

# 'Obamacare' Anniversary Finds Two Americas

BY RICARDO ALONSO-ZALDIVAR  
Associated Press

WASHINGTON — Three years, two elections, and one Supreme Court decision after President Barack Obama signed the Affordable Care Act, its promise of health care for the uninsured may be delayed or undercut in much of the country because of entrenched opposition from many Republican state leaders.

In half the states, mainly led by Democrats, officials are racing deadlines to connect uninsured residents to coverage now only months away. In others it's as if "Obamacare" — signed Mar. 23, 2010 — had never passed.

Make no mistake, the federal government will step in and create new insurance markets in the 26 mostly red states declining to run their own. Just like the state-run markets in mostly Democratic-led states, the feds will start signing up customers Oct. 1 for coverage effective Jan. 1. But they need a broad cross-section of people, or else the pool will be stuck with what the government calls the "sick and worried" — the costliest patients.

Insurance markets, or exchanges, are one prong of Obama's law, providing subsidized private coverage for middle-class households who currently can't get their own. The other major piece is a Medicaid expansion to serve more low-income people. And at least 13 states have already indicated they will not agree to that.

"It could look like two or three different coun-

tries," said Robert Blendon, a Harvard School of Public Health professor who studies public opinion on health care. "The political culture of a state is going to play an important role in getting millions of people to voluntarily sign up."

Civic leadership — from governors, legislators, mayors and business and religious groups — is shaping up as a huge factor in the launch of Obama's plan, particularly since the penalty for ignoring the law's requirement to get coverage is as low as \$95 the first year.

People-to-people contacts will be key, and the potential for patchwork results is real.

"Obviously it's a possibility in terms of there being some real difficulties," said Sen. Bob Casey, D-Pa., whose efforts helped pass the law. Casey also said he believes the Obama administration will be ready to lead in states holding back.

Disparities already are cropping up. Town Meeting Day — the first Tuesday in March — is a storied tradition in Vermont, and this year it provided a platform to educate residents about their options under the health care law. As many as 250,000 may eventually get coverage through Vermont Health Connect, as the state's marketplace is known.

"Even before we were a state, these town meetings existed," said Sean Sheehan, director of education and outreach. "It's a way people come together as a community, and we are counting on those community connections to get the word out." The health care plan was on the agenda at about 100 town meetings, and other local gather-

ings are taking place.

Texas residents are entitled to the same benefits as Vermonters, but in the state with the highest proportion of its population uninsured, Gov. Rick Perry will not be promoting the federal insurance exchange, a spokeswoman said. Nor does Perry plan to expand Medicaid.

The result is a communications void that civic and political groups, mayors, insurers and hospitals will try to fill.

"You have people who aren't really charged up about it because they don't even know that they would qualify," said Durrell Douglas, spokesman for the Texas Organizing Project, an activist group. A national poll this week by the nonpartisan Kaiser Family Foundation found that two of every three uninsured people don't know enough about the law to understand how it will affect them.

Supporters of Obama's law in Texas say the federal government hasn't shown up yet to launch the state's insurance exchange and no one is sure when that will happen.

"It is a much bigger lift here," said Anne Dunkelberg, associate director of the Austin-based Center for Public Policy Priorities, which advocates for low-income people. "The sooner the federal exchange can get engaged and working with all the folks here who want to promote enrollment, the better."

The Congressional Budget Office predicts a slow start overall, with only 7 million gaining coverage through the exchanges next year, rising to 24 million in 2016.

# 'Peace Is Possible,' Obama Insists In Middle East

BY JULIE PACE  
AP White House Correspondent

JERUSALEM — Insisting "peace is possible," President Barack Obama on Thursday prodded both Israelis and Palestinians to return to long-stalled negotiations with few, if any, pre-conditions, softening his earlier demands that Israel stop building settlements in disputed territory.

The president made his appeal just hours after rockets fired from Hamas-controlled Gaza landed in a southern Israeli border town, a fresh reminder of the severe security risks and tensions that have stymied peace efforts for decades.

Obama, on his second day in the Middle East, shuttled between Jerusalem and Ramallah, reaching out to the public as well as political leaders. He offered no new policies or plans for reopening peace talks but urged both sides to "think anew" about the intractable conflict and break out of the "formulas and habits that have blocked progress for so long."

"Peace is possible," Obama declared during an impassioned speech to young people in Jerusalem. "I'm not saying it's guaranteed. I can't even say that it is more likely than not. But it is possible."

The deep disputes dividing the Israelis and Palestinians have remained much the same over the years, and include deciding the status of Jerusalem, defining borders and resolving refugee issues. Palestinians have been particularly incensed over Israeli settlements in disputed territories, and the Israelis' continued construction has also drawn the condemnation of the United States and other nations.

Further settlement activity is "counterproductive to the cause of peace," Obama said. But in a notable shift, he did not repeat his administration's previous demands that Israel halt construction. Instead he urged the Palestinians to stop using the disagreement as an "excuse" to avoid talks.



MUATH HAMED/AA/ABACA PRESS/MCT  
U.S. President Barack Obama is welcomed by Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas, as he arrives in Ramallah, West Bank, on Thursday.

"If the expectation is that we can only have direct negotiations when everything is settled ahead of time, then there is no point for negotiations," Obama said during a joint news conference with Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas in Ramallah. "I think it is important to work through this process even if there are irritants on both sides."

Abbas said Palestinians remain committed to seeking peace with Israelis, but he made clear that settlement construction had made his people distrustful of Is-

rael's intentions.

"This is very dangerous that people and the new generation reaches the conviction that it's no more possible to believe in the two-state solution," he said.

Obama has sided with the Palestinians on the settlement issue during his first four years in office. However, when Israel reluctantly declared a 10-month moratorium on construction, the Palestinians balked at returning to negotiations until shortly before the suspension expired and talks foundered shortly thereafter.

## Syrian Bombing Kills Top Pro-Assad Preacher

BEIRUT (AP) — A suicide bombing tore through a mosque in the Syrian capital Thursday, killing a top Sunni Muslim preacher and longtime supporter of President Bashar Assad along with at least 41 other people.

The assassination of Sheikh Mohammad Said Ramadan al-Buti removes one of the few remaining pillars of support for the Alawite leader among the majority sect that has risen up against him.

The powerful explosion struck as al-Buti, an 84-year-old cleric and religious scholar who appeared often on TV, was giving a religious lesson in the Eman Mosque in the central Mazraa district of Damascus, according to state TV.

Suicide bombings blamed on Islamic extremists fighting with the rebels have become common in Syria's 2-year-old civil war. But Thursday's explosion marked the first time a suicide bomber detonated his explosives inside a mosque.

Syrian TV said 84 people were wounded in the explosion and showed footage of wounded people and bodies with severed limbs on the blood-stained floor and later, bodies covered in white body bags lined up in rows. Sirens wailed through the capital as ambulances rushed to the scene of the explosion, which was sealed off by the military.

## Gun Control Advocates Want Expanded Checks

WASHINGTON (AP) — Gun control advocates are pressing Democrats to make expanded federal background checks for firearms buyers a cornerstone of the gun control legislation the Senate plans to debate next month, calling it the best way for lawmakers to salvage a meaningful response to December's elementary school massacre in Newtown, Conn.

Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid, D-Nev., is widely expected to include a broadening of the background system in the overall gun legislation, say Senate aides and lobbyists who spoke on condition of anonymity to describe internal Democratic deliberations.

They caution he has yet to make a final decision as he waits to see if senators can strike a bipartisan deal on the proposal. If they don't, he will have to calculate whether to introduce a more modest overall gun bill without background checks or dare Republicans to scuttle a bolder one that includes the expanded system.

Background checks are designed to keep guns from criminals, people with serious mental problems and others. The checks are currently required only for sales involving federally licensed gun dealers, not for private transactions at gun shows or online.

President Barack Obama and other supporters say the system helps keep dangerous people from getting guns and should be expanded to virtually all firearms transactions. The National Rifle Association and other opponents say the checks are easily avoided by criminals who get their weapons illegally, and say expanding them would be a step toward a government registry of firearms owners — which is forbidden by federal law.

## House Passes Budget Plan Promising Cuts

WASHINGTON (AP) — The Republican-controlled House passed a tea party-flavored budget plan Thursday that promises sharp cuts in safety-net programs for the poor and a clampdown on domestic agencies, in sharp contrast to less austere plans favored by President Barack Obama and his Democratic allies.

The measure, similar to previous plans offered by Budget Committee Chairman Paul Ryan, R-Wis., demonstrates that it's possible, at least mathematically, to balance the budget within a decade without raising taxes.

But its deep cuts to programs for the poor like Medicaid and food stamps and its promise to abolish so-called "Obamacare" are non-starters with the president, who won re-election while campaigning against Ryan's prior budgets. It passed on a mostly party-line 221-207 vote.

The House measure advanced as the Democratic Senate debated its first budget since the 2009 plan that helped Obama pass his health care law.

The dueling House and Senate budget plans are anchored on opposite ends of the ideological spectrum in Washington, appealing to core partisans in the warring parties that are gridlocked over persistent budget deficits. Obama is exploring the chances of forging a middle path that blends new taxes and modest curbs to government benefit programs.

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