

BRIEFLY

Obama calls for spending surge, buoyed by rising economy

WASHINGTON (AP) — Declaring an end to “mindless austerity,” President Barack Obama called for a surge in government spending Thursday, and asked Congress to throw out the sweeping budget cuts both parties agreed to four years ago when deficits were spiraling out of control.

Obama’s proposed \$74 billion in added spending — about 7 percent — would be split about evenly between defense programs and the domestic side of the budget. Although he’s sought before to reverse the “sequester” spending cuts, Obama’s pitch in this year’s budget comes with the added oomph of an improving economy and big recent declines in federal deficits.

The figures represent Obama’s opening offer as he gears up for an inevitable budget battle with the new Republican-run Congress. He was to brief House Democrats on the plan Thursday evening in Philadelphia at their annual retreat.

The Republicans promise to produce a balanced budget blueprint this spring even as they worry about Pentagon spending.

GOP lawmakers are focused primarily on reversing restraints on military spending, while Democrats and Obama are seeking new domestic dollars for education, research, health care and infrastructure. Republicans argue that spending more in so many areas would undo the hard-fought reductions in the country’s annual deficit. They also oppose many of the tax hikes Obama has proposed to pay for the increased spending.

Families plead for lives of IS hostages as swap hopes fade

AMMAN, Jordan (AP) — The father of a Jordanian fighter pilot and the wife of a Japanese journalist held by the Islamic State group pleaded for their loved ones’ lives after a possible prisoner swap wasn’t carried out by a deadline of sunset Thursday.

The extremists had demanded that Jordan release a female al-Qaida prisoner from death row, and they purportedly threatened in an audio message to kill the airman if she was not freed by the deadline.

After sundown in the Middle East, there was no word on the fate of Lt. Muath al-Kaseasbeh and journalist Kenji Goto, and the families’ agonizing wait dragged on.

The audio message purportedly posted by the Islamic State group only said the pilot would be killed if al-Rishawi was not delivered to the Turkish border by the deadline. There was no mention of Goto and no word on whether the pilot would be traded for the woman. The authenticity of the recording could not be verified independently by the AP.

Simultaneous attacks in Egypt’s Sinai kill 26

EL-ARISH, Egypt (AP) — Militants struck more than a dozen army and police targets in the restive Sinai Peninsula with simultaneous attacks involving a car bomb and mortar rounds on Thursday, killing at least 26 security officers.

An Army spokesman immediately blamed former Islamist President Mohammed Morsi’s Muslim Brotherhood of orchestrating the attack, which killed 25 Army soldiers and one policeman.

The wide-ranging attacks late Thursday required a previously unseen level of coordination. At least one car bomb was set off outside a military base, while mortars were simultaneously fired at the base, toppling some buildings and leaving soldiers buried under the

debris, official said.

Other attacks included mortar rounds fired at a hotel, a police club and more than a dozen checkpoints, officials said.

Hours before the attack, the Islamic State affiliate in Egypt posted on its official Twitter account pictures of masked militants dressed in black. They were carrying rocket-propelled grenades in a show of force, while flying the Islamic State black flag.

Gas blast wrecks Mexico hospital, at least 2 dead

MEXICO CITY (AP) — Injured and bleeding, mothers carrying infants fled from a maternity hospital shattered by a powerful gas explosion Thursday, and rescuers swung sledgehammers to break through fallen concrete hunting for others who might be trapped.

At least two people were killed and 73 injured, Mexico City officials said. The known dead were a woman and a child. Officials earlier said at least four people had been killed.

About 75 percent of the hospital collapsed, officials said, and the priority was to continue digging in search of any trapped survivors. Authorities said they had confirmed that none of the children registered in the hospital were missing, but said it was possible that others who had come for appointments could be trapped.

The city’s health secretary, Armando Ahued, said the adult victim was a 25-year-old woman and the child was a newborn, between 2 and 3 weeks old. He said 21 babies were injured, and nine of those and seven adults were in serious condition after being rushed to other hospitals.

The explosion occurred at 7:05 a.m. when a tanker truck was making a routine delivery of gas to the hospital kitchen and gas started to leak. Witnesses said the tanker workers struggled frantically for 15 or 20 minutes to repair the leak while a large cloud of gas formed.

Balloon crew surpasses distance record in flight

ALBUQUERQUE, N.M. (AP) — Two pilots soaring over the Pacific Ocean have made history by surpassing an official world distance record for human flight in a gas balloon.

The Two Eagles pilots, Troy Bradley of Albuquerque and Leonid Tiukhtyaev of Russia, traveled more than 5,260 miles to put themselves in contention for the record.

It still needs to be ratified by the Federation Aeronautique Internationale, a process that can take weeks.

The rules of international aviation require the current record of 5,209 miles to be exceeded by at least 1 percent to establish a record.

On Thursday evening, they were about 400 miles off the coast of California and heading south, where they planned to land in Baja California on Saturday.

Rod McKuen, mega-selling poet and performer, dies at 81

NEW YORK (AP) — Rod McKuen, the husky-voiced “King of Kitsch” whose music, verse and spoken-word recordings in the 1960s won him Oscar nominations and made him one of the best-selling poets, has died. He was 81.

Until his sabbatical in 1981, McKuen was an astonishingly successful and prolific force in popular culture, turning out hundreds of songs and poems and records, including the Academy Award-nominated song “Jean” for the 1969 film “The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie.”

He conjured a New Age spirit world that captivated those who didn’t ordinarily like “poetry” and those who craved relief from the war.

Senate passes bill approving Keystone pipeline

WASHINGTON (AP) — The Republican-controlled Senate on Thursday approved a bipartisan bill to construct the Keystone XL oil pipeline, defying a presidential veto threat and setting up the first of many battles with the White House over energy and the environment.

The 62-36 vote advanced a top priority of the newly empowered GOP, and marked the first time the Senate passed a bill authorizing the pipeline, despite numerous attempts to force President Barack Obama’s hand on the issue. Nine Democrats joined with 53 Republicans to back the measure.

This bill “is an important accomplishment for the country,” said Majority Leader Mitch McConnell of Kentucky. “We are hoping the president upon reflection will agree to sign on to a bill that the State Department said could create up to 42,000 jobs and the State Department said creates little to no impact on the environment.”

Still the vote was short of the threshold needed to override a veto, and the legislation still must be reconciled with the version the House passed.

“We hope President Obama will

now drop his threat to veto this common-sense bill that would strengthen our energy security and create thousands and thousands of new, good-paying American jobs,” said House Speaker John Boehner.

Most Democrats framed the bill as gift to a foreign oil company that would have little benefit for the American people, because much of the oil would be exported. They tried and failed to get amendments on the bill to construct the pipeline with U.S. steel, ban exports of the oil and the products refined from it, and protect water resources.

The Senate agreed to add an energy efficiency measure, and went on the record saying climate change was not a hoax and the oil sands should be subject to a tax that helps pay for oil spill cleanups. Oil sands are currently exempt.

“This bill is a disgrace,” said Sen. Barbara Boxer, D-Calif., the top Democrat on the Senate environment committee. “We tried on our side to make this a better bill and they turned us away.”

TransCanada Corp., the pipeline’s developer, disputed the export argu-

ment Thursday, saying it didn’t make sense.

“Those who argue this pipeline is for export are not being factual,” said Russ Girling, president and chief executive officer of TransCanada. “It’s time to approve Keystone XL so we can transport Canadian and American oil to fuel the everyday lives of the American people.”

First proposed in 2008, the \$8 billion pipeline project has been beset by delays in Nebraska over its route and at the White House, where the president has resisted prior efforts by Congress to force him to make a decision. In 2012, Obama rejected the project after Congress attached a measure to a payroll tax cut extension that gave him a deadline to make a decision. The pipeline’s developer, TransCanada Corp., then reapplied.

Obama has said he will not be forced to make a decision on the pipeline, which requires presidential approval because it crosses an international border, until the review process concludes. Federal agencies’ comments on whether the project is in the national interest are due Monday.

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