

White House Receives Cyanide Letter

WASHINGTON (AP) — The Secret Service says an envelope addressed to the White House has tentatively tested positive for cyanide. The letter was received at an off-site mail screening facility Monday. Initial biological testing was negative. The agency says additional testing Tuesday returned a "presumptive positive" for cyanide. The sample has been taken to another facility for further testing. The Secret Service is responsible for President Barack Obama's security. The agency says the investigation into the letter continues and it will have no additional comment on the matter.

Murder Case Raises Ethical Questions

NEW YORK (AP) — It was a filmmaker, not police, who uncovered a crucial piece of evidence in the murder case against Manhattan real estate millionaire Robert Durst. The sensational small-screen moments created by HBO's "The Jinx" confronted documentarian Andrew Jarecki with an ethical question that is likely to come up again, given the popularity of true-crime TV: Should a television sleuth's priority lie in making good entertainment or in seeing that justice is served? Jarecki's team found a Durst writing sample that appears to match the handwriting in a letter sent to Beverly Hills police alerting them to the body of Susan Berman, a friend of Durst's who was killed 15 years ago. Durst was arrested in the slaying last weekend shortly before the finale of "The Jinx," which exhaustively examined Durst's alleged role in three killings. It's not clear when that writing sample was found, but the filmmakers confronted Durst with that evidence in an April 2012 interview. The filmmakers did not tell authorities about the evidence until October 2012. It's not clear why it took several months, but Jarecki explained in an interview on ABC on Monday that he wanted to get Durst on film addressing that piece of evidence before it was turned over to the authorities.

Chlorine Gas Attack Poisons And Kills Six

BEIRUT (AP) — Syrian activists and the Western-backed opposition accused the government Tuesday of carrying out a chlorine gas attack against a rebel-held town that killed at least six people and left dozens, including children, choking and gasping for breath. The purported use of poison gas on the town of Sarmin in northwestern Idlib province is the first alleged chemical attack since the U.N. Security Council approved a U.S.-drafted resolution this month that condemns the use of toxic chemicals such as chlorine in Syria. That measure also threatens military action in case of further violations. But any such action would require the consent of the Security Council, which remains deeply divided over Syria's civil war. The U.S. and its allies support the opposition, while Russia backs Syrian President Bashar Assad — and Moscow has used its veto on several occasions to shield its ally. The attack on Sarmin, located some eight kilometers (five miles) east of Idlib city, took place late Monday, according to the Britain-based Syrian Observatory for Human Rights and the Local Coordination Committees activist collective. The two activist groups said that six people were killed and dozens more suffered from severe breathing difficulties. A Syrian military official in Damascus denied any government role in the attack and blamed it on rebels. "The army did not and will never use any internationally-prohibited weapon," the official said on condition of anonymity because he was not authorized to brief the media.

Rep. Schock Announces Resignation

WASHINGTON (AP) — Illinois Rep. Aaron Schock abruptly resigned Tuesday following a monthlong cascade of revelations about his business deals and lavish spending on everything from overseas travel to office decor in the style of "Downton Abbey." "I do this with a heavy heart," Schock said in a statement. He said he had given the people of his Peoria-area district his all since his election in 2008, "but the constant questions over the last six weeks have proven a great distraction that has made it too difficult for me to serve the people of the 18th District with the high standards that they deserve and which I have set for myself." Schock, 33, a young, media-savvy Republican, had drawn attention for his physical fitness and fundraising prowess. But more recently he has come under scrutiny for extravagant spending, payments to donors for flights on private jets and improperly categorized expenses. The questions raised have included Associated Press investigations of his real estate transactions, air travel and Instagram use. On Monday, the AP confirmed that the Office of Congressional Ethics had reached out to Schock's associates as it apparently began an investigation. In a statement, House Speaker John Boehner said: "With this decision, Rep. Schock has put the best interests of his constituents and the House first. I appreciate Aaron's years of service, and I wish him well in the future."

Nuclear Agreement: Iranians Optimistic

LAUSANNE, Switzerland (AP) — A senior Iranian official suggested Tuesday that Iran is nearing a preliminary deal with the U.S. and five world powers that would lead to a breakthrough eluding them for more than a decade — a formal pact limiting Tehran's ability to make an atomic weapon while easing punitive economic sanctions on the Islamic Republic. The United States was less upbeat, with officials saying the sides had made progress but still had a ways to go in eliminating differences over what Iran had to do for a gradual end to sanctions. "There's no doubt they have made substantial progress over the past year," said White House spokesman Josh Earnest. "Reaching an agreement is at best 50-50." The sides face two deadlines: an end-of-March date for a preliminary deal, and a June deadline for a comprehensive agreement that fills in the blanks. A comprehensive agreement that the U.S. says would stretch the time Iran would need to make a bomb from a few months to a year has been a top foreign policy objective of the Obama administration. Even a deal by deadline will not end the Iran nuclear controversy, however.

Penn State Frat Suspended For A Year

HARRISBURG, Pa. (AP) — A Penn State University fraternity was suspended for a year Tuesday after police began investigating allegations that members used a private, invitation-only Facebook page to post photos of nude and partly nude women, some apparently asleep or passed out. A former member of Kappa Delta Rho at the university's flagship campus in State College tipped police off to the page, telling them in January that it had been used by members to share photos of "unsuspecting victims, drug sales and hazing," according to a copy of a police warrant obtained by The Associated Press. The ex-member also provided authorities with printouts from the page. The fraternity's national executive director, Joe Rosenberg, told the Penn State chapter in a letter that it would be banned from most activities for the near future and must reorganize. He said the suspension was "for the most serious misconduct, most serious disregard of fraternity rules."

Israel's Netanyahu Emerges With Slight Edge After A Tight Race

BY JOSEF FEDERMAN
Associated Press

JERUSALEM — Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu appeared to fend off a strong challenge from the country's opposition leader in parliamentary elections Tuesday, emerging from an acrimonious campaign in a slightly better position to form Israel's next government. But with the sides nearly evenly divided, a victory by Netanyahu's Likud Party still was not guaranteed. His chief rival, Isaac Herzog of the Zionist Union, said he would make "every effort" to form a government, and an upstart centrist party led by a former Netanyahu ally-turned-rival was set to be the kingmaker. The country now heads into what could be weeks of negotiations over the makeup of the next coalition. Both Netanyahu and Herzog will now compete for a chance to form a coalition that commands a majority in the 120-seat parliament, a daunting task in Israel's fractured political landscape. Netanyahu appeared to have a better chance of cobbling together a government with right-wing and religious parties that he calls his "natural allies." Herzog would have to appeal to more ideologically diverse parties. Either will likely need the support of Moshe Kahlon, whose new Kulanu party captured nine or 10 seats, according to polls. Kahlon, whose campaign focused almost entirely on bread-and-butter economic issues, refused to take sides. "I am loyal to my way," he told his supporters, saying he would work to form a gov-



DANIELLA CHESLOW/MCCLATCHY/TNS
Ayman Odeh, left, chairman of the newly formed Joint List of Arab parties, embraces a supporter at a polling place in Nazareth on Tuesday. Arab citizens of Israel voted in record numbers Tuesday to propel the Joint List to the third-largest party in Knesset, Israel's parliament.

ernment committed to social justice. The election was widely seen as a referendum on Netanyahu, who has governed the country for the past six years, and recent opinion polls had given Herzog a slight lead. As the results were announced on the nation's three major TV stations, celebrations erupted at Likud's campaign headquarters in Tel Aviv. "Against all the odds, we obtained a great victory for the Likud," Netanyahu told the gathering. "Now we must form a strong and stable government that will ensure Israel's security and welfare," he added, in comments aimed at Kahlon. He said he had already been in touch with all other nationalist parties in hopes

of quickly forming a coalition. Netanyahu focused his campaign on security issues, while his opponents instead pledged to address the country's high cost of living and accused the leader of being out of touch with everyday people. Herzog also promised to repair tattered ties with the U.S. and to revive peace efforts with the Palestinians. At a rally of his supporters, Herzog vowed to do his utmost to form a government and said he too had reached out to potential coalition partners. In a nod to Kahlon, he said he was committed to forming a "real social reconciliation government" committed to lowering the country's cost of living and reducing gaps between rich and poor.

Netanyahu's return to power would likely spell trouble for Mideast peace efforts and could further escalate tensions with the United States. Netanyahu, who already has a tenuous relationship with President Barack Obama, took a sharp turn to the right in the final days of the campaign, staking out a series of hard-line positions that will put him at odds with the international community. In a dramatic policy reversal, he said he now opposes the creation of a Palestinian state — a key policy goal of the White House and the international community. He also promised to expand construction in Jewish areas of east Jerusalem, the section of the city claimed by the Palestinians as their capital.

Budget Fight: Obama Claims The Upper Hand Over Congress

BY JOSH LEDERMAN
AND JIM KUHNHENN
Associated Press

WASHINGTON — Bolstered by a spate of upbeat economic news, President Barack Obama is claiming the upper hand in the budget fight unfolding in Congress, aiming to exploit recent Republican stumbles to give Democrats an advantage despite their status as a weakened minority. But while Obama retains full use of the bully pulpit, his leverage over matters of government spending may prove limited. The White House has put a spotlight on GOP missteps and infighting in recent weeks, arguing that Republicans who promised to govern effectively are falling down on the job since taking control of Congress earlier this year. Drawing an implicit contrast, Obama has been playing up his own, unilateral economic steps as a way to show he's the one setting Washington's agenda. "We're going to have a robust debate," Obama pledged Tuesday shortly after House Republicans released their \$3.8 trillion budget. Obama has stood firmly behind his insistence that Republicans increase spending on domestic programs — not just the Pentagon. "The defining feature of this new Republican majority in Congress is them being on defense responding to the president's agenda," Brian Deese, an Obama senior adviser, said in an interview. The current debate is over a budget resolution, a non-binding measure that doesn't

require Obama's signature. Typically, Congress uses separate appropriations bills to fund various parts of the government, which makes it harder for the president to insist that Republicans pass funding for his priorities before he'll approve funding for theirs. As a result, the White House strategy is not so much designed to negotiate a bargain with Republicans as it is to keep Obama's underlying economic message at the forefront while Republicans play out their own internal struggles. Such GOP divisions were on full display earlier in March when Republicans dropped their insistence on repealing Obama's immigration directives and agreed to fund the Homeland Security Department — calling into question the GOP's broader strategy to use spending bills as leverage against the president. Still, the White House is taking a much more aggressive stance than it has in the past. In his budget proposal this year, Obama called for an equal surge in both domestic and defense spending, and his budget director, Shaun Donovan, told Congress on Monday that Obama "will not accept a budget" that does otherwise. "It gives Democrats cover to say 'no,'" said Stan Collender, a long-time budget analyst now with the Qorvis-MSL Group. "It gives them some backbone." The House Republican plan released Tuesday proposes major increases in military spending accompanied by big cuts to social programs like food stamps and Medicaid. The Senate GOP was to follow with its proposal on Wednesday.

"It's not a budget that reflects the future. It's not a budget that reflects growth," Obama said following a St. Patrick's Day meeting with Irish Prime Minister Enda Kenny. "I'll keep my four-leaf clover in my pocket and see if the speaker and (Senate Republican Leader) Mitch McConnell and others are interested in having that conversation." Even before unveiling their budget, the GOP leadership was struggling to calm tensions between defense hawks who want more money for the Pentagon and budget hard-liners who want to rein in federal spending. That may create an opening for Obama to exploit the fact that his budget calls for more money for defense than many conservative Republicans are willing to spend. "They have Republicans in a bind — they really do," said Steve Bell, a former Republican director of the Senate Budget Committee. "The Republican Party, which used to be the party of hawks, is now split." Obama's aides said there was little concern at the White House that by holding his position in support of domestic spending, Obama would take the blame for the political logjam if Congress fails to increase spending for the military, which enjoys broad support amid growing threats from extremist groups and instability in the Middle East. White House advisers said the economy's resurgence under Obama's leadership had exposed the "austerity fallacy" pushed for years by Republicans who argue the government must downsize to bring deficits under control.

Ferguson Police Shooting Suspect Returns To Court

BY ALAN SCHER ZAGIER
Associated Press

CLAYTON, Mo. — A man accused of shooting two police officers in Ferguson returned to court Tuesday over a claim that St. Louis County police used excessive force during his arrest. A circuit court judge agreed to defense lawyer Jerry Christmas' request to photograph Jeffrey L. Williams in the courtroom. Online court records indicate prosecutors took their own photos at the brief hearing, which came one day after Williams, 20, made his first appearance in court. Christmas told The Associated Press on Monday that police roughed up his client and described bruises on Williams' back, shoulders and face and a knot on his head. Police spokesman Brian Schellman called the assertion "completely false" while noting that the suspect was seen by a nurse when he was booked into the county jail, standard procedure for all incoming inmates. He added that Williams did not resist arrest. Christmas also suggested that police coerced a statement by Williams in which he reportedly admitted to the shooting but said he wasn't targeting police. Schellman also rejected that assertion, noting the statement was videotaped.

OBITUARIES

Leona Mehlhaf

Leona Mehlhaf, 93, of Menno passed away early Tuesday, March 17, 2015, at the Freeman Medical Center, Freeman. Funeral services will be 10:30 a.m. Friday, March 20, at Zion Reformed Church, Menno, with Rev. Travis Grassmid officiating. Burial will be in the Menno Cemetery, Menno. Visitations will be from 5-7 p.m. Thursday evening at the Zion Reformed Church, Menno, with a prayer service at 7 p.m. Visitations will resume one hour prior to the service at the church. The Aisenbrey-Opsahl-Kostel Memorial Chapel,

Menno, is assisting with the service details. Leave an online condolence at www.opsahl-kostelfuneralhome.com.

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