

Gingrich Begins White House Bid With Missteps

ATLANTA (AP) — Hardly the start he'd hoped for, Newt Gingrich's first week as a presidential candidate has been riddled with missteps that have angered many of his fellow Republicans and exposed campaign vulnerabilities.

The former U.S. House speaker disparaged House Republicans' Medicare proposal as "right-wing social engineering" and was all but forced to apologize after the conservative outcry. He tied himself in knots when he defended part of the Democrats' health care law — which he says he opposes. And he refused to explain a \$500,000 debt he once owed to the upscale Tiffany's jewelry store through railing against President Barack Obama for what he calls excessive federal spending.

"He has severely damaged his campaign and his credibility," said Debbie Dooley of Duluth, Ga., a national coordinator for the Tea Party Patriots who contended that Gingrich made things worse when he tried to explain his health care stance favoring a requirement that Americans have coverage. "If he continues with that position, for the most conservative tea party Republicans ... it's over," she said.

Gingrich's team says he's not changing.

Advisers say Gingrich has repeatedly proven he can survive such troubles, and they insist there's no need to recalibrate a campaign decades in the making.

Flood Victims Must Play Waiting Game

VICKSBURG, Miss. (AP) — For thousands of people forced from their homes by the rising Mississippi River, life has become a tedious waiting game: waiting for meals at shelters, waiting for the latest word on their flooded homes, waiting for the river to fall.

The monotony of shelter life has taken a toll on victims who have already been displaced for weeks and may not be able to return for at least a month. The river is expected to crest Thursday in Vicksburg, but high water might not retreat in some areas until late June.

"Lord only knows when it's going to recede. It's so much water," said Steven Cole, who has stayed for nearly two weeks at a church being used as a Red Cross shelter.

Cole's bottom lip quivered as he described how he ended up here: He wrecked the truck he uses for carpentry work while helping evacuate several families. Then the house he shared with a friend flooded.

Without the shelter in Vicksburg, "I'd be out in the streets," he said.

Biden And Lawmakers Eye Deficit Cuts

WASHINGTON (AP) — The White House and key lawmakers are considering reductions in student loan subsidies, farm payments and support for federal workers' pensions as they search for cuts that can clear the way for an increase in the national debt limit, according to officials in both parties.

The negotiations are still in the early stages, with no final decisions made, these officials said Wednesday. While the amounts involved so far are relatively modest, the talks led by Vice President Joe Biden appear likely to assume greater public prominence with the evident collapse of a freelance attempt by the "Gang of Six" senators to produce a sweeping bipartisan plan to reduce red ink.

"We're talking (about cuts totaling) \$200 billion, \$150 billion and we have to get up into the trillion range or more," said Sen. Jon Kyl, R-Ariz., one of six other lawmakers taking part in the talks at Blair House across the street from the White House.

"We have a long way to go if we're struggling at this level with this amount," he said, adding that so far, the talks have generally focused on areas of agreement.

The group has yet to discuss military spending or deeper reductions in programs that already were trimmed in legislation that narrowly averted a partial government shutdown in April.

U.S. Slaps Sanctions On Syria's Assad For Abuses

BY MATTHEW LEE
AND MARTIN CRUTSINGER
Associated Press

WASHINGTON — The United States slapped sanctions on Syrian President Bashar Assad and six senior Syrian officials for human rights abuses over their brutal crackdown on anti-government protests, for the first time personally penalizing the Syrian leader for actions of his security forces.

The White House announced the sanctions Wednesday, a day before President Barack Obama delivers a major speech on the uprisings throughout the Arab world. The speech is expected to include prominent mentions of Syria.

The Obama administration had pinned hopes on Assad, seen until recent months as a pragmatist and potential reformer who could buck Iranian influence and help broker an eventual Arab peace deal with Israel.

But U.S. officials said Assad's increasingly brutal crackdown left them little choice but to abandon the effort to woo Assad, and to stop exempting him from the same sort of sanctions already applied to Libya's Moammar Gadhafi.

In a letter to congressional leaders, Obama said he issued the new sanctions order as a response to the Syrian government's "continuous escalation of violence against the people of Syria."

Obama cited "attacks on protesters, arrests and harassment of protesters and political activists, and repression of democratic change, overseen and executed by numerous elements of the Syrian government."

The sanctions will freeze any assets Assad and the six Syrian government officials have in U.S. jurisdiction and make it illegal for Americans to do business with them. The U.S. had imposed similar sanctions on two of Assad's relatives and another top Syrian official last month but had thus far refrained from going after Assad himself.

"The actions the administration has taken today send an unequivocal message to President Assad, the Syrian leadership and regime insiders that they will be held accountable for the ongoing violence and repression in Syria," said David S. Cohen, Treasury's acting under secretary for terrorism, said in a statement.

Police Look For DNA In IMF Case

BY TOM HAYS AND COLLEEN LONG
Associated Press

NEW YORK — Investigators cut out a piece of carpet in a painstaking search of a penthouse suite for DNA evidence in IMF chief Dominique Strauss-Kahn's sex assault case, law enforcement officials said Wednesday as he made a new bid to get out of jail.

New York detectives and prosecutors believe the carpet in the hotel room may contain Strauss-Kahn's semen, spat out after an episode of forced oral sex by a hotel maid, the officials told The Associated Press.

Strauss-Kahn, jailed at Rikers Island since Monday, made a second appeal for bail and proposed to be confined to his daughter's Manhattan home 24 hours a day with electronic monitoring. He was set for another hearing Thursday afternoon.

The French politician said in court papers that he had surrendered his passport and wouldn't flee the country. "I do not intend to leave the United States of America without the permission of the New York Court," he said.

In addition to examining the Sofitel Hotel suite for further potential DNA evidence, investigators were looking at the maid's keycard to determine whether she used it to enter the room, and how long she was there, officials said.

One of the officials said that the DNA testing was being "fast-tracked" but that the results could still be a few days away.

The two officials spoke to the AP on condition of anonymity because neither was authorized to speak about the case publicly and because it has gone to a grand jury.

The maid, a 32-year-old immigrant from the West African nation of Guinea, told police that the 62-year-old Strauss-Kahn came out of the bathroom naked, chased her down, forced her to perform oral sex on him and tried to remove her underwear before she broke free and fled the room.

The AP does not identify alleged victims of sex crimes unless they agree to it.

Police Commissioner Raymond Kelly declined to comment Wednesday on the details of the evidence-gathering but said results of any DNA and other testing have not yet come back. He said the detectives investigating the case found the maid's story believable.

"Obviously, the credibility of the complainant is a factor in cases of this nature," Kelly said. "One of the things they're trained to look for, and what was reported to me early on, was that the complainant was credible."

One of Strauss-Kahn's attorneys, Benjamin Brafman, said at his client's arraignment this week that the forensic evidence "will not be consistent with a forcible encounter." That

led to speculation the defense would argue it was consensual sex.

The woman's lawyer, Jeffrey Shapiro, has dismissed suggestions from some of Strauss-Kahn's defenders that she made up the charges or tried to cover up a consensual encounter.

In court papers filed Wednesday, Strauss-Kahn's attorneys proposed posting \$1 million cash bail and confining him to the home of his daughter, Camille, a Columbia University graduate student, 24 hours a day with electronic monitoring.

Strauss-Kahn "is a loving husband and father, and a highly regarded diplomat, politician, lawyer, economist and professor, with no criminal record," his attorneys said in court papers.

The attorneys had proposed similar conditions at an earlier bail hearing but added the promise of home detention Wednesday. A judge denied Strauss-Kahn bail Monday, sending him to an isolated wing of Rikers Island.

The motion for bail also laid out a more precise timeline for Strauss-Kahn's movements while arguing he never tried to flee: It says he checked out of the hotel at 12:28 p.m., went to a lunch appointment a few blocks away at 12:45 p.m. and went to the airport afterward.

Gates: Somebody In Pakistan Knew About Bin Laden

BY LOLITA BALDOR
Associated Press

WASHINGTON — Pakistan has already paid dearly for its failure to know or acknowledge that Osama bin Laden was hiding for more than five years in a compound a short distance from a Pakistani military facility, Pentagon leaders insisted Wednesday.

Pushing back against angry public and congressional accusations that Pakistani officials were complicit in bin Laden's sanctuary there, Defense Secretary Robert Gates said he's seen proof that leaders there were unaware of bin Laden's whereabouts.

"I have seen no evidence at all that the senior leadership knew. In fact, I've seen some evidence to the contrary," Gates told reporters at the Pentagon. "We have no evidence yet with respect to anybody else. My supposition is, somebody knew."

He wouldn't say who, but suggested it could have been retired or low-level Pakistani officials.

The Obama administration is reassessing its fragile and sometimes hostile relationship with Pakistan after the bin Laden killing, which may change the stakes for both sides. For the U.S., it may provide greater leverage in its argument to prod Pakistan to go after the militants that target the U.S., instead of only those that target Pakistan.

For Pakistan, outrage and shame over what is seen as a breach of national sovereignty will color leaders' willingness to cooperate with the U.S.

Gates and Joint Chiefs chairman Adm. Mike Mullen issued a broad defense of Islamabad's leadership Wednesday. And they urged patience as the "humiliated" country worked through the problems emanating from the U.S. clandestine raid deep into

Pakistan that killed bin Laden on May 2.

"If I were in Pakistani shoes, I would say I've already paid a price. I've been humiliated. I've been shown that the Americans can come in here and do this with impunity," said Gates. "I think we have to recognize that they see a cost in that and a price that has been paid."

That argument, however, may hold no sway on Capitol Hill, which has seen more than \$10 billion in aid go to Pakistan over the past 10 years.

If a U.S. aid package to Pakistan came up for a vote in at least one Senate Appropriations subcommittee, "it would not pass at all. I don't know how I would vote on the issue," said Sen. Patrick Leahy, D-Vt., chairman of the Appropriations subcommittee that oversees foreign aid.

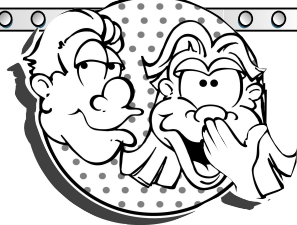
The comments came as the Pakistani Taliban vowed to fight

with "new zeal" in the wake of bin Laden's death to complete the al-Qaida chief's mission of waging holy war against the West, the deputy commander of the militant group told The Associated Press.

Waliur Rehman's remarks appeared designed to deflate expectations that bin Laden's death would slow down insurgent groups allied with or inspired by al-Qaida. And it also could be an attempt to boost morale among the insurgents who are facing a tough fight against U.S. and coalition forces in Afghanistan.

Gates and Mullen said the Pakistanis are well aware of the swelling frustration in Washington. And they've heard the demands that Islamabad pay a price for its inability or unwillingness to more aggressively target insurgents that are planning and waging attacks against U.S. and coalition troops across the border in Afghanistan.

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