

### Syrian Rebels In Strategic Battle For Region

BEIRUT (AP) — Capitalizing on a recent influx of weapons, Syrian rebels are waging a strategic battle for the southern part of the country and seeking to secure a corridor from the Jordanian border to Damascus in preparation for an eventual assault on the capital.

On Friday, the rebels celebrated their latest victory: They seized full control of Dael, a key town along a main highway, after forces of President Bashar Assad's regime all but withdrew from the area.

"God is great! We are coming, Bashar!" armed fighters cried overnight Thursday after they captured the last of the military checkpoints in the town where Assad's forces had been holed up, according to amateur video posted online.

Dael is one of the bigger towns in the southern Daraa province, where the uprising against Assad began in March 2011, when security forces arrested high school students who scrawled anti-regime graffiti on a wall.

Activists say it was in Dael that the first statue of Assad's father and predecessor, the late President Hafez Assad, was first toppled shortly after the protests broke out.

### Analysis: No One Expects Another Korean War

SEOUL, South Korea (AP) — Across North Korea, soldiers are gearing up for battle and shrouding their jeeps and vans with camouflage netting. Newly painted signboards and posters call for "death to the U.S. imperialists" and urge the people to fight with "arms, not words."

But even as North Korean leader Kim Jong Un is issuing midnight battle cries to his generals to ready their rockets, he and his million-man army know full well that a successful missile strike on U.S. targets would be suicide for the outnumbered, out-powered North Korean regime.

Despite the hastening drumbeat of warfare — seemingly bringing the region to the very brink of conflict with threats and provocations — Pyongyang aims to force Washington to the negotiating table, pressure the new president in Seoul to change policy on North Korea, and build unity inside the communist country without triggering a full-blown war.

North Korea wants to draw attention to the tenuousness of the armistice designed to maintain peace on the Korean Peninsula, a truce Pyongyang recently announced it would no longer honor as it warned that war could break out at any time.

In July, it will be 60 years since North Korea and China signed an armistice with the U.S. and the United Nations to bring an end to three years of fighting that cost millions of lives. The designated Demilitarized Zone has evolved into the most heavily guarded border in the world.

### Gun Proponents Offer Free Shotgun Program

TUCSON, Ariz. (AP) — A campaign promising free shotguns for people in Tucson's most troubled neighborhoods has divided some residents in a community still reeling from a shooting rampage in 2011 that killed six people, left a congresswoman and several others wounded, and made the city a symbol of gun violence in America.

The nonprofit Armed Citizen Project is part of a national campaign to give shotguns to single women and homeowners in neighborhoods with high-crime rates. The effort comes amid a national debate on gun control after mass shootings in Arizona, Colorado and Connecticut.

While towns in Idaho, Utah, Virginia and Pennsylvania have debated ordinances recommending gun ownership, the gun giveaway effort appears to be the first of its kind.

"If you are not willing to protect the citizens of Tucson, someone is going to do it, why not me? Why not have armed citizens protecting themselves," said Shaun McClusky, a real estate agent who plans to start handing out shotguns by May.

Arizona gun proponents have donated about \$12,500 to fund the gun giveaway and McClusky, a former mayor and city council candidate, hopes to collect enough to eventually arm entire neighborhoods.

### Agency Defends Dental Clinic Inspections

TULSA, Okla. (AP) — The Oklahoma agency that accused a Tulsa oral surgeon of unsanitary practices, putting thousands of people at risk for hepatitis and HIV, says it's never needed to inspect medical offices regularly.

"This doesn't happen," Susan Rogers, the executive director of the Oklahoma Board of Dentistry, said Friday. "There's not been a need for these inspections because we've never had a complaint like this."

That's not unusual. Some other states don't routinely inspect clinics, either, noting they don't have the money and such incidents are so rare that the need just isn't there.

In Oklahoma, the Board of Dentistry's small staff does inspections only if the agency receives a complaint. That's what happened in the case of Dr. W. Scott Harrington, whose practice was inspected after officials determined a patient may have contracted hepatitis C while having dental surgery.

State epidemiologist Kristy Bradley and Tulsa Health Department Director Bruce Dart sent letters Friday to all 7,000 patients they found in Harrington's 6-year-old records, urging them to be screened for hepatitis B, hepatitis C and the virus that causes AIDS because of unsafe practices at his two clinics. More patients may be at risk, but Harrington's files go back only to 2007.

### Alaska Lawmaker Criticized For Racial Slur

WASHINGTON (AP) — Rep. Don Young, the gruff Republican veteran who represents the entire state of Alaska, said he "meant no disrespect" in referring to Hispanic migrant workers as "wetbacks."

The 79-year-old Young, the second-most senior Republican in the House, issued a statement late Thursday seeking to explain his remark after using the derogatory term to describe the workers on his father's farm in central California, where he grew up.

Young, discussing the labor market during an interview with radio station KRBD in Ketchikan, Alaska, said that on his father's ranch, "we used to have 50-60 wetbacks to pick tomatoes." He said, "It takes two people to pick the same tomatoes now. It's all done by machine."

"Wetbacks" often refers to Mexican migrants who have entered the country illegally, and Hispanics consider the word, which can be used to disparage all Hispanics, to be highly pejorative.

Young's use of the word drew swift criticism from Republicans working to temper the party's hard-line positions on illegal immigrants and to improve GOP standing among Hispanic voters.

House Speaker John Boehner, R-Ohio, said Young's remarks were "offensive and beneath the dignity of the office he holds." Boehner said he didn't care why Young said it; "there's no excuse, and it warrants an immediate apology."

# Returning To The Economy, Obama Pushes Public Works

BY JOSH LEDERMAN  
Associated Press

MIAMI — Trying to show that the economy remains a top priority, President Barack Obama promoted a plan Friday to create construction and other jobs by attracting private money to help rebuild roads, bridges and other public works projects.

Obama fleshed out the details during a visit to a Miami port that's undergoing \$2 billion in upgrades paid for with government and private dollars. The quick trip was designed to show that the economy and unemployment are top priorities for a president who also is waging high-profile campaigns on immigration reform and gun control.

Obama said the unemployment rate among construction workers was the highest of any industry, despite being cut nearly in half over the past three years.

"There are few more important things we can do to create jobs right now and strengthen our economy over the long haul than rebuilding the infrastructure that powers our businesses and economy," Obama said. "As president, my top priority is to make sure we are doing everything we can to ignite the true engine of our economic growth — a rising, thriving middle class."

Among the proposals Obama called for, which require approval from Congress, are: —\$4 billion in new spending on two infrastructure programs that award loans and grants.

—Higher caps on "private activity bonds" to encourage more private spending on highways and other infrastructure projects. State and local governments use the bonds to attract investment.

—Giving foreign pension funds tax-exempt status when selling U.S. infrastructure, property or real estate assets. U.S. pension funds are generally tax exempt in those circumstances. The administration says some international pension funds cite the tax burden as a reason for not investing in American infrastructure.

—A renewed call for a \$10 billion national "infrastructure bank."

Arriving at the expansive port in Miami, Obama stood inside a double-barreled, concrete-laced hole in the ground, touring a tunnel project that will connect the port to area highways. The project has received loans and grants under the programs Obama touted and is expected to open next summer.



CHUCK FADELY/MIAMI HERALD/MCT  
PortMiami workers take pictures as President Obama speaks during a visit to PortMiami in Miami on Friday. The president was in Miami to deliver a speech about the economy.

The president made private-sector infrastructure investment a key part of the economic agenda he rolled out in his State of the Union address last month. In the speech, he also called for a "Fix-It-First" program that would spend \$40 billion in taxpayer funds on urgent repairs.

Congressional approval is not a sure bet, considering that House Republicans have shown little appetite for Obama's spending proposals. In fact, the infrastructure bank is an idea Obama called for many times in the past, but it gained little traction during his first term.

Obama's focus on generating more private-sector investment underscores the tough road new spending faces on Capitol Hill, where Republican lawmakers often threaten to block new spending unless it's paid for by cutting

taxes or other spending. "These are projects that are helpful to the economy and shouldn't break down on partisan lines," said White House spokesman Josh Earnest.

But Florida Republicans, including Gov. Rick Scott, faulted Obama for being "late to the party." Before Obama arrived in Florida, Scott argued that state taxpayers have had to pick up too much of the tab for this and other port projects because the president was slow to support them.

Alan Krueger, chairman of the White House Council of Economic Advisers, told reporters traveling with Obama that the initiatives discussed Friday will cost \$21 billion, not including the \$40 billion for "Fix-It-First." Krueger said any increased spending associated with the proposals would not add to the deficit.

Krueger said details of how the programs would be paid for would be included in the budget Obama is scheduled to release on April 10.

## Business, Labor Near Immigration Deal

BY ERICA WERNER  
Associated Press

WASHINGTON — Big business and major labor unions appeared ready Friday to end a fight over a new low-skilled worker program that had threatened to upend negotiations on a sweeping immigration bill in the Senate providing a pathway to citizenship for 11 million immigrants already in the U.S.

Sen. Chuck Schumer, D-N.Y., who's been brokering talks between the AFL-CIO and the Chamber of Commerce, said in a statement that negotiators are "very close, closer than we have ever been, and we are very optimistic." He said there were still a few issues remaining.

The talks stalled late last week amid a dispute over wages for workers in the new program, and senators left town for a two-week recess with the issue in limbo. Finger-pointing erupted between the AFL-CIO and the chamber, with each side accusing the other of trying to sink immigration reform, leaving prospects for a resolution unclear.

But talks resumed this week, and now officials from both sides indicate the wage issue has been largely resolved. An agreement would likely clear the way for a bipartisan group of senators to unveil legislation the week of April 8 to dramatically overhaul the U.S. immigration system, strengthening the border and cracking down on employers as well as remaking the legal immigration system while providing a path to citizenship for

11 million illegal immigrants already in the U.S.

"We're feeling very optimistic on immigration: Aspiring Americans will receive the road map to citizenship they deserve and we can modernize 'future flow' without reducing wages for any local workers, regardless of what papers they carry," AFL-CIO spokesman Jeff Hauser said in a statement. "Future flow" refers to future arrivals of legal immigrants.

Under the emerging agreement, a new "W" visa program would bring tens of thousands lower-skilled workers a year to the country. The program would be capped at 200,000 a year, but the number of visas would fluctuate, depending on unemployment rates, job openings, employer demand and data collected by a new federal bureau pushed by the labor movement as an objective monitor of the market.

The workers would be able to change jobs and could seek permanent residency. Under current temporary worker programs, workers can't move from employer to employer and have no path to permanent U.S. residence and citizenship.

The new visas would cover dozens of professions such as long-term care workers and hotel

and hospitality employees. Currently there's no good way for employers to bring many such workers to the U.S.; an existing visa program for low-wage nonagricultural workers is capped at 66,000 per year and is supposed to apply only to seasonal or temporary jobs.

The Chamber of Commerce said workers would get paid actual wages paid to American workers or the prevailing wages for the industry they're working in, whichever is higher. The Labor Department determines prevailing wage based on rates prevailing in specific localities, so that it would vary from city to city.

The labor organization had accused the chamber of trying to pay

workers in the new program poverty-level wages, something the chamber disputed.

There was also disagreement about how to deal with certain higher-skilled construction jobs, such as electricians and welders, and it appears those will be excluded from the deal, said Geoff Burr, vice president of federal affairs at Associated Builders and Contractors. Burr said his group opposes such an exclusion because, even though unemployment in the construction industry is high right now, at times when it is low there can be labor shortages in high-skilled trades and contractors want to be able to bring in foreign workers. But unions pressed for the exclusion, Burr said.

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