

Ukraine Rebels Soften Their Demands

MOSCOW (AP) — Pro-Russian rebels softened their demand for full independence Monday, saying they would respect Ukraine's sovereignty in exchange for autonomy — a shift that reflects Moscow's desire to strike a deal at a new round of peace talks.

The insurgents' platform, released at the start of Monday's negotiations in Minsk, the Belarusian capital, represented a significant change in their vision for the future of Ukraine's eastern, mainly Russian-speaking region.

It remains unclear, however, whether the talks can reach a compromise amid the brutal fighting that has continued in eastern Ukraine. On Monday, the rebels pushed Ukrainian government forces from an airport near Luhansk, the second-largest rebel-held city, the latest in a series of military gains.

The peace talks in Minsk follow last week's meeting between Russian President Vladimir Putin and his Ukrainian counterpart, Petro Poroshenko. The negotiations involve former Ukrainian President Leonid Kuchma; Russia's ambassador to Ukraine; an envoy from the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe and representatives of the rebels.

Yet similar talks earlier this summer produced no visible results.

UN Launches Investigation Into ISIS

GENEVA (AP) — The U.N.'s top human rights body on Monday overwhelmingly approved the Iraqi government's request for an investigation into alleged crimes against civilians committed by the Islamic State group in its rampage across north-eastern Syria and parts of Iraq.

Diplomats agreed by unanimous consent to approve a nearly \$1.2 million U.N. fact-finding mission at a daylong special session of the 47-nation Human Rights Council about Iraq and the extremist group.

Iraq's request for the U.N. to investigate alleged abuses by the IS was included in a resolution that more broadly condemns the group's severe tactics but also calls on Iraq's government to protect human rights.

Its aim is to provide the Geneva-based council with a report and evidence next March that could shed further light on Iraq atrocities and be used as part of any international war crimes prosecution.

The session Monday focused on the threat posed by the militants, who have seized cities, towns and vast tracts of land and carried out a number of massacres and beheadings.

Outgoing Iraqi PM Issues Stern Pledge

BAGHDAD (AP) — Iraq's outgoing prime minister pledged Monday to turn his country into "a big grave" for Sunni militants from the Islamic State group and commended security forces who achieved a rare victory over insurgents by ending the siege of a Shiite town.

Nouri al-Maliki made the comments during an unannounced visit to the northern community of Amirli, where he was greeted with hugs. A day earlier, Iraqi forces backed by Iran-allied Shiite militias and U.S. airstrikes broke a two-month siege of the town where some 15,000 Shiite Turkmen had been stranded.

In footage aired on state TV, al-Maliki was shown sitting at a wooden desk in front of a large poster of Shiite leader Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani, ordering promotions and awards for those who fought in the battle.

"I salute you for your steadfastness and patience against those beasts and killers," he told a gathering of fighters in a large hall as they chanted Shiite religious slogans. He vowed to root out Sunni militants from areas they control in the country.

"All Iraq will be a grave for those infidels, and we will send all the IS (Islamic State) gang to death," he added.

Detained US Tourists Expect Trial Soon

PYONGYANG, North Korea (AP) — North Korea gave foreign media access on Monday to three detained Americans who said they have been able to contact their families and — watched by officials as they spoke — called for Washington to send a high-ranking representative to negotiate for their freedom.

Jeffrey Fowle and Mathew Miller said they expect to face trial within a month. But they said they do not know what punishment they could face or what the specific charges against them are. Kenneth Bae, who already is serving a 15-year term, said his health has deteriorated at the labor camp where he works eight hours a day.

The three were allowed to speak briefly with The Associated Press at a meeting center in Pyongyang. North Korean officials were present during the interviews, conducted separately and in different rooms, but did not censor the questions that were asked. The three said they did not know they were going to be interviewed until immediately beforehand.

All said they believe the only solution to their situation is for a U.S. representative to come to North Korea to make a direct appeal.

That has often been North Korea's bargaining chip in the past, when senior statesmen including former President Bill Clinton made trips to Pyongyang to secure the release of detainees.

Pakistan's Premier Fights For His Job

ISLAMABAD (AP) — Ahead of a joint session of parliament, Pakistan's prime minister and army chief held marathon meetings Monday over violent anti-government protests that could force the premier of this nuclear-armed country to resign.

Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif again vowed he would not step down under duress, even as protesters briefly took over the country's state-run television broadcaster and battled security forces in the streets. But the pressure from three days of violent protests on Sharif has intensified amid reports — later denied by the military — that the country's powerful army chief advised him to resign.

Decision 2014

Despite Surly Public Mood, Incumbents Are In Good Shape

BY DONNA CASSATA
Associated Press

WASHINGTON — A surly electorate that holds Congress in even lower regard than unpopular President Barack Obama is willing to "keep the bums in," with at least 365 incumbents in the 435-member House and 18 of 28 senators on a glide path to another term when ballots are counted Nov. 4.

With less than 10 weeks to the elections, Republicans and Democrats who assess this fall's midterm contests say the power of incumbency — the decennial process of reconfiguring congressional maps and hefty fundraising — trumps the sour public mood and antipathy toward gridlocked Washington.

"Despite the incredibly low polling, favorable ratings for Congress, it's still an incumbent's world," said Sheila Krumholz, executive director of the nonpartisan Center for Responsive Politics that tracks political money.

That leaves many voters angry, not only with the political reality but their inability to change it.

"I can't get over where they say people are going to be able to keep their seats when they're not doing their jobs. I just don't understand it," said retired teacher Pauline Legendre after voting in Minnesota's Democratic primary last month.

The voter disgust is palpable, evident in blistering comments at summertime town halls and middling percentages for incumbents in primaries. Yet no sitting senator

has lost and only three congressmen got the primary boot. Come Election Day, only a fraction of the electorate will be motivated enough to vote — if history is any guide.

Congressional hopefuls are whipsawed by the two dynamics.

"It's going to be a challenge for any candidate running for Congress to suggest that they have all the answers or that somehow there's something about them that's so inspiring" that voters are going to forget "how disenchanted or disaffected they are with government at the federal level," said Ryan Costello, a Republican seeking an open House seat in southeast Pennsylvania where just 12 percent of GOP voters turned out in the May primary.

Still, the candidates press ahead, with Republicans laser-focused on gaining the six seats necessary to grab the Senate majority and control Congress for the remainder of Obama's presidency. Five Democratic retirements give the GOP a clear shot to capture control. So do races in conservative-leaning states such as Louisiana, North Carolina and Arkansas, where white Southern Democrats are nearly extinct.

The GOP figures it's half-way to its goal, with a solid advantage in open contests in South Dakota, West Virginia and Montana. Republicans are optimistic about the open seat in Iowa, less so about Michigan and energized by their prospects in Colorado and Alaska. If a GOP wave materializes, it could be in the Senate.

In the House, Republicans are expected to pad their majority — currently 233-199

with three vacancies — with the goal of matching or surpassing the 246 seats the GOP held from 1947-49.

Fueling the battle is what's expected to be a record-breaking flow of campaign cash. The parties' campaign committees and their allied outside groups are spending at a rate certain to exceed the \$3.6 billion price tag of the 2010 midterm elections.

House Republicans who saw a wave election in January 2010 — the year Democrats lost 63 seats — don't expect a comparable sweep in 2014 simply because redistricting reduced the number of opportunities. On that, Democrats agree, though an Obama decision on immigration could change the dynamic.

On the cusp of the fall election season, fewer than two dozen House Democrats and Republicans are in real jeopardy in November.

The GOP is counting on opposition to Obama to motivate its core voters. To counter that situation, Democrats have dispatched 444 organizers to 48 districts to get out the vote, with another 250-plus ready for the September-to-November sprint as the party typically faces a drop-off in midterm voting.

The Democratic Party is employing reminder pledge cards — "1 million votes for 2014" — the number they say decided 65 competitive House races in 2012. Democrats maintain that they had a shot two years ago, but Obama's miserable performance in his first presidential debate sank the party's chances.

Fast-Food Pay Fight May Get Hostile

BY CANDICE CHOI
AP Food Industry Writer

NEW YORK — McDonald's, Wendy's and other fast-food restaurants are expected to be targeted with acts of civil disobedience that could lead to arrests Thursday as labor organizers escalate their campaign to unionize the industry's workers.

Kendall Fells, an organizing director for Fast Food Forward, said workers in a couple of dozen cities were trained to peacefully engage in civil disobedience ahead of this week's planned protests.

Fells declined to say what exactly is in store for the protests in around 150 U.S. cities. But workers involved in the movement recently cited sit-ins as an example of strategies they could use to intensify their push for higher pay and unionization. Past protests have targeted a couple of restaurants in each city for a limited time, in many cases posing little disruption to operations.

A spokesman for the Service Employees International Union, which has been spearheading the protests, said home health care aides will join the actions in some locations.

The "Fight for \$15" campaign has gained national attention at a time when growing income disparities have become a hot political issue. President Barack Obama renewed his push for Congress to raise the minimum wage at a Labor Day appearance in Milwaukee.

Many fast-food workers do not make much more than the federal minimum wage of \$7.25 an hour. That equates to around \$15,000 a year for 40 hours a week. But workers are often subject to unpredictable schedules and don't know how

many hours they'll be given from week to week, since restaurants are careful to avoid paying overtime.

The fast-food campaign is designed to bring attention to such hardships, which few customers think about when buying burgers and fries, said Catherine Fisk, a professor of labor law at the University of California in Irvine. Over time, she said that could help "change the mindset" about fast-food jobs, which have historically been seen as difficult to unionize.

"The goal is to persuade workers that it doesn't have to be this way," she said. "This is about getting attention to the issue."

Fisk noted that mining and manufacturing jobs were also once considered low-wage jobs with dim prospects. That

changed in the 1930s, however, after legal protections for unionizing and actions by fed-up workers helped transform the jobs into more middle-class professions.

The National Restaurant Association said in a statement that the fast-food protests are attempts by unions "to boost their dwindling membership." The industry lobbying group said it hopes organizers will be respectful to customers and workers during the protests this week.

So far, the campaign and a similar effort on behalf of Wal-Mart workers have been effectively handled by BerlinRosen, a public relations firm known for its political work. Since the protests began in late 2012, organizers have kept the issue in the spotlight by switching up their tactics every few months.

They trumpeted the spread of protests around the country and then overseas, for instance, although turnout has been fairly minimal in some places. Organizers are also pushing to bring attention to the issue of "wage theft," such as the denial of overtime pay and rest breaks.

Several lawsuits alleging wage theft by McDonald's and its franchisees have been filed in three states on behalf of workers who were referred by labor organizers. McDonald's Corp. has said it would investigate the claims.

In the meantime, actions by labor organizers are likely to continue, with the SEIU pouring millions of dollars into the effort.

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