

As U.S. Debates, Fighting Continues In Syria

BY DAVID ESPO AND
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Associated Press

WASHINGTON — President Barack Obama's request for speedy congressional backing of a military strike in Syria advanced Wednesday toward a showdown Senate vote, while the commander in chief left open the possibility he would order retaliation for a deadly chemical weapons attack even if Congress withheld its approval.

Legislation backing the use of force against President Bashar Assad's government cleared the Senate Foreign Relations Committee on a 10-7 vote after it was stiffened at the last minute to include a pledge of support for "decisive changes to the present military balance of power" in Syria's civil war. It also would rule out U.S. combat operations on the ground.

The measure is expected to reach the Senate floor next week, although the timing for a vote is uncertain. Sen. Rand Paul, a Kentucky conservative with strong tea party ties, has threatened a filibuster.

The House also is reviewing Obama's request, but its timetable is even less certain and the measure could face a rockier time there.

The administration blames Assad for a chemical weapons attack that took place on Aug. 21 and says more than 1,400 civilians died, including at least 400 children. Other casualty estimates are lower, and the Syrian government denies responsibility, contending rebels fighting to topple the government were to blame.

The Senate panel's vote marked the first formal response in Congress, four days after Obama unexpectedly put off an anticipated cruise missile strike against Syria last weekend and instead asked lawmakers to unite first behind such a plan.

In Stockholm, Sweden, where Obama was traveling on Wednesday, the White House praised the vote, and said it would continue to seek support for "a military response that is narrowly tailored to enforce the prohibition on the use of chemical weapons, and sufficient to protect the national security interests of the United States of America."

Earlier, at a news conference Obama said, "I always preserve the right and responsibility to act on behalf of America's national security." In a challenge to lawmakers back home, he said Congress' credibility was on the line, not his own, despite saying a year ago that the use of chemical weapons would cross a "red line."

Secretary of State John Kerry said he believes Obama will address the nation on Syria in the next few days. The president returns home from overseas Friday night.

Obama's request also received its first hearing in the House during the day, and Kerry responded heatedly when Rep. Jeff Duncan, R-S.C., said that the secretary of state, Obama and Vice President Joseph Biden all had advocated for caution in past conflicts. "Is the power of the executive branch so intoxicating that you have abandoned past caution in favor of pulling the trigger on a military response so quickly?" Duncan asked.

Kerry, who fought in Vietnam in the 1960s and voted to authorize the war against Iraq a decade ago, shot back angrily: "I volunteered to fight for my country, and that wasn't a cautious thing to do when I did it." When Duncan interrupted, the secretary of state said, "I'm going to finish, congressman," and cited his support as senator for past U.S. military action in Panama and elsewhere.

The Senate committee's vote capped a hectic few days in which lawmakers first narrowed the scope of Obama's request — limiting it to 90 days and banning combat operations on the ground — and then widened it.

Sen. John McCain, R-Ariz., a proponent of aggressive U.S. military action in Syria, joined forces with Democratic Sen. Chris Coons of Delaware to add a provision calling for "decisive changes to the present military balance of power on the ground in Syria."

At their urging, the measure was also changed to state that the policy of the United States is "to change the momentum on the battlefield in Syria so as to create favorable conditions for a negotiated settlement that ends the conflict and leads to a democratic



Rise of modern Syria

1920 After 400 years of Ottoman rule, Syria comes under French mandate following Turkish defeat in World War I

1941 Syria falls to the Germans during World War II; British, French troops invade

1946 French troops leave; Syria gains independence

1947 Arab Socialist Baath Party formed

1958 Syria, Egypt form the United Arab Republic (dissolved 1961)

1967 Israel seizes Golan Heights in Six Day War

Source: CIA World Factbook, Eurostat, UNHCR
Graphic: Pat Carr

Hafez Assad, 1970-2000

1970 Defense Minister Hafez Assad seizes power in a bloodless coup

1973 Syria and Egypt fight Israel but fail to retake the Golan

1976 Islamist Sunni Muslim Brotherhood begins insurgency; Syria intervenes in the Lebanese civil war

1980 Muslim Brotherhood tries to kill Assad; Syria backs Iran from start of 10-year war with Iraq

1982 Military crushes Muslim Brotherhood uprising; thousands are killed

1990 Syria joins U.S.-led coalition against Iraq, leading to better relations with Israel, U.S.

Bashar Assad, 2000-

2000 Assad dies; his son Bashar becomes president

2004 U.S. imposes sanctions over Syria's alleged support for terrorists

2005 Syrian troops leave Lebanon

2008 Syria establishes diplomatic relations with Lebanon

2011 Government begins crackdown on protesters, leading to civil war

2013 World nations, led by U.S., consider punitive attack following reported use of chemical weapons; to date, war has left more than 100,000 dead and nearly 2 million refugees

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government in Syria." McCain, who has long accused Obama of timidity in Syria, argued that Assad will be willing to participate in diplomatic negotiations only if he believes he is going to lose the civil war he has been fighting for over two years.

The changes were enough to attract bipartisan support, but political fault lines were clear on a military action that polls show a war-weary public opposes.

Seven Democrats and three Republicans supported the measure, while two Democrats and five Republicans opposed. Among Republicans, opposition came from lawmakers with the closest ties to tea party activists, including Paul and Florida Sen. Marco Rubio, both presidential aspirants.

Among Democrats, Kerry's replacement in the Senate, Sen. Ed Markey, D-Mass., voted "present" after expressing misgivings.

In his comments in Sweden, the president sought to shift the onus for responding to Assad to Congress and the world at large. "I didn't set a

red line. The world set a red line" with a treaty banning the use of chemical weapons. He added that "Congress set a red line" when it passed legislation a decade ago demanding Syria stop production of weapons of mass destruction. His comments drew a disbelieving response from one Republican back home.

"He needs to go back and read his quote," Sen. Saxby Chambliss of Georgia said, referring to a comment the president made slightly more than a year ago. On Aug. 20, 2012, Obama said, "We have been very clear to the Assad regime, but also to other players on the ground, that a red line for us is we start seeing a whole bunch of chemical weapons moving around or being utilized. ... "That would change my calculus" about military action, he added at the time.

Elsewhere on Wednesday: — In Syria, al-Qaida-linked rebels were said to have launched an assault on a government-held Christian mountain village in the densely populated western part of the

country, and there was new fighting near Damascus as well.

— In Rome, Pope Francis underscored Vatican opposition to threatened military strikes against Syria, urging Catholics and non-Catholics alike to take part in a day of fasting and prayer for peace on Saturday.

— In France, Prime Minister Jean-Marc Ayrault told parliament that failure to take action would allow Assad to launch more chemical attacks.

By his country's intelligence, the Syrian has an abundance of material. Sen. Richard Durbin, D-Ill., citing a French estimate, said at the Senate meeting that Assad has an estimated 1,000 tons of chemical weapons material and "may be in the chemical weapons world a superpower."

Kerry said Assad had used chemical weapons 11 times but until the most recent attack the president did not have a "compelling" enough case to push for a U.S. military response.

Few if any members of Congress dispute the administration's claim that Assad was responsible for the attack, and lawmakers in both parties appear far more focused on determining how they should respond.

Gaveling the House committee hearing to order, Rep. Ed Royce, R-Calif., said that while it would be important to deter the use of chemical weapons by Assad and others, there remained many unanswered questions, including what the U.S. would do if Assad retaliated.

"The administration's Syria policy doesn't build confidence," he said.

In a letter to her rank and file, Democratic Leader Nancy Pelosi of California said she had received suggestions for legislation in the House "to add language to prevent boots on the ground, to tie the authorization more closely to the use of chemical weapons and to address concerns about an open-ended timetable."

Early Look At Health Law's Premiums

BY RICARDO ALONSO-ZALDIVAR

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — The No. 1 question about President Barack Obama's health care law is whether consumers will be able to afford the coverage. Now the answer is coming in.

The biggest study yet of premiums posted by states finds that the sticker price for a 21-year-old buying a mid-range policy will average about \$270 a month. That's before government tax credits that act like a discount for most people, bringing down the cost based on their income.

List-price premiums for a 40-year-old buying a mid-range plan will average close to \$330, the study by Avalere Health found. For a 60-year-old, they were nearly double that at \$615 a month.

Starting Oct. 1, people who don't have health care coverage on their job can go to new online insurance markets in their states to shop for a private plan and find out if they qualify for a tax credit. Come Jan. 1, virtually all Americans will be required to have coverage, or face fines. At the same time, insurance companies will no longer be able to turn away people in poor health.

The study points to the emergence of a competitive market, said lead author Caroline Pearson, a vice president of the private data analysis firm. But it's a market with big price differences among age groups, states and even within states. A copy was provided to The Associated Press.

The bottom line is mixed: Many consumers will like their new options, particularly if they qualify for a tax credit. But others may have to stretch to afford coverage.

"We are seeing competitive offerings in every market if you buy toward the low end of what's available," said Pearson, a vice president of Avalere.

However, for uninsured people who are paying nothing today "this is still a big cost that they're expected to fit into their budgets," Pearson added.

The Obama administration didn't challenge the study, but Health and Human Services spokeswoman Joanne Peters said consumers will have options that are cheaper than the averages presented. "We're consistently seeing that premiums will be lower than expected," she added. "For the many people that qualify for a tax credit, the cost will be even lower."

With insurance marketplaces just weeks away from opening, the Avalere study crunched the numbers on premiums filed by insurers in 11 states and Washington, D.C.

Eight of them are planning to run their own insurance markets, while the federal government will run the operation in the remaining four. There were no significant differences in premiums between states running their own markets and federal ones.

The states analyzed were California,

Connecticut, Indiana, Maryland, New York, Ohio, Rhode Island, South Dakota, Vermont, Virginia and Washington. No data on premiums were publicly available for Texas and Florida — together they are home to more than 10 million of the nation's nearly 50 million uninsured people — and keys to the law's success.

However, Pearson said she's confident the premiums in the study will be "quite representative" of other states, because clear pricing patterns emerged. Official data for most other states isn't expected until close to the Oct. 1 deadline for the new markets.

The study looked at premiums for non-smoking 21-year-olds, 40-year-olds and 60-year-olds in each of the 11 states and the District of Columbia.

It compared four levels of plans available under Obama's law: bronze, silver, gold and platinum. Bronze plans will cover 60 percent of expected medical costs; silver plans will cover 70 percent; gold will cover 80 percent, and platinum 90 percent.

All plans cover the same benefits, but bronze features the lowest premiums, paired with higher deductibles and copays. Platinum plans would have the lowest out-of-pocket costs and the highest premiums.

Mid-range silver plans are considered the benchmark, because the tax credits will be keyed to the cost of the second-lowest-cost silver plan in a local area.

The average premium for a silver plan ranged from a low of \$203 a month for a 21-year-old in Maryland to a high of \$764 for a 60-year-old in Connecticut.

The silver plan premiums for 40-year-olds were roughly \$75 a month higher than for 21-year-olds across the states. But the price jumped for 60-year-olds. The health law allows insurers to charge older adults up to three times more than younger ones. That's less of a spread than in most states now, but it could still be a shock.

"It's striking that the curve increases quite dramatically above age 40," said Pearson. "As you get older and approach Medicare age, your expected health costs start to rise pretty quickly."

But older consumers could also be the biggest beneficiaries of the tax credits, because they work by limiting what you pay for health insurance to a given percentage of your income.

For example, an individual making \$23,000 would pay no more than 6.3 percent of their annual income — \$1,450 — for a benchmark silver plan.

That help tapers off for those with solid middle-class incomes, above \$30,000 for an individual and \$60,000 for a family of four.

The study also found some striking price differences within certain states, generally larger ones. In New York, with 16 insurers participating, the difference between the cheapest and priciest silver premium was \$418.

U.S. Spies Had Key Intelligence, But Didn't Connect Dots Before Syrian WMD Strike

WASHINGTON (AP) — U.S. intelligence agencies did not detect the Syrian regime readying a massive chemical weapons attack in the days ahead of the strike, only piecing together what had happened after the fact, U.S. officials say.

One of the key pieces of intelligence that Secretary of State John Kerry later used to link the attack to the Syrian government — intercepts of communications telling Syrian military units to prepare for the strikes — was in the hands of U.S. intelligence agencies but had not yet been

"processed," according to senior U.S. officials.

That explains why the White House did not warn either the regime or the rebels who might be targeted as it had done when detecting previous preparations for chemical strikes.

"We know that for three days before the attack the Syrian regime's chemical weapons personnel were on the ground in the area making preparations," Kerry said as he presented the evidence in a State Department speech last week. "We know that the Syrian regime elements were

told to prepare for the attack by putting on gas masks and taking precautions associated with chemical weapons."

But the Obama administration only uncovered the evidence after Syrians started posting reports of the strike from the scene of the attack, leading U.S. spies and analysts to focus on satellite and other evidence showing a Syrian chemical weapons unit was preparing chemical munitions before the strike, according to two current U.S. officials and two former senior intelligence officials.

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