

NATION/WORLD DIGEST

Obama Pushes For Federal Immigration Law

WASHINGTON (AP) — Confronting soaring frustration over illegal immigration, President Barack Obama on Wednesday condemned Arizona's crackdown and pushed instead for a federal fix the nation could embrace. He said that will never happen without Republican support, pleading: "I need some help."

In asking anew for an immigration overhaul, Obama showed solidarity with his guest of honor, Mexican President Felipe Calderon, who called Arizona's law discriminatory and warned Mexico would reject any effort to "criminalize migration." The United States and Mexico share a significant economic and political relationship that stands to be damaged the more the nations are at odds over immigration, which affects millions of people on both sides of the border.

Obama sought to show that he, too, is fed up with his own government's failure to fix a system widely seen as broken. He said that would require solving border security, employment and citizenship issues all at once — the kind of effort that collapsed in Congress just three years ago.

The president's stand underscored the forces working against him in this election year: the need for help from Republican critics, the impatience of states like Arizona after federal inaction, the pressure to show movement on a campaign promise, and the mood of the public disgusted by porous borders.

The Arizona law requires police to question people about their immigration status if there's reason to suspect they're in the country illegally, and it makes it a state crime to be in the U.S. illegally. People may be questioned about their status if they've been stopped by police who are in the process of enforcing another law.

Wal-Mart Pulls Jewelry Over Toxic Cadmium

LOS ANGELES (AP) — Wal-Mart said Wednesday it is pulling an entire line of Miley Cyrus-brand necklaces and bracelets from its shelves after tests performed for The Associated Press found the jewelry contained high levels of the toxic metal cadmium.

In a statement issued three hours after AP's initial report of its findings, Wal-Mart said it would remove the jewelry while it investigates. The statement was issued along with Cyrus and Max Azria, the designer that developed the jewelry for the 17-year-old "Hannah Montana" star.

In the statement, Wal-Mart said that while the jewelry is not intended for children, "it is possible that a few younger consumers may seek it out in stores."

Cadmium in jewelry is not known to be dangerous if the items are simply worn. Concerns come when youngsters bite or suck on the jewelry, as many children are apt to do.

Continued Rioting Leaves Bangkok In Flames

BANGKOK (AP) — Buildings blazed across central Bangkok early Thursday, torched by rioters after army troops routed anti-government protesters to end a two-month siege — Thailand's deadliest political violence in nearly 20 years.

The government quelled most of the violence in Bangkok but not the underlying political divisions that caused it, and unrest spread to northern parts of Thailand.

Prime Minister Abhisit Vejjajiva imposed a nighttime curfew in the capital and 23 other provinces and said his government would restore calm. Although leaders of the Red Shirt demonstrators surrendered, sporadic clashes between troops and remaining protesters continued well after dark.

Bangkok's skyline was blotted by black smoke from more than two dozen buildings set ablaze — including Thailand's stock exchange, main power company, banks, a movie theater and one of Asia's largest shopping malls.

At least six people were killed in clashes that followed the army's storming of the protest camp Wednesday. Witnesses said another six to eight bodies were in a temple where hundreds of demonstrators, including women and children, had sought sanctuary.

N.Y. Suspect Was Thinking Of Other Targets

NEW YORK (AP) — While sequestered in a New York hotel room, the Times Square bomb suspect revealed he had thought about targeting other landmarks and asked investigators why the bomb he built failed to go off, people familiar with the probe said Wednesday.

Faisal Shahzad said he considered attacking Grand Central Terminal, Rockefeller Center in midtown Manhattan, the World Financial Center near ground zero and Sikorsky Inc. — a defense contractor with an office in his Connecticut hometown — before deciding to abandon an SUV rigged with a homemade bomb in Times Square on May 1, a law enforcement official told The Associated Press.

A person familiar with the case said Wednesday that during more than two weeks of questioning, the Pakistani-American also expressed surprise that the device — a mishmash of fireworks, gasoline canisters, propane tanks and fertilizer — did not detonate. The suspect said he thought the fireworks would trigger a chain-reaction that would rupture the tanks and create a deadly fireball, the person said.

Shahzad, who authorities say has claimed he received explosives training in Pakistan, even asked interrogators to explain why the device failed.

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Consumer Prices Fall For First Time In Over A Year

WASHINGTON (AP) — Inflation has essentially disappeared, and that gives the Federal Reserve more room to keep interest rates at record lows.

Consumer prices fell in April for the first time in more than a year. The figures released Wednesday were welcome news for people who qualify for loans and want to take on more debt. But low rates hurt savers, especially those on fixed incomes.

The Fed now appears more likely to keep rates at record-low levels well into next year, economists say. Some had thought it would start increasing rates at the end of this year.

Paul Ashworth, senior U.S. economist at Capital Economics, said he thinks the Fed won't start raising rates until late next year — and possibly not until 2012.

Declining gas prices pulled overall prices down 0.1 percent last month. Gas prices are predicted to sink lower still this summer.

Core inflation, which excludes volatile food and energy prices, was flat in April. Over the past 12 months, it has risen just 0.9 percent — the smallest increase in 44 years.

The weakness of the economy has kept inflation so low that some economists are beginning to worry about the possibility of deflation — a destabilizing period of falling prices and wages.

Normally, if interest rates are kept too low for too long, it raises fears of inflation. But not now, with inflation having disappeared. Those low rates could provide some protection to the U.S. economy if the European debt crisis were to spread globally.

The Fed's record-low rates influence rates charged to consumers. The prime lending rate used by major banks to set rates on some credit cards and consumer loans will remain at about 3.25 percent. That's its lowest point in decades.

Economists had expected overall prices and core prices to edge up 0.1 percent in April. The drop in overall prices was the first decline since a similar dip in March 2009.

Energy prices fell 1.4 percent, the biggest one-month decline since March 2009. Gasoline prices dropped 2.4 percent. Analysts expect further declines in coming months because crude oil prices have fallen nearly 20 percent since April.

Food costs rose 0.2 percent in April, the same modest increase posted in March. Economists had expected a bigger increase because of a winter freeze on Florida vegetable and citrus crops.

Clothing costs dropped 0.7 percent. The cost of new vehicles was unchanged. Airline tickets rose 2.2 percent, one of the few areas to show price pressures last month.

GULF OIL SPILL



SEAN GARDNER/GREENPEACE/MCT

Oil clings to reeds on the bank of the breakwater in the mouth of the Mississippi River where it meets the Gulf of Mexico in Louisiana, Tuesday. The BP-leased Deepwater Horizon oil platform exploded April 20 and sank after burning, leaking an estimate of more than 210,000 gallons of crude oil per day from the broken pipeline to the sea.

Inventors: BP Ignoring Ideas To Stop Blow Well

NEW ORLEANS (AP) — A suggestion box or publicity stunt? BP has received thousands of ideas from the public on how to stop a blowout in the Gulf of Mexico, but some inventors are complaining that their efforts are getting ignored.

Oil-eating bacteria, bombs and a device that resembles a giant shower curtain are among the 10,000 fixes people have proposed to counter the growing environmental threat. BP is taking a closer look at 700 of the ideas, but the oil company has yet to use any of them nearly a month after the deadly explosion that caused the leak.

"They're clearly out of ideas, and there's a whole world of people willing to do this free of charge," said Dwayne Spradlin, CEO of InnoCentive Inc., which has created an online network of experts to solve problems.

BP spokesman Mark Salt said the company wants the public's help, but that considering proposed fixes takes time.

"They're taking bits of ideas from lots of places," Salt said. "This is not just a PR stunt."

BP said Wednesday it hopes to begin shooting a mixture known as drilling mud into the blown-out well in the Gulf by Sunday. The "top kill" method involves shooting heavy mud into crippled equipment on top of the well, then aiming cement at the well to permanently keep down the oil. Even if it works it could take several weeks to complete.

"This is all being done at a depth of 5,000 feet and it's never been done at these depths before," said Doug Suttles of BP PLC, which leased the rig that exploded April 20 off the coast of Louisiana.

If the top kill effort fails, BP is considering a "junk shot," which involves shooting knotted rope, pieces of tires and golf balls into the blowout preventer. Crews hope they will lodge into the nooks and crannies of the device to plug it.

About 70 BP workers are taking more suggestions at a tip line center in Houston. The company plans to test one idea from actor Kevin Costner — a centrifuge device to vacuum up the oil — but that was not delivered through the suggestion-box system.

Thousands of barrels of oil are still pouring into open waters each day, and some of it has washed ashore as far east as Alabama. Tar balls found in the Florida Keys were not from the spill, the Coast Guard said Wednesday.

National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration scientists said a small portion of the oil slick from the blown-out well has reached a powerful current that could take it to Florida. They said diluted oil could appear in isolated locations in Florida if persistent winds push the current toward it, but that oil also could evaporate before reaching the coast.

In Louisiana, a chocolate-brown blanket of oil about as thick as latex paint has invaded reedy freshwater wetlands at the state's U.S. and Cuba were holding talks on how to respond to the spill, U.S. State Department spokesman Gordon Duguid said, underscoring worries that the oil might reach Cuba's northern coast.

BP succeeded in partially siphoning away the leak over the weekend, when it hooked up a mile-long tube to the broken pipe,

sending some of the oil to a ship on the surface. Gerald Graham, a marine environmental consultant and oil spill response expert from Victoria, British Columbia, said he suggested a similar idea at the end of April to the joint incident command center run by BP, government agencies and Transocean Ltd., which owned the rig. The command center had him forward the idea to NOAA, which didn't respond.

FINANCIAL REFORM

Senate Fails To End Debate On Bill

BY JIM KUHNHEIN
Associated Press Writer

WASHINGTON — Senate Republicans on Wednesday delayed final action on a sweeping financial regulation bill, raising a last-minute obstacle to the legislation as it approached the home stretch.

Democrats appeared within reach of the 60-vote threshold needed to move the bill toward passage, however, and Senate Majority leader Harry Reid said he would seek a new vote Thursday.

The vote and Wednesday's maneuvering over a handful of remaining amendments represented the final lumps and bruises of a bill that appeared headed for approval.

The legislation, which seeks an overhaul of financial regulations unseen since the 1930s, would set up a mechanism to watch out for risks in the financial system, make it easier to liquidate large failing firms and write new rules for complex securities blamed for helping precipitate the 2008 economic crisis. It also would create a new consumer protection agency, a key point for President Barack Obama.

As the end game on the bill nears, Republicans this week have escalated their attacks on the legislation, arguing the bill had grown worse during its time on the Senate floor and does not address root causes of the 2008 financial meltdown.

The Democratic majority, said Senate Republican leader Mitch McConnell, "uses this crisis as yet another opportunity to expand the cost and size and reach of government."

The vote to end debate was 57-42, three votes shy of the 60 needed to pass. Three Democrats joined 39 Republicans in voting against the measure. Among them was Reid, the Democratic leader, who switched his vote from yes for procedural reasons.

With Sen. Arlen Specter, D-Pa., absent, Democrats needed one more vote to demonstrate to Republicans that they would eventually prevail and set the stage to pass the biggest rewrite of financial regulations since the Great Depression.

Still, several contentious amendments were still unresolved.

Democratic Sens. Jeff Merkley of Oregon and Carl Levin of Michigan were awaiting a vote on their proposal to ban commercial banks from trading in speculative investments with their own accounts. The measure, also opposed by financial institutions, would toughen an existing provision in the bill.

Senators also were expecting a vote on a measure by Sen. Sam Brownback, R-Kan., that would let auto dealers avoid any regulations passed by a proposed consumer protection agency. The White House has lobbied heavily against the measure and Pentagon officials have complained that auto dealers have preyed on service members.

Late Wednesday, the Senate voted 60-35 against a measure that would have allowed states to impose their interest rate caps on financial institutions that issue credit cards. Currently, banks and credit card companies are only required to charge the interest rate permitted in the state where they are headquartered.

Banks, which have flocked to states with the most permissible rates, have vigorously fought the proposal, offered by Sen. Sheldon Whitehouse, D-R.I.

On Wednesday's attempt to end debate, Democratic Sens. Russ Feingold of Wisconsin and Maria Cantwell of Oregon broke with their party. Feingold said the bill did not go far enough to rein in Wall Street. Cantwell's vote protested her inability to get a vote on an amendment to toughen controls on the complex securities known as derivatives.

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