind.

This tense, relentlessly gray capital embodies many of Venezuela's problems, with crumbling apartment towers and food lines often sharing the same sidewalk with cheering crowds eager to greet their departed Comandante.

"More than anything, the government continues fighting with everyone, and does everything badly," said Francisco Olivero, a 54-year-old carpenter who lives with his wife and five children in the poor neighborhood of Catia, just blocks from the funeral route.

Like many Venezuelans, Olivero said wartime-levels of street violence all over the city were his top worry.

### Maryland Lawmakers Approve Death Penalty Ban

ANNAPOLIS, Md. (AP) — Maryland lawmakers approved a measure abolishing the death penalty on Friday, and the bill is expected to be signed by the Democratic governor who has long pushed for banning capital punishment in the state.

If the measure is signed by Gov. Martin O'Malley, it will make Maryland the 18th state in the nation to do away with the death penalty.

A repeal bill won final passage from the House of Delegates on Friday. It already had been approved by the Senate.

The House advanced the legislation this week after delegates rejected nearly 20 amendments, mostly from Republicans, aimed at keeping capital punishment for the most heinous crimes.

If passed, life without the possibility of parole would be the most severe sentence in the state.

### Clergy Abuse Victims Want Pope To Take Action

LOS ANGELES (AP) — Most Roman Catholics are rejoicing at the election of Pope Francis, but alleged victims of clergy abuse in the U.S. are demanding swift and bold actions from the new Jesuit pontiff: Defrock all molester priests and the cardinals who covered up for them, formally apologize, and release all confidential church files.

Adding to their distrust are several multimillion dollar settlements the Jesuits paid out in recent years, including \$166 million to more than 450 Native Alaskan and Native American abuse victims in 2011 for molestation at Jesuit-run schools across the Pacific Northwest. The settlement bankrupted the Oregon Province of the Society of Jesus. The order also paid \$14 million to settle nine California cases.

"I would like to see this pope stand up and say to those cardinals, 'You need to square this away and change everything that was covered up,'" said Ken Smolka, a 70-year-old retired actor who claimed in a lawsuit he was abused as a teen by a Jesuit priest. "You need to get them on their knees, and let them spend the rest of their lives on their knees praying for the victims."

### Obama Pushes For Clean-Energy Research

LEMONT, Ill. (AP) — Envisioning cars that can go "coast to coast without using a drop of oil," President Barack Obama on Friday urged Congress to authorize spending \$2 billion over the next decade to expand research into electric cars and biofuels to wean automobiles off gasoline.

Obama, expanding on an initiative he addressed in his State of the Union speech last month, said the United States must shift its cars and trucks entirely off oil to avoid perpetual fluctuations in gas prices. Citing policies that already require automakers to increase gas mileage, he said he expects that by the middle of the next decade, Americans will only have to fill up their cars half as often.

"We've set some achievable but ambitious goals," Obama said, speaking at Argonne National Laboratory outside Chicago.

"The only way to break this cycle of spiking gas prices — the only way to break that cycle for good — is to shift our cars entirely, our cars and trucks, off oil," the president said.

Friday's speech, with its focus on energy, was designed to draw attention to what the White House says is one of Obama's top agenda items for his second term. That focus, however, has been overshadowed as the administration and Congress work on an immigration overhaul, gun legislation and deficit-reduction measures.

### Pentagon To Beef Up Missile Defense System

WASHINGTON (AP) — The Pentagon announced Friday it will spend \$1 billion to add 14 interceptors to a West Coast-based missile defense system, responding to what it called faster-than-anticipated North Korean progress on nuclear weapons and missiles.

In announcing the decision, Defense Secretary Chuck Hagel said he is determined to ensure protection of the U.S. homeland and stay ahead of the North Korean missile threat. He acknowledged that the interceptors already in place to defend against potential North Korean missile launches have had poor test performances.

# GOP Senator Shifts On Gay Marriage

BY CHARLES BABINGTON AND ANN SANNER  
Associated Press



Portman

WASHINGTON — A Republican senator's embrace of gay marriage is the latest sign of soul-searching in a party struggling to adapt in a society whose demographics — and views on emotional issues — are changing fast.

Gay marriage still divides the party, with the conservative wing strongly opposed. But an increasing number of Republicans, now including Sen. Rob Portman of Ohio, are reversing course. Many others simply downplay the subject.

With the issue of immigration also shifting rapidly under Republicans' feet, they seem increasingly focused — and united — on one overarching goal: keeping income taxes from rising. Their solidarity on that issue is hindering President Barack Obama's efforts to make higher tax revenue part of a compromise approach to deficit spending and expensive social programs.

These trends raise the possibility that the GOP — reeling after losing the popular vote in five of the last six presidential elections — will lessen its identity with hot-button social issues and sharpen its emphasis on tax and spending matters.

Portman announced Friday that he now supports gay marriage, linking his stand to learning that one of his sons is gay.

A former U.S. trade representative and White House budget chief, Portman is seen as one of the party's most knowledgeable and effective leaders. Mitt Romney considered him to be his running mate last year. Portman says he told Romney of his son Will's sexuality but does not believe it affected Romney's decision.

As a U.S. House member in 1996, Portman supported the Defense of Marriage Act, or DOMA. It defines marriage as between a man and a woman and bars federal recognition of same-sex marriage.

Portman's reversal makes him the only Senate Republican to openly back gay marriage.

"I have come to believe that if two people are prepared to make a lifetime commitment to love and care for each other in good times and in bad, the government shouldn't deny them the opportunity to get married," Portman wrote in an op-ed article in *The Columbus Dispatch*.

He said he had talked to his pastor and others, including Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell, R-Ky., who opposes gay marriage, and

to former Vice President Dick Cheney, who supports it.

Cheney, whose younger daughter is a lesbian, became arguably the best-known Republican to embrace gay marriage with his announcement in June 2009.

Portman said his previous views on marriage were rooted in his Methodist faith.

However, he wrote, "Ultimately, for me, it came down to the Bible's overarching themes of love and compassion and my belief that we are all children of God."

Despite his party's struggles with Americans' increasing acceptance of gay rights, many GOP leaders met Portman's news with silence or a shrug.

A spokesman for House Speaker John Boehner, who shares Portman's Cincinnati background, said the senator "is a great friend and ally, and the speaker respects his position, but the speaker continues to believe that marriage is between a man and a woman."

In January, Boehner chastised the Obama administration for dropping its legal defense of the Defense of Marriage Act, which the Supreme Court is to consider this month. Boehner authorized the continued use of public funds to defend the law in courts.

Boehner's latest comments reflect the change among many mainstream Republicans, who now deal with gay marriage in largely unemotional, legalistic terms rather than emotional terms about sin and God's will.

Congress now has several openly gay members, including a senator, Wisconsin Democrat Tammy Baldwin.

At the U.S. House, which was in session Friday, several conservatives had little or nothing to say about Portman's announcement.

Gay marriage "is not the most front-burner issue," said Rep. James Lankford, R-Okla. "We still have the same legal issues we've always had with the Defense of Marriage Act," which he supports, he said.

Citing Obama's position, he said, "It's more a separation of powers issue than it is anything else." Lankford said other Republicans have supported same-sex marriage, so "this is not anything new."

In another legal matter — California's ban on same-sex marriage — all 21 state attorneys general who have signed legal briefs or letters urg-

ing the Supreme Court to uphold the law are Republican.

White House spokesman Josh Earnest said Friday: "What is clear is that we are witnessing a pretty significant sociological shift in this country."

"It's happening right before our eyes in a way that says a lot about our country, that we have a country where we prioritize equality and fairness," he said.

Obama said last year he personally supports gay marriage, a step some liberals called overdue.

Polls show that public opinions on gay rights, including same-sex marriage, have shifted perhaps more rapidly than on any other major issue in recent times. In Gallup polling last November, 53 percent of adult Americans said same-sex marriages should be granted the same status as traditional marriages, while 46 percent felt they should not be valid.

Those figures were nearly reversed two years earlier. In 1996, when Gallup first asked about gay marriages, 27 percent felt they should be valid.

Many social and religious conservatives still oppose gay marriage. Some spoke up at the Conservative Political Action Conference, which was under way Friday in suburban Washington.

Randy Smith, a technology entrepreneur from California, said Portman's decision violates key conservative principles.

"Conservative values are based on God's word," Smith said. "If he is professing to be a Christian, I'd have no part of him."

Arne Owens, a "pro-family movement" activist from Virginia, said Portman's shift "does make it harder to maintain support for traditional marriage. There's no question about that."

John Radell, head of the Faith and Freedom Coalition of Delaware, said Portman's personal situation was difficult, "but that doesn't mean you stray from your faith."

"I understand loving your son," he said. "But Sen. Portman represents more than his son."

Radell said that "without question" Portman's shift would make his political future — particularly any presidential aspirations — more difficult.

Curt Steiner, an Ohio GOP consultant who helped run Portman's first House campaign in 1993, disagreed.

# Business, Labor Still At Odds On Temporary Workers

BY ERICA WERNER  
Associated Press

WASHINGTON — The Chamber of Commerce's lead immigration negotiator said Friday he's hoping for a deal soon with the AFL-CIO on a new temporary worker program, but the sides are still apart on important details.

The issue has emerged as perhaps the toughest obstacle to completion of comprehensive immigration legislation taking shape on Capitol Hill. Senators working on the bill gave the Chamber and the AFL-CIO the job of helping negotiate an agreement on the temporary worker issue.

Randy Johnson, the chamber's senior vice president for labor, immigration and employee benefits, told reporters at a briefing that points of contention include wages and the overall number of visas in the new program. He said the chamber sought 400,000 new visas for temporary workers while the AFL-CIO's opening number was much lower, in the low five figures.

Johnson said much of the negotiating work has now been kicked up to Sens. Charles Schumer, D-N.Y., Lindsey Graham, R-S.C., and others in the bipartisan Gang of Eight, which is trying to complete a bill in time to release it once Congress returns from a two-week recess in early April. In addition to the temporary worker issue, the bill would aim to secure the border, strengthen workplace enforcement and provide an eventual path to citizenship for the estimated 11 million illegal immigrants in the U.S.

"Having been through this I wouldn't say it's taking longer than

expected, but it's been difficult," Johnson said of talks with labor. "The next week-and-a-half will tell the tale."

Andrea Zuniga DiBitetto, legislative representative for the AFL-CIO, said the labor group remains "absolutely committed, we are committed to working on comprehensive immigration reform, committed to citizenship and committed to honoring our agreement to come to agreement with the chamber."

The question of temporary workers has traditionally produced a stark divide between business and labor, with business seeking a large, low-cost supply of workers, and labor opposed to any guest-worker program that could threaten American laborers and produce questionable working conditions.

The issue contributed to the failure of the last serious attempt at immigration reform in 2007, and Schumer and Graham sought to head off such an outcome this time around by asking Chamber President Tom Donohue and AFL-CIO President Richard Trumka to work together.

The talks have progressed in fits and starts. Last month the two sides agreed on broad principles, which was more progress than in the past but no guarantee of a final deal.

Current programs for temporary workers in the U.S. are woefully inadequate to meet demand, business leaders say. There is a

small visa program for seasonal, short-term, low-skilled workers but it only offers 66,000 visas a year. Meanwhile there are numerous industries — hotels, construction and nursing homes among them — that operate year-round and have labor shortages but no good way to sign on foreign workers. These industries and others end up employing large numbers of illegal workers.

The new visa program the chamber and AFL-CIO envision would fill that void. Separately, Senate negotiators are working on programs for high-tech and agricultural workers.

Johnson said workers coming in on the new lower-skilled visa program would not be tied to one employer, as short-term-worker visa holders now are, but would be able to move from one job to another. That's seen as an important detail for the workability of such a

program. The cap on the number of visas would also fluctuate according to demand.

Other unresolved details in the business-labor negotiations include the legal status of the workers coming in on the new visas. The AFL-CIO says all the workers should be able to petition for permanent resident visas that would allow them eventual citizenship, but the chamber says not all of the workers may be eligible for permanent residency.

The chamber and AFL also have agreed to create a new federal bureau to inform Congress and the public about labor supply issues, but the role of that entity remains unclear. The AFL-CIO had pushed for a commission with authority to determine labor market needs, while the chamber has argued that businesses themselves were best suited to make such determinations.