

France Recalls Ambassador To Syria

BEIRUT (AP) — Syria's president faced a growing challenge to his iron rule from home and abroad Wednesday, with renegade troops launching their most daring attack yet on the military and world leaders looking at possibilities for a regime without Bashar Assad.

France recalled its ambassador to Damascus in the wake of recent attacks against diplomatic missions and increasing violence stemming from the 8-month-old uprising. French Foreign Minister Alain Juppe warned that "the vise is tightening" around Assad, and a government spokeswoman said Paris is working with the Syrian opposition to find an alternative to the regime.

The move comes as the 22-member Arab League formally suspended Damascus over the crackdown, which the U.N. estimates has killed more than 3,500 people, and threatened economic sanctions if the regime continues to violate an Arab-brokered peace plan.

The foreign ministers also gave the Syrian government three days to respond to an Arab peace plan that involves sending an Arab League delegation to monitor compliance.

Gingrich Defends His Work

URBANDALE, Iowa (AP) — Rising in polls and receiving greater scrutiny, Republican presidential candidate Newt Gingrich found himself on the defensive Wednesday over huge payments he received over the past decade from the mortgage giant Freddie Mac.

Gingrich, who now is near the top in polling on the GOP race, said he didn't remember exactly how much he was paid, but a person familiar with the hiring said it was at least \$1.6 million for consulting contracts stretching from 1999 to early 2008. The person spoke on condition of anonymity in order to address a personnel matter.

Long unpopular among Republicans, federally backed Freddie Mac and its larger sister institution, Fannie Mae, have become targets for criticism stemming from the housing crisis that helped drive the nation deep into recession and then hampered recovery. Gingrich himself criticized Barack Obama in 2008 for accepting contributions from executives of the two companies.

Speaking with reporters in Iowa on Wednesday, Gingrich said he provided "strategic advice for a long period of time" after he resigned as House speaker following his party's losses in the 1998 elections. He defended Freddie Mac's role in housing finance and said, "every American should be interested in expanding housing opportunities."

On Tuesday, a House committee voted to strip top executives of Freddie Mac and Fannie Mae of huge salaries and bonuses and to put them on the same pay scale as federal employees. After disastrous losses, both companies were taken over by the government in 2008, and since then a federal regulator has controlled their financial decisions.

Monti Forms New Italian Government

ROME (AP) — Italian Premier Mario Monti formed a government of bankers, diplomats and business executives Wednesday, saying the absence of politicians in his Cabinet will spare political parties the "embarrassment" of taking the tough decisions needed to steer the country from financial disaster.

The 68-year-old former European Union competition commissioner and his Cabinet were sworn in at a solemn ceremony at the presidential palace that formally ended Silvio Berlusconi's 3 1/2-year-old government and the media mogul's 17-year-long political dominance.

Monti faces his first major hurdle Thursday when he presents his legislative agenda to parliament and subjects his government to a confidence vote in the Senate.

The vote in the lower Chamber of Deputies is expected Friday.

In another troubled European economy, Greek Prime Minister Lucas Papademos easily won a confidence vote Wednesday for his new government, formed last week with politicians from the Socialists, the rival conservatives and a small right-wing party. He won 255-38 in the 300-member parliament.

Facebook Says Most Spam Is Gone

NEW YORK (AP) — Facebook said Wednesday that it has stopped most of the spam that has flooded many users' pages with pictures showing graphic sex and violence.

The social-networking company urged its 800 million-plus users to remain vigilant to keep their accounts from being hijacked.

That includes reporting suspicious links on friends' pages and not clicking on links that offer deals that are too good to be true.

Social-networking sites are popular targets for spammers because people are more likely to trust and share content that comes from people they know. This makes spam, scams and viruses easy to spread.

Still, Facebook says less than 4 percent of content shared on the site is spam. By comparison, about 74 percent of email is spam, according to security firm Symantec, though the bulk gets filtered out before reaching the inbox.

Congress OKs Bill For Veterans

WASHINGTON (AP) — Congress has overwhelmingly approved a bill helping government contractors and unemployed veterans, finally giving President Barack Obama the chance to sign the first, tiny shred of his \$447 billion jobs bill into law.

The House consented to the popular legislation Wednesday 422-0 as Democrats and Republicans rallied on a rare patch of common ground. The Senate passed the measure 95-0 last week.

The bill creates tax breaks for companies hiring jobless veterans and beefs up vets' job-training and counseling programs.

It also repeals a law that would require the government to withhold 3 percent of its payments to contractors to compel them to pay their taxes.

Obama proposed the veterans tax credits in his jobs bill. It is worth \$95 million — a tiny fraction of his overall jobs plan.

Countering China, Obama Asserts U.S. Pacific Power

BY BEN FELLER
AP White House Correspondent

CANBERRA, Australia — Signaling a determination to counter a rising China, President Barack Obama vowed Thursday to expand U.S. influence in the Asia-Pacific region and "project power and deter threats to peace" in that part of the world even as he reduces defense spending and winds down two wars.

"The United States is a Pacific power, and we are here to stay," he declared in a speech to the Australian Parliament, sending an unmistakable message to Beijing.

Obama's bullish speech came several hours after announcing he would send military aircraft and up to 2,500 Marines to northern Australia for a training hub to help allies and protect American interests across Asia. He declared the U.S. is not afraid of China, by far the biggest and most powerful country in the region.

China immediately questioned the U.S. move and said it deserved further scrutiny.

Emphasizing that a U.S. presence in the Asia-

Pacific region is a top priority of his administration, Obama stressed that any reductions in U.S. defense spending will not come at the expense of that goal.

"Let there be no doubt: in the Asia Pacific in the 21st century, the United States of America is all in," he said.

For Obama, Asia represents both a security challenge and an economic opportunity. Speaking in broad geopolitical terms, the president asserted: "With most of the world's nuclear powers and some half of humanity, Asia will largely define whether the century ahead will be marked by conflict or cooperation, needless suffering or human progress."

Virtually everything Obama is doing on his nine-day trip across the Asia-Pacific region has a Chinese subtext, underscoring a relationship that is at once cooperative and marked by tensions over currency, human rights and military might.

China's military spending has increased threefold since the 1990s to about \$160 billion last year, and its military recently tested a new stealth jet fighter and launched its first aircraft

carrier. A congressional advisory panel on Wednesday said China's buildup is focused on dealing with America's own defenses and exploiting possible weaknesses.

The panel, the U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission, urged the White House and Congress to look more closely at China's military expansion and pressed for a tougher stance against what it called anticompetitive Chinese trade policies.

The U.S. and smaller Asian nations have grown increasingly concerned about China's claims of dominion over Pacific waters and the revival of old territorial disputes, including confrontations over the South China Sea. China says it has sovereignty over the vast sea.

Responding to questions at a news conference Wednesday with Australian Prime Minister Julia Gillard, Obama said, "The notion that we fear China is mistaken."

While stressing his intent to increase influence in the Asia-Pacific region, Obama avoided a confrontational tone with China in his speech to the Australian parliament.

A day of protests

Some of the U.S. cities where events are planned on Nov. 17 for a national day of action by Occupy Wall Street protesters joined by unions and liberal groups to call for more jobs and better economic conditions:



Chronology of the Occupy movement

- July 13** Canadian anti-consumerist magazine *Abusters* issues a call to occupy Wall Street
- Aug. 30** Anonymous, a hacktivist group, releases video on the Internet in support of occupation
- Sept. 17** Nearly 1,000 people begin occupation of Zuccotti Park in New York's financial district
- Oct. 1** More than 700 protesters arrested for marching across the Brooklyn Bridge, blocking traffic
- Oct. 15** Global Day of Action; protests in more than 80 countries; occupations spread
- Oct. 21** About 100 occupiers removed by police from tents in Melbourne, Australia; later, camps in Oakland, Calif., Boston, Atlanta, elsewhere are broken up by police
- Nov. 16** New York City police in riot gear shut down encampment, 200 are arrested; occupiers vow to keep fighting against economic inequality

Source: American Dream Movement, Mother Jones Graphic: Judy Treible © 2011 MCT

Wall St. Protests Yielding Few Tangible Results

NEW YORK (AP) — Everywhere, it seems, people want to weigh in about the Occupy Wall Street protests around the country, from CEOs and politicians to your next-door neighbor. So far the talk has translated into little action.

Two months into the movement, with police dismantling the encampments one by one, city by city, few politicians or policymakers have publicly taken up the protesters' cause and done anything to address corporate excesses and economic inequality.

But some political observers say the demonstrators have changed the conversation in the U.S., and that is a big first step.

"They've shifted the center of gravity of the debate so that the whole question of wealth and privilege is now being discussed," said William Galston, a senior fellow at the Brookings Institution, the Washington political think tank. "In a democracy, what people are talking about matters."

Georgia state Sen. Vincent Fort, a Democrat who was among those arrested when protesters were expelled from an Atlanta park last month, said he is not troubled by

the absence of any major tangible change.

"The Occupy movement is a relative baby. It's just a few months old," he said. "The most important thing it has done is to change the conversation in this country. You can't have any policy change, you can't have any legislative change, until the debate is changed."

Examples of real, measurable Occupy-inspired change in the political sphere are hard to come by.

In Rhode Island, Democratic Sen. Sheldon Whitehouse noted that Occupy activists encouraged customers to fight back recently against fees imposed by major banks — a fight that ended with Bank of America and its competitors backing down.

Whitehouse is trying to channel the anger that has bubbled up in the Occupy movement against big banks as he seeks support for a bill to crack down on credit card interest rates.

Union leaders say the Occupy movement has also brought a spark of optimism and energy to organized labor after a summer of setbacks and assaults on their bargaining power.

Millionaires On Capitol Hill: Please Tax Us More!

WASHINGTON (AP) — Lobbyists for a day, a band of millionaires stormed Capitol Hill on Wednesday to urge Congress to tax them more.

They had a little trouble getting in. It turns out there are procedures, even for the really rich.

But once inside, their message was embraced by liberals and tolerated by some conservatives — including the ideological leader of anti-tax lawmakers, who had some advice for them, too.

"If you think the federal government can spend your money better than you can, then by all means" pay more in taxes than you owe, said Grover Norquist, of Americans for Tax Reform, a group that has gotten almost all congressional Republicans to pledge to vote against tax hikes. The IRS should have a little line on the form where people can donate money to the government, he suggested, "just like the tip line on a restaurant receipt."

One of the millionaires suggested that if Norquist wanted low taxes and less government, "Renounce your American citizenship and move to Somalia where they don't collect any tax."

In the silence left by the private efforts of the "supercommittee" to find \$1.2 trillion or more in deficit cuts by Thanksgiving, free advice flowed in public.

And not just any advice: pie-in-the-sky suggestions from those not connected to the talks, mostly

to reopen debates that have led nowhere.

The millionaires want the panel to raise taxes on people who earn more than \$1 million, even though most Republicans are committed against the idea. And 150 House member and senators urged a much bigger debt-and-deficit deal, even as a small-scope agreement is proving elusive.

While they were at it, the lawmakers insisted that bipartisanship was not, in fact, dead.

This group of House members and senators shared a stage and some jokes and signed a letter urging the supercommittee of Republicans and Democrats to find the required \$1.2 trillion in cuts — plus about \$2.8 trillion more. They all want the panel to avoid triggering automatic cuts as a penalty for failing.

So this uneasy alliance of 150 Republicans and Democrats will vote for whatever deal the supercommittee strikes?

"No," said House Democratic Whip Steny Hoyer. "Nobody's going to commit to the deal until they see the deal."

What deal? There is no evidence that one is near, so the millionaires tried to meet with anyone who would meet with them.

The progressive caucus did, eagerly and on-camera. The rest wasn't so easy.

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