

Romney Now Faces Big Summertime Choices

DES MOINES, Iowa (AP) — What's next for Mitt Romney? The Republican presidential nomination finally in hand, he will spend the next three months trying to undercut President Barack Obama on the economy while portraying himself as Mr. Fix It for a nation with stubbornly and painfully high unemployment.

Romney also faces key decisions between now and his acceptance of the party's nomination in late August in Florida: Where should he compete most aggressively? Who should be his running mate?

At the same time, he must dive anew into fundraising and work to win over voters who are distracted by their own summer plans and day-to-day pocketbook worries — while withstanding Obama's attacks on his own claims as a jobs creator.

Not that Romney is publicly sweating the hurdles that come with being the little-known challenger to a personally popular president. "People will get to know me better," Romney told Fox News in an interview that aired Wednesday, the day after he sealed the GOP nomination with his primary election victory in Texas. He says the general election campaign is only beginning even though his chief challenger dropped out more than six weeks ago.



Romney

UN: Civilian Deaths In Afghanistan Drop 36%

KABUL, Afghanistan (AP) — The number of Afghan civilians killed has dropped 36 percent so far this year compared with last, the U.N. said Wednesday, the first time the death toll has declined over multiple months since the United Nations started keeping track.

The senior U.N. envoy for the country, Jan Kubis, called the trend promising but cautioned that too many civilians were still being caught up in the violence as insurgents fight Afghan and foreign forces.

Kubis' office said 579 civilians were killed in the first four months of this year, down from 898 killed in the same period of 2011. The number of wounded dropped from 1,373 to 1,216 in the January to April period.

James Rodehaver, a U.N. human rights officer in Afghanistan, noted the death toll has sometimes declined from month to month since the U.N. started tracking attacks in 2007, but never over such a sustained period.

Few Opt For Small-Biz Health Care Tax Credit

WASHINGTON (AP) — Many small businesses struggle to afford health insurance for their workers, but a new tax credit meant to help them seems to be turning into a disappointment.

Although opinion polls show the credit is one of the most popular ideas in President Barack Obama's health care law, only 170,300 businesses out of a pool of as many as 4 million potentially eligible claimed it in 2010, about 4 percent.

A recent government report found the tax credit time-consuming to apply for and not rewarding enough to be financially attractive.

That's put the Obama administration in the awkward position of asking Congress to help fix the problems by allowing more businesses to qualify and making it simpler to apply. But Republicans who run the House say they want to repeal what they deride as "Obamacare," not fix its flaws.

"They completely missed the target on this thing," Rep. Sam Graves, R-Mo., said of the tax credit. "I don't think expanding it is going to make any difference whatsoever." Graves chairs the House Small Business Committee.

Stevens: Citizens United Needs Exception

LITTLE ROCK, Ark. (AP) — Former U.S. Supreme Court Justice John Paul Stevens says he expects the court has had second thoughts about parts of its controversial Citizens United ruling that eased restrictions on corporate spending in political campaigns.

Stevens, who dissented from that 2010 decision, made the comments Wednesday evening during a speech in Little Rock.

In the case, the divided court ruled that independent spending by corporations does "not give rise to corruption or the appearance of corruption." Stevens says it'll be necessary for the high court to create exceptions.

Stevens served on the Supreme Court from 1975 until his retirement in 2010. Nominated by President Gerald Ford, Stevens recently published a memoir.

Syria

Violence Reaches New Heights

BY ZEINA KARAM
 Associated Press

BEIRUT — Thirteen bound corpses, many apparently shot execution-style, have been discovered in eastern Syria, U.N. observers said Wednesday, days after the massacre of more than 100 people provoked international outrage and the coordinated expulsion of Syrian diplomats from world capitals.

The latest killings happened in Deir el-Zour province, where the bodies were found late Tuesday blindfolded with their hands tied behind their backs. A statement by the U.N. mission said some appeared to have been shot in the head at close range.

A video posted online by activists showed the men lying face down, pools of dried blood under their heads.

The head of the U.N. observer team, Maj. Gen. Robert Mood, said he was "deeply disturbed by this appalling and inexcusable act."

The fresh killings underline violence that seems to be spiraling out of control as the uprising against President Bashar Assad that began in March 2011 has morphed into an armed insurgency. Activists say as many as 13,000 people have been killed



AUSTIN TICE/MCT

A group gathers near a home in al-Latamneh, Hama Province, Syria that was reportedly razed by Syrian Army forces after its owner's brother defected from the Syrian Army. Upon seeing a Western photographer, the women were concerned that United Nations observers might be nearby. Syrian Army units are known to attack areas that UN observers have recently visited.

since the revolt began.

In the wake of last weekend's massacre in Houla, in which nearly half of the 108 dead were children, the United States and Western nations expelled Syrian diplomats in protest — a move Syria's state-run media denounced Wednesday as "unprecedented hysteria."

The massacre drew continued harsh criticism Wednesday, even from Syria's closest ally Iran,

with Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad saying that anyone responsible for the killings should be punished. "I'm not excluding anyone from this responsibility," Ahmadinejad told France 24 TV station.

U.N. investigators and survivors have blamed pro-regime gunmen for at least some of the carnage in Houla, a collection of poor farming villages in central Homs province, saying men in

civilian clothes gunned down people in the streets and stabbed women and children in their homes. The Syrian government denied its troops were behind the killings and blamed "armed terrorists."

Damascus had said it would conclude its own investigation into the Houla deaths by Wednesday but it was not clear if the findings would be made public. The U.N.'s top human rights body planned to hold a special session Friday to address the massacre.

Meanwhile, violence continued unabated. Syrian forces bombed rebel-held areas and clashed with army defectors in Homs province, killing at least eight people, activists said.

The United States, Britain, Canada, Australia, France, Germany, Italy, Spain and Bulgaria ordered top Syrian diplomats to leave on Tuesday.

On Wednesday, Turkey, Syria's neighbor and a former close ally, joined the coordinated diplomatic action, saying it ordered the Syrian charge d'affaires and other diplomats at the Syrian Embassy in Ankara to leave the country within 72 hours. The consulate in Istanbul will remain open for consular duties only.

Fed Flood Insurance Program Extended

BY JIM ABRAMS
 Associated Press

WASHINGTON — Congress has given itself two more months to come up with long-term solutions for the debt-burdened federal program that provides insurance for homes and businesses in areas subject to flooding.

A voice vote in the House Wednesday extended the life of the National Flood Insurance Program for 60 days, assuring that people in flood-risk areas will continue to have access to the flood insurance they need to close on mortgages or obtain re-financing. The program is slated

to expire Thursday.

The last full-scale reauthorization of the NFIP, a wing of the Federal Emergency Management Agency, occurred in 2004. Since 2008 the insurance provider has stayed alive through a series of 16 short-term extensions while lawmakers debate how to restore its fiscal soundness.

The NFIP was largely self-financing until it was overwhelmed by claims from hurricanes Katrina and Rita in 2005. It now owes nearly \$18 billion to the Treasury.

Rep. Judy Biggert, R-Ill., chair of the House Financial Services

subcommittee on insurance, said she hoped Wednesday's 17th stopgap measure would be the last, "because this program is too important to let lapse, and too in debt to continue without reform."

She said Senate leaders had given public and private assurances that they would vote on a long-term extension in June.

The House last year passed a five-year extension that allowed for increased premiums and ended some subsidies, but the Senate has been unable to get a companion bill to the floor for a vote.

The Senate last week passed the 60-day extension after adding a provision by Sen. Tom Coburn, R-Okla., that would gradually eliminate premium rate subsidies for people buying second homes and vacation homes in flood-prone areas. Coburn said that could save the program \$2.7 billion over 10 years.

The NFIP was created in 1969, partly to fill the gap left by the unwillingness of private insurers to provide flood insurance. It now covers some 5.6 million policyholders in 21,000 flood-prone communities.

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