

Boehner in line for third term as speaker

By DAVID ESPO
AP Special Correspondent

WASHINGTON — House Speaker John Boehner's prospects for a new term appeared secure Monday despite grumblings from tea party-aligned dissidents on the eve of a Republican takeover of Congress, while GOP leaders in both houses pointed toward a swift veto showdown with President Barack Obama over the long-stalled Keystone XL pipeline.

Senate Republicans, winners of a majority in last fall's elections, began laying down markers for legislative battles ahead. "Tax reform should not be used as an excuse to raise taxes on the American people," wrote Sen. Orrin Hatch of Utah, who will become chairman of the tax-writing Senate Finance Committee. "Any such effort is a needless distraction," he added, pointedly rejecting a long-held view of the White House and many Democrats.

Tax reform was a distant target as congressional veterans and newcomers alike looked ahead to a day of pomp and ceremony beneath the Capitol Dome. Kentucky Sen. Mitch McConnell's ascension Tuesday to the post of Senate majority leader was automatic following his approval by rank-and-file Republicans late last year.

That wasn't the case in the House, where the election of a speaker is the main event on any opening day's agenda. Reps. Lou



In this Dec. 11, 2014 file photo, House Speaker John Boehner of Ohio arrives for a news conference on Capitol Hill in Washington.

ie Gohmert of Texas and Ted Yoho of Florida put themselves forward as challengers, and the Tea Party Patriots tweeted out a request for

rank and file Republicans to support one or the other. Roughly a dozen Republicans have announced they will oppose

Boehner's election, but that was far short of the number needed to place his election in jeopardy. One lawmaker, Rep. Lou Barletta of Pennsylvania, said Boehner "deserves a chance" to try and pass a conservative agenda in cooperation with the Senate under Republican control.

The speaker's spokesman, Michael Steel, said Boehner "was selected as the House Republican Conference's choice for speaker in November, and he expects to be elected by the whole House this week."

Nor did any of the rebels predict they would succeed in toppling the 65-year-old Ohioan. Instead, they said the current high command wasn't conservative enough.

Virginia Rep. Dave Brat, who defeated former Majority Leader Eric Cantor in a primary last summer, said the Republican leadership has "strayed from its own principles of free market, limited government, constitutional conservatism. We are at a crucial turning point in our country's history."

Two years ago, Boehner was faced with similar criticism, and sweated out his election to a second term.

His hand is considerably stronger this year as a result of the sweep of the Republican electoral triumph. The party will hold 246 House seats in the new Congress, to 188 for the Democrats, the biggest GOP majority in nearly 70 years.

It would have been bigger still, but New York Rep. Michael Grimm's resignation took effect one day before the new Congress convened. He pleaded guilty last month to federal tax evasion.

The intra-party leadership struggle underscored the political peril facing Republicans as they looked ahead to two-house control of Congress. Yet the evident ability to pass Keystone pipeline legislation showed their potential to advance an agenda.

The legislation passed the House but died in a Democratic-led filibuster in the Senate late last year. Now, Republican leaders intend to push the bill through the House late this week, and appear to have more than enough votes to clear it through the Senate as well, given the Republican pickup of nine seats in the elections.

While Obama has not said if he will reject the measure, White House spokesman Josh Earnest outlined a series of concerns with the measure before adding, "I'm not prepared at this point to issue a veto threat related to that specific piece of legislation."

But Republicans stand ready to cast the measure as a bipartisan jobs bill of the type that should be signed into law.

"There's a lot we can get done together if the president puts his father than vetoing legislation his liberal allies don't like," McConnell said late last year.

BRIEFLY

Jury selection begins in Boston Marathon bombing

BOSTON (AP) — Some of the prospective jurors who could decide Dzhokhar Tsarnaev's fate got their first look Monday at the young man accused of bombing the Boston Marathon, and they seemed transfixed by the sight of the shaggy-haired 21-year-old.

Tsarnaev, for his part, rose to his feet and nodded, slightly and awkwardly, as he was introduced to the first group of about 200 citizens.

So began what could be weeks of jury selection in the nation's most closely watched terror trial since the Oklahoma City bombing two decades ago.

Security was tight, with dozens of police officers stationed inside and outside the federal courthouse along with bomb-sniffing dogs.

The potential jurors seemed riveted by Tsarnaev and by U.S. District Judge George O'Toole Jr.'s explanation of the gravity of what they will be asked to do if they are picked: They must decide not only whether the former college student is guilty or innocent, but also what his punishment will be if he is convicted — life in prison or execution.

Police seek attacker who wounded three, stole baby

LONG BEACH, Calif. (AP) — Police say they don't know why a gunman wounded three members of a California family and stole a 3-week-old baby girl who was later found dead in a trash bin near the Mexican border.

At a news conference Monday afternoon, Long Beach Police Chief Robert Luna called pleaded for public help finding the attacker. He says the Los Angeles County Board of Supervisors will offer a \$10,000 reward for information leading to an arrest and conviction.

The body of Eliza Delacruz was found Sunday in a trash bin behind a strip mall in Imperial Beach, about 120 miles south of where her father, mother and uncle were shot a day earlier.

The mother and uncle are hospitalized in critical

condition. Authorities are looking for a man, but his description is vague and they have no leads. However, police say they don't believe the attack was random.

Judge orders suspect to stand trial in state trooper ambush

MILFORD, Pa. (AP) — A judge on Monday ordered a survivalist who called for revolution to stand trial on charges he fatally shot a Pennsylvania state trooper and wounded another outside their barracks, a case his attorneys acknowledge will be difficult to defend.

The ruling came after a preliminary hearing for Eric Frein, 31, who is charged with first-degree murder and related offenses in the Sept. 12 ambush that killed Cpl. Bryon Dickson and critically wounded Trooper Alex Douglass.

Investigators testified that they found the murder weapon along with a journal in which Frein described shooting the troopers.

After the hearing, a defense lawyer, Bill Ruzzo, said his primary goal is to save Frein's life. Prosecutors are seeking the death penalty.

"It's a battle," said another defense attorney, Michael Weinstein, adding that Frein "understands his circumstances."

Lebanon limits entry of Syrians fleeing civil war

BEIRUT (AP) — Lebanon turned back Syrians trying to cross the border Monday under strict new visa regulations, saying it simply cannot handle any more people displaced by the ongoing civil war.

The policy, requiring Syrians to obtain visas that sharply limit the time they can stay in Lebanon, effectively narrows one of the few escape routes left from a conflict that has displaced a third of Syria's pre-war population and shows no sign of ending.

Humanitarian groups dealing with Syrian refugees say authorities should not close the doors on people who are desperate to leave.

Men attempt most difficult climb in world at Yosemite

By KRISTIN J. BENDER
Associated Press

SAN FRANCISCO — Two men are roughly halfway through what has been called the hardest rock climb in the world: a free climb of a half-mile section of exposed granite in California's Yosemite National Park.

Tom Evans, a climber and photographer, has been chronicling Kevin Jorgeson, 30, of Santa Rosa, California, and Tommy Caldwell, 36, of Estes Park, Colorado, as they scale their way using only their hands and feet.

El Capitan, the largest monolith of granite in the world, rises more than 3,000 feet above the Yosemite Valley floor.

The men eat, stretch and sleep in hanging tents suspended to El Capitan's Dawn Wall. They don't have the creature comforts of home, but they have kept in touch with the outside world thanks to social media — tweeting, posting on Facebook, feeding information for blogs and keeping in touch with a bevy of supporters on the ground.

"The guys are doing great," said Josh Lowell with Big Up Productions, which has been chronicling their climbs for the last six years. "(Monday) they are resting and trying to grow skin back on their fingertips so they can continue to do battle with the hardest climbing sections, which involve grabbing tiny, razor-sharp edges of rock," Lowell said.

If all goes as planned, the duo could be at the top as soon as Friday or Saturday, Lowell said.

"But that's best-case scenario. It could take several more days just to get through the difficult section where they currently are. If any weather moves in, that could also delay things, but the forecast is looking



This 2004 file photo shows the climbing face of El Capitan in Yosemite National Park.

good for now," he said.

Many have climbed Dawn Wall but the pair would be the first to "free climb" the section using ropes only as a safeguard against falls. The first climber reached El Capitan's summit in 1958, and there are roughly 100 routes up to the top.

Evans said the two have a cellphone on their ascent, but they weren't taking calls Monday because they were resting and "want no distractions while on the cliff." The two also weren't answering emails from roughly 1,500 feet above the ground.

These practices may not seem unusual, but the climbers have relied heavily on social media to document their adventure. Both update their Facebook pages regularly and tweet from the Dawn Wall, which has been called "as smooth as alabaster, as steep as the bedroom wall."

Last Friday, Jorgeson hosted a live question-and-answer session from the wall.

Caldwell's wife, Becca, has also been blogging about their trip daily and wrote this post last weekend:

"Being up on the wall for over a week and the hard climbing Tommy and Kevin have done up until now adds an element of difficulty on top of the hard climbing they have to do," she wrote. "Imagine performing your very best after not walking for one week. I know Tommy has made an effort to try and do stretching, push-ups, (and) yoga in the (hanging tent) hoping this might combat the unusual circumstances of living like veal between their climbing. So let's hope for big things today. This climb definitely won't be over until it's over, but I believe it's possible. Let's go boys!!!"

Flu season continues to worsen, could peak this month

NEW YORK (AP) — The flu is now widespread in all but seven states, and hospitalization rates match the dismal season two years ago. While health officials fear this will be an unusually bad year, it's too soon to say.

The latest figures released Monday by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention show the flu hitting hard in most of

the 43 states where the illness was widespread. But the flu was not yet rampant in populous states like California and New York.

The report is for the week of Christmas, and it shows the flu season following a similar track as the last two, when flu activity peaked no later than mid-January. Perhaps that will happen this winter, too, the CDC's Dr.

Michael Jung said.

It's not clear yet how bad this flu season is. Experts are worried because the nasty bug that's making most people sick isn't included in this year's vaccine. Preliminary data on how well the vaccine is working is still weeks away. Among infectious diseases, flu is considered one of the nation's leading causes of death, killing roughly 24,000 a year, on average.

The different flu strain makes predictions more difficult. The current season hit hard in December — earlier than usual. But the last two flu seasons hit early, too. So far, hospitalization rates are similar to the harsh season two years ago, which was dominated by a similar flu virus.

Big threat for Obama's climate efforts from GOP-run Congress

By JOSH LEDERMAN
Associated Press

WASHINGTON — President Barack Obama's determined efforts to combat global warming face their biggest trial yet as Republicans take full control of Congress this week. The GOP vows to move fast and forcefully to roll back his environmental rules and force his hand on energy development.

The GOP's first order of business: the Keystone XL pipeline. The Republican-led House has repeatedly passed legislation to approve the pipeline, which would carry tar sands oil from Canada deep into the United States.

The bills died in the Senate when Democrats were in control, but that will change Wednesday when a Republican-led Senate committee holds a Keystone hearing.

"The president is going to see the Keystone XL pipeline on his desk and it's going to be a bellwether decision by the president whether to go with jobs and the economy," Sen. John Barrasso, R-Wyo., said Sunday.

Success for Republicans on the climate front would jeopardize a key component of Obama's legacy. And the ramifications would likely ricochet far beyond the United States. Later this year, nations

are supposed to sign a major global climate treaty in Paris. Aggressive action by the U.S. under Obama has upped the pressure on other governments to get serious about climate change, too. But if Obama can't make good on his commitments at home, it's unclear whether poorer nations will still feel compelled to act.

"The American government has been responsible for sending very strong political and economic signals with what they have announced so far," former Mexican President Felipe Calderon, now a global climate leader, said in an Associated Press interview. "I know that there is a

risk that those will be overcome by the new political reality in the U.S."

Obama has made clear he will use his veto power if Republicans succeed in getting hostile bills to his desk — especially on climate change. "I'm going to defend gains that we've made on environment and clean air and clean water," he has said.

And Sen. Brian Schatz, D-Hawaii, says the Republicans aren't likely to overturn his veto. That would require a number of Democrats to vote against the president.

"There's reason to be concerned, but I don't think there's reason to be panicked," Schatz said.



President Barack Obama addresses the Climate Summit, at United Nations headquarters in September.

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