

House Kills Bill Containing \$3.7B Disaster Aid

WASHINGTON (AP) — The House has rejected a measure providing \$3.7 billion for disaster relief as part of a bill to keep the government running through mid-November. The surprise 230-195 defeat for GOP leaders came at the hands of Democrats and tea party Republicans.

Democrats were opposed because the measure contains cuts to a government loan program to help car companies build fuel efficient vehicles.

For their part, many GOP conservatives feel the underlying bill permits spending at too high a rate.

Americans Freed From Iran Prison After 2 Years

MUSCAT, Oman (AP) — After more than two years in Iranian custody, two Americans convicted as spies took their first steps toward home Wednesday as they bounded down from a private jet and into the arms of family for a joyful reunion in the Gulf state of Oman.

The families called this "the best day of our lives," and President Barack Obama said their release — under a \$1 million bail-for-freedom deal — "wonderful news."

The release capped complicated diplomatic maneuvers over a week of confusing signals by Iran's leadership on the fate of Josh Fattal and Shane Bauer.

Although the fate of the two gripped America, it was on the periphery of the larger showdowns between Washington and Tehran that include Iran's nuclear program and its ambitions to widen military and political influence in the Middle East and beyond. But — for a moment at least — U.S. officials may be adding words of thanks in addition to their calls for alarm over Iran.

For Tehran, it was a chance to court some goodwill after sending a message of defiance with hard-line justice in the July 2009 arrests of the Americans along the Iran-Iraq border. The Americans always maintained they were innocent hikers.

Typhoon Slams Japan, Leaves 13 Missing

TOKYO (AP) — A powerful typhoon slammed into Japan Wednesday, halting trains and leaving 13 people dead or missing in south-central regions before grazing a crippled nuclear plant and heaping rain on the tsunami-ravaged northeast.

Officials at the Fukushima Dai-ichi plant, where engineers are still struggling with small radiation leaks due to tsunami damage, expressed relief that Typhoon Roke's driving winds and rain caused no immediate problems there other than a broken security camera.

"The worst seems to be over," said Takeo Iwamoto, spokesman for plant operator Tokyo Electric Power Co., after the storm passed just west of the plant on its way north.

But the typhoon brought new misery to the northeastern region already slammed by the March 11 earthquake and tsunami, dumping up to 17 inches (42 centimeters) of rain in some areas.

Authorities warned of a high risk of mudslides in that region. Hundreds of tsunami survivors in government shelters in the Miyagi state town of Onagawa were forced to evacuate for fear of flooding.

Romney Questions Perry On Social Security

MIAMI (AP) — Republican presidential candidate Mitt Romney on Wednesday questioned how Rick Perry would fix Social Security as the focus of the GOP presidential race turns to senior citizen-rich Florida this week.

In a likely preview of a Thursday debate in Orlando, Romney took issue with Perry's contention in a recently published book that each of the 50 states would better handle the huge federal program.

"In my opinion, this does not work in any way, shape or form," Romney, the former Massachusetts governor, said at a town hall meeting attended by about 75 people. Romney also asserted that Perry called Social Security "unconstitutional" and added: "I believe it is constitutional. I think that's proven and settled."

While Perry indeed roundly criticized Social Security in his book, he didn't use the word unconstitutional. Rather, Perry branded the program the "best example" of the "fraud" and "bad disease" spread by Washington in Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal. Perry furthermore criticized the Supreme Court of that era for "abdication its role as the protector of constitutional federalism."

Romney's criticism marks the start of an important three-day stretch for the GOP presidential field in the perennial battleground state of Florida. There's Thursday's debate, with events sponsored by the social conservative group Faith and Freedom Coalition stretching into Friday and a nonbinding test vote of party faithful on Saturday.

R.E.M. Calling It Quits After Almost 3 Decades

NEW YORK (AP) — R.I.P. to R.E.M. The alternative rock group that shook up the music world with its experimental, edgy sound and then earned multiplatinum success and a place in the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame announced on its website Wednesday that it has "decided to call it a day as a band."

"A wise man once said — 'the skill in attending a party is knowing when it's time to leave.' We built something extraordinary together. We did this thing. And now we're going to walk away from it," frontman Michael Stipe said in a statement on the website.

"I hope our fans realize this wasn't an easy decision; but all things must end, and we wanted to do it right, to do it our way."

The Grammy-winning group, now composed of Stipe, guitarist Peter Buck and bassist Mike Mills, released its debut album "Murmur" in 1983; at the time it was a quartet, with drummer Bill Berry.

High Court Refuses To Block Execution

BY GREG BLUESTEIN
 Associated Press

JACKSON, Ga. — The Supreme Court late Wednesday rejected an 11th-hour request to block the execution of Troy Davis, who convinced hundreds of thousands of people but not the justice system of his innocence in the murder of an off-duty police officer.

The court did not comment on its order late Wednesday, four hours after receiving the request. Davis' execution had been set to begin at 7 p.m., but the high court's decision was not issued until after 10 p.m.

Though Davis' attorneys say seven of nine key witnesses against him have disputed all or parts of their testimony, state and federal judges have repeatedly ruled against granting him a new trial. As the court losses piled up Wednesday, his offer to take a polygraph test was rejected and the pardons board refused to give him one more hearing.

Davis' supporters staged vigils in the U.S. and Europe, declaring "I am Troy Davis" on signs, T-shirts and the Internet. Some tried increasingly frenzied measures, urging prison workers to stay home and even posting a judge's phone number online, hoping people will press him to put a stop to the lethal injection. President Barack Obama deflected calls for him to get involved.

"They say death row; we say hell no!" protesters shouted outside the Jackson prison where Davis was to be executed. In Washington, a crowd outside the Supreme Court yelled the same chant.

The crowd outside the prison swelled to more than 500 as night fell and a few dozen riot police stood watch. About 10 counter-demonstrators also were there, showing support for the death penalty and the family of Mark MacPhail, the man Davis was convicted of killing in 1989.

"He had all the chances in the world," his mother, Anneliese MacPhail, said of Davis in a telephone interview. "It has got to come to an end."

At a Paris rally, many of the roughly 150 demonstrators carried signs emblazoned with Davis' face. "Everyone who looks a little bit at the case knows that there is too much doubt to execute him," Nicolas Krameyer of Amnesty International said at the protest.

Davis' execution has been stopped three times since 2007, but on Wednesday the 42-year-old appeared to be out of legal options.

As his last hours ticked away, an upbeat and prayerful Davis turned down an offer for a special last meal as he met with friends, family and supporters.

"Troy Davis has impacted the world," his sister Martina Correia said at a news conference. "They say, 'I am Troy Davis,' in languages he can't speak."

Correia, who is battling breast cancer and using a wheelchair as she helps coordinate rallies and other events, called on people to push for change in the justice system. Then she said, "I'm going to stand here for my brother," and got up with help from people around her.

His attorney Stephen Marsh said Davis would have spent part of Wednesday taking a polygraph test if pardons officials had taken his offer seriously.

"He doesn't want to spend three hours away from his family on what could be the last day of his life if it won't make any difference," Marsh said.

Amnesty International says nearly 1 million people have signed a petition on Davis' behalf. His supporters include former President Jimmy Carter, Pope Benedict XVI, a former FBI director, the NAACP, several conservative figures and many celebrities, including hip-hop star Sean "P. Diddy" Combs.

"I'm trying to bring the word to the young people: There is too much doubt," rapper Big Boi, of the Atlanta-based group Outkast, said at a church near the prison.

The U.S. Supreme Court gave Davis an unusual opportunity to prove his innocence in a lower court last year, though the high court itself did not hear the merits of the case.

Oil

From Page 1

2-year construction period.

Pipeline opponents have urged Heineman to call a special legislative session so lawmakers can impose regulations on the pipe route. Heineman said lawmakers missed their chance this year and still don't have the votes.

Heineman said he met with Malcolm Sen. Ken Haar, a leading pipeline critic in the Legislature, but said he has not yet seen enough support to call a special session.

Heineman has urged federal officials to reject the pipeline unless another route is chosen, and has called on U.S. Sen. Ben Nelson, a Democrat up for re-election in 2012, to call his "best friends"

Obama and Clinton and urge them to reject the proposal.

Nelson has said the pipeline's route is up to the states, citing a 2010 Congressional Budget Office report and the U.S. State Department's environmental impact statement about the project. On Wednesday, Nelson said governors should certify the Keystone XL pipeline's route before the State Department takes final action.

Nelson said Nebraska's state government hasn't done enough.

"I believe there ought to be some kind of certification from governors in the states the pipeline crosses to make sure the development of the pipeline proceeds as a partnership between the federal governments and the states," Nelson said in remarks to the Senate Appropriations Committee in Washington.

He was convicted in 1991 of killing MacPhail, who was working as a security guard at the time. MacPhail rushed to the aid of a homeless man who prosecutors said Davis was bashing with a handgun after asking him for a beer. Prosecutors said Davis had a smirk on his face as he shot the officer to death in a Burger King parking lot in Savannah.

No gun was ever found, but prosecutors say shell casings were linked to an earlier shooting for which Davis was convicted.

Witnesses placed Davis at the crime scene and identified him as the shooter, but several of them have recanted their accounts and some jurors have said they've changed their minds about his guilt. Others have claimed a man who was with Davis that night has told people he actually shot the officer.

"Such incredibly flawed eyewitness testimony should never be the basis for an execution," Marsh said. "To execute someone under these circumstances would be unconscionable."

State and federal courts, however, have repeatedly upheld Davis' conviction. One federal

judge dismissed the evidence advanced by Davis' lawyers as "largely smoke and mirrors."

"He has had ample time to prove his innocence," said MacPhail's widow, Joan MacPhail-Harris. "And he is not innocent."

The latest motion filed by Davis' attorneys in Butts County Court disputed testimony from the expert who linked the shell casings to the earlier shooting involving Davis, and challenged testimony from two witnesses. Superior Court Judge Thomas Wilson and the Georgia Supreme Court rejected the appeal, and prosecutors said the filing was just a delay tactic.

The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, which has helped lead the charge to stop the execution, said it was considering asking President Barack Obama to intervene.

Obama cannot grant Davis clemency for a state conviction. Richard Dieter, executive director of the Death Penalty Information Center, said he could halt the execution by asking for an investigation into a federal issue if one exists.



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