

Romney, Obama Aim At Swing Voters On Health Care

BY THOMAS BEAUMONT AND JIM KUHNHENN
 Associated Press

BOSTON — With swing voters in his sights, Republican presidential candidate Mitt Romney is tacking toward the center on health care and defense spending now that he's put his final partisan hurdle behind him and the sprint to Nov. 6 is underway.

Romney said in an interview that aired Sunday that he would retain some popular parts of the 2010 health care law he has pledged to repeal, saying the features he would keep are common-sense measures in what he calls an otherwise costly, inefficient plan.

The former Massachusetts governor also faulted congressional Republicans for going along with the White House on a budget deal that has set up automatic spending cuts that include huge reductions in defense spending — a deal his running mate, Rep. Paul Ryan, helped steer.

Meanwhile, President Barack Obama focused Floridians' attention on the Republican ticket's stand on Medicare, an issue that's been more favorable to Democrats.

Romney's campaign dismissed the idea that the comments were a lurch toward the middle now that the Republican convention, the last partisan event of the campaign, has passed, even as Romney was visiting the most competitive states on the election map.

"I'm not getting rid of all of health care reform. Of course, there are a number of things that I like in health care reform that I'm going to put in place," Romney told NBC's "Meet the Press" in an interview taped Friday and Saturday. He cited coverage for people with medical conditions and new insurance marketplaces.

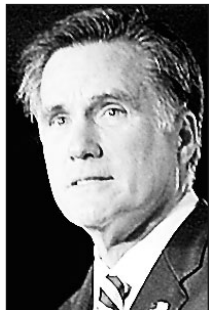
Romney's aides said that was consistent with his previous position that those who haven't had a gap in coverage shouldn't be denied coverage.

But the comments brought renewed attention to the similarities between Obama's plan and the one Romney championed when he was Massachusetts governor, which included protections for health conditions and an individual mandate that the Republican has since raided again.

The GOP nominee, who attended church in Boston before debate practice sessions Sunday, didn't offer specifics for how he'd deal with the affordability of insurance, but suggested competition would help bring down costs. For seniors, Romney has called for restructuring Medicare by giving retirees a government payment that they would use to choose between traditional Medicare and private insurance.

Romney aides dismissed the idea that the candidate's comments about the defense cuts or health care were an effort to appear less partisan with the race for undecided voters now under way.

Spokesman Kevin Madden said Romney was sharper in his criticism of Obama than he was of House Republicans on military cuts. Madden also said calling for the repeal of the 2010 health care law and supporting some of its provisions are consistent.



Romney



Obama

"Repealing Obamacare is a focus because it costs too much and the taxes and regulations are hurting small business. That's common sense," Madden said. "Affordability and portability of health care insurance aren't partisan issues."

Obama, campaign for a second day in Florida, tried to move past a weak jobs report Friday and highlight the impact of Romney's proposals on older workers and those nearing retirement.

The president promoted a study showing that future retirees under Romney's plan would pay tens of thousands of dollars more for health care over their retirement period. The report was rejected quickly by Romney's campaign, which faulted Obama for relying on "discredited attacks" and noted the study was conducted by Obama's former adviser.

Obama told about 3,000 supporters in Melbourne, Fla., that if Romney had his way, Americans will pay more so insurers could make more. "No American should have to spend their golden years at the mercy of insurance companies," he said.

In Ohio, another critical battleground, Vice President Joe Biden piled on, mocking Republicans for saying they want to protect Medicare and claiming that under Romney's leadership, benefits would be slashed.

Hoping to put a human face on the issue, Obama ate breakfast at a Florida cafe with two older couples concerned about Medicare costs. But a brief interaction with another patron and Romney supporter underscored what polls show is a persistent problem for Obama with voters who like him personally but question his economic competence.

"I always thought he was a very personable person, nice person," said 73-year-old Bill Terrell of Cocoa, Fla. "I just don't think he's doing a good job on the economy."

In broadcast interviews, Romney and Ryan kept the heat on Obama on the economic front, warning that across-the-board spending cuts set to take effect at the start of 2013 could devastate the defense budget. Half of the cuts are expected to come from the Pentagon if Congress doesn't reach a budget solution in the next few months.

But Romney's attacks on the president for signing the deficit-reduction measure had some collateral damage for his running mate, who as House Budget Committee chairman both voted for and loudly praised the bill that created the trigger for the automatic spending cuts.

"I thought it was a mistake on the part of the White House to propose it," Romney said. "I think it was a mistake for Republicans to go along with it."

With an eye toward undecided voters dismayed by the lackluster recovery, Romney and Ryan faulted Obama for failing to provide the tax relief they say holds the key to the creation of millions of jobs. Romney has pledged to lower tax rates for by 20 percent for all Americans — including the wealthy.

Romney has said he'll pay for those cuts by eliminating loopholes and deductions for higher-income earners. But both Republicans were unyielding in saying that the specifics would come only after the election.

"Mitt Romney and I, based on our experience, think the best way to do this is to show the framework, show the outlines of these plans, and then to work with Congress to do this," Ryan said on ABC's "This Week."

Drawing attention to his opponents' reticence, Obama shot back hours later, saying Ryan and Romney deserve a failing math grade instead of accolades for bold leadership.

"They need to stay after school. They need to get some extra study hall in there. No recess for you," Obama said.

For Obama, Florida presents a convergence of issues. Even as Obama sought to touch a nerve on health care, Romney's campaign was trying to stoke anti-Obama sentiments among the state's numerous Jewish voters and donors by drawing attention to the flap at the Democratic National Convention over whether the party platform should define Jerusalem as the capital of Israel.

White House press secretary Jay Carney sought to distinguish between what Obama has said is his personal view — that Jerusalem is and should remain the capital of Israel — and longstanding U.S. foreign policy, which states that the status of Jerusalem should be part of final negotiations between Israelis and Palestinians.

Also on the minds of some Florida residents was the future of the U.S. space program. Greeting Obama as he arrived at his rally in Melbourne was a knot of protesters holding anti-Obama signs, including one that read: "Obama lied. Space Coast died."

Melbourne, home of the Kennedy Space Center and the Florida Institute of Technology, has been hard hit by cutbacks in the space program. Obama's campaign cast blame on President George W. Bush and House Republicans, while Obama said his proposals to put the U.S. on the cutting edge of space exploration would inspire the next generation.

Romney, who took a break from the campaign trail during the Democratic convention last week, has returned to the most competitive states, with recent stops in Iowa, New Hampshire and Virginia. A rally Monday in Mansfield, Ohio, will be followed by a Chicago fundraiser. On Tuesday, the 11th anniversary of the 9/11 attacks, Romney plans to speak to a veterans group in Reno, Nev.

Car Bomb Kills 17 In North Syrian City Of Aleppo

BY JAMAL HALABY AND ALBERT AJI
 Associated Press

AMMAN, Jordan — A car bomb ripped through Syria's largest city of Aleppo on Sunday, killing at least 17 people and wounding 40 in one of the main battlegrounds of the country's civil war, state-run media said.

Al-Qaida-style bombings have become increasingly common in Syria, and Western officials say there is little doubt that Islamist extremists, some associated with the terror network, have made inroads in the country as instability has spread. But the main fighting force looking to oust President Bashar Assad is the Free Syrian Army, a group made up largely of defected Syrian soldiers.

Sunday's blast came hours after a Jordanian militant leader linked to al-Qaida warned that his extremist group will launch "deadly attacks" to help the rebels in Syria topple Assad.

In a speech delivered to a crowd of nearly 200 followers protesting outside the prime minister's office in Amman, Mohammad al-Shalabi, better known as Abu Sayyaf, told Assad that "our fighters are coming to get you."

The warning fueled concern that Syria's civil war is providing a new forum for foreign jihadists, who fought alongside Iraqi Sunni insurgents after the 2003 invasion of Iraq and are sending fighters to help the Taliban in Afghanistan.

A Jordan-based Western diplomat who monitors Syria from his base in Jordan said the number of foreign fighters is about 100 but that figure is gradually rising. He spoke on condition of anonymity, saying identifying him further could risk his ability to gather information on Syria.

"From this podium, we declare jihad (holy war) against the wicked Assad, who is shedding the blood of our Sunni Muslim brothers in Syria," Abu Sayyaf yelled through a loudspeaker.

Abu Sayyaf is the head of Jordan's Salafi Jihadist group, which

was blamed for the 2002 assassination of U.S. aid worker Laurence Foley outside his Amman home. He himself was convicted in 2004 of plotting attacks on Jordanian air bases hosting American trainers but served his term and was released last year.

The fight for Aleppo, a city of 3 million that was once a bastion of support for President Bashar Assad, is critical for both the regime and the opposition. Its fall would give the opposition a major strategic victory with a stronghold in the north near the Turkish border. A rebel defeat, at the very least, would buy Assad more time.

State-run TV aired footage of fire trucks trying to extinguish the blaze and rescue workers digging through mounds of rubble left by the car bomb. Aleppo's governor, Mohammed Wahid Akkad, was quoted by Syria's official news agency, SANA, as saying 17 dead were civilians.

No group immediately claimed responsibility for the attack. SANA blamed terrorists, the term the regime uses for rebels. Opposition activists could not immediately be reached for comment.

Fighting also raged elsewhere in Syria, with at least 58 people reported killed and scores wounded, according to the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights — a Britain-based monitoring group. That figure excluded the car bomb but included eight killed in an air raid earlier in Aleppo that flattened a residential building, the group said.

The Free Syrian Army said the strikes came hours after rebels overran army barracks in the Hananu neighborhood.

The Syrian conflict has its roots in mostly peaceful street protests that started in March last year. Since then, it has expanded into a civil war, with 23,000 people killed so far, according to human rights activists.

Most rebel leaders deny outright that foreigners are among

their ranks. Others say foreigners have only a limited presence.

Still, as the battle grinds on, observers have noticed increasingly sectarian overtones to some of the violence, suggesting any power vacuum will usher in a bloodbath pitting Syria's majority Sunni population against the Assad family's minority Alawite sect, which is an offshoot of Shiite Islam.

Syria's rebels enjoy widespread sympathy across Sunni Arab countries.

On the diplomatic front, Syrian Foreign Ministry spokesman Jihad Makdessi criticized France, saying its growing support for the opposition does nothing but hinder the mission of the new U.N.-Arab League envoy, Lakhdar Brahimi, who is tasked with brokering a diplomatic solution to the conflict.

France, Syria's one-time colonial ruler, has been one of the most outspoken Western critics of the Assad regime and announced earlier this month that it has begun sending direct aid and money to five rebel-held Syrian cities as part of intensified efforts to weaken Assad. It was the first such move by a Western power.

Makdessi said France suffers from "schizophrenia" in its approach to the country's conflict.

"On the one hand, it supports Brahimi's mission, while at the same time it makes statements demonstrating that it supports the militarization of the crisis in Syria," Makdessi told The Associated Press.

French officials have acknowledged providing communications and other non-lethal equipment to Syrian rebel forces, but say they won't provide weapons without international agreement. France played a leading role in

the international campaign against Libya's dictator Moammar Gadhafi last year.

Diplomatic efforts to solve the seemingly intractable conflict have failed so far. A peace plan by former U.N. Secretary-General Kofi Annan never got off the ground, and Annan quit his post as special U.N. envoy. He was replaced Sept. 1 by Brahimi, a 78-year-old former Algerian foreign minister.

Makdessi reaffirmed that Syria is "fully committed to cooperating with Brahimi," adding that "the only way to make Brahimi's mission a success is the cooperation of all parties to enable him to bring about calmness and then the political process."

In Iran, a Foreign Ministry official said that Brahimi would visit Iran as part of efforts to revive a peace effort, according to the semi-official Mehr news agency. It quoted Deputy Foreign Minister Abbas Eraghchi as saying Brahimi will visit Tehran at an "appropriate time" but gave no other details.

The Assad regime made similar public statements of cooperation when it signed on to Annan's peace plan, only to frequently ignore or outright violate its commitments by refusing to pull troops out of cities and cease its shelling of opposition areas.

Back in Syria, activists also reported clashes between government forces and rebels in a Palestinian refugee camp on the outskirts of the capital, Damascus, in the central city of Homs, in the northern city of Idlib, in the eastern city of Deir el-Zour and the restive southern town of Daraa bordering Jordan.

The Observatory said the heaviest fighting was in Homs, where 17 people had been killed.

Congress Returns For Pre-Election Session

WASHINGTON (AP) — Fresh off a five-week vacation, lawmakers return to Washington on Monday for a brief pre-election session in which Congress will do what it often does best: punt its problems to the future.

There's a slew of deadlines and the prospect of a debilitating "fiscal cliff" in January. But lawmakers are expected to take a pass on the big issues of taxes and spending cuts and instead focus on doing the bare minimum — preventing a government shutdown when the budget year ends on Sept. 30.

At issue is a six-month temporary spending bill to finance the day-to-day operations of the federal government. The annual appropriations process on Capitol Hill collapsed about midway through the campaign season.

Fla. Officer In Obama Motorcade Struck, Killed

WEST PALM BEACH, Fla. (AP) — A motorcycle police officer escorting President Barack Obama's motorcade has died after being hit by a pickup truck.

Palm Beach County Sheriff's spokeswoman Teri Barbera says the Jupiter police officer was on Interstate 95 Sunday afternoon preparing to shut the roadway down when he was struck by a Ford F-150.

He was pronounced dead at a nearby hospital. His identity has not been released.

Barbera says an investigation is ongoing and no charges have yet been filed against the driver.

Obama made a campaign appearance at the Palm Beach County Convention Center.

White House press secretary Jay Carney says the president was notified of the officer's death and "our thoughts and prayers are with the officer's family."

Iraq's Sunni VP Sentenced To Death

BAGHDAD (AP) — Iraq's fugitive Sunni vice president was sentenced Sunday to death by hanging on charges he masterminded death squads against rivals in a terror trial that has fueled sectarian tensions in the country. Underscoring the instability, insurgents unleashed an onslaught of bombings and shootings across Iraq, killing at least 92 people in one of the deadliest days this year.

It's unlikely that the attacks in 13 cities were all timed to coincide with the afternoon verdict that capped a months-long case against Vice President Tariq al-Hashemi, a longtime foe of Shiite Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki. Still, taken together, the violence and verdict could energize Sunni insurgents bent on returning Iraq to the brink of civil war by targeting Shites and undermining the government.

Al-Hashemi fled to Turkey in the months after the Shiite-led government accused him of playing a role in 150 bombings, assassinations and other attacks from 2005 to 2011 — years in which the country was mired in retaliatory sectarian violence that followed the 2003 U.S.-led invasion that ousted Saddam Hussein's Sunni regime. Most of the attacks were allegedly carried out by al-Hashemi's bodyguards and other employees, and largely targeted government officials, security forces and Shiite pilgrims.

The vice president declined to immediately comment on the verdict after meeting with the Turkish Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoglu in Ankara. He said he would "tackle this issue in a statement" in coming hours.

The politically charged case — which was announced the day after U.S. troops withdrew from the country last December — sparked a government crisis and fueled Sunni Muslim and Kurdish resentment against al-Maliki, whom critics say is monopolizing power.

Chicago Teachers Prepare To Go On Strike

CHICAGO (AP) — With Chicago teachers poised to go on strike for the first time in a quarter century, parents spent Sunday worrying about how much their children's education might suffer and where their kids will go while they're at work.

Teachers said they would walk off the job Monday if no deal was reached with the district by midnight on issues such as pay, job security and evaluations. Parents have been waiting nervously for word of progress as city and union officials send messages that are discouraging one day and encouraging the next.

School officials have said they would open more than 140 schools between 8:30 a.m. and 12:30 p.m. if there is a strike so that children can eat lunch and breakfast in a district where most receive free meals.

Working parents such as Eric Ferrer said opening buildings for four hours won't help them much because they have to be at work all day.

Shell Begins Oil Drilling Off Alaskan Coast

ANCHORAGE, Alaska (AP) — More than four years after Royal Dutch Shell paid \$2.8 billion to the federal government for petroleum leases in the Chukchi Sea, a company vessel on Sunday morning sent a drill bit into the ocean floor, beginning preliminary work on an exploratory well 70 miles off the northwest coast of Alaska.

Drilling began at 4:30 a.m., said Shell Alaska spokesman Curtis Smith. Shell Alaska vice president Pete Slaiby called it historic.

"It's the first time a drill bit has touched the sea floor in the U.S. Chukchi Sea in more than two decades," Slaiby said in a prepared statement. "This is an exciting time for Alaska and for Shell. We look forward to continued drilling progress throughout the next several weeks and to adding another chapter to Alaska's esteemed oil and gas history."

Federal officials estimate Arctic waters in the Chukchi and Beaufort seas hold 26 billion barrels of recoverable oil and 130 trillion cubic feet of natural gas. Interior Secretary Ken Salazar announced Aug. 30 that Shell would be permitted to begin preparation work at the Chukchi site even though the company's spill response barge has not been certified and is not positioned nearby.

The company is authorized to drill narrow pilot holes 1,400 feet below the ocean floor and roughly 4,000 feet above a petroleum reservoir.

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