

Punxsutawney Phil forecasts 6 more weeks of winter

PUNXSUTAWNEY, Pa. (AP) — The handlers of Pennsylvania's most famous groundhog, Punxsutawney Phil, said Monday the furry rodent has forecast six more weeks of winter.

Members of the top hat-wearing Inner Circle announced the "prediction" Monday morning.

A German legend has it that if a furry rodent sees his shadow on Feb. 2, winter will last another six weeks. If not, spring comes early.

The forecast was also announced on Twitter, as was referenced in the official proclamation read by Jeff Lundy, the Fair Weatherman of the Inner Circle.

"Forecasts abound on the Internet, but, I, Punxsutawney Phil am still your best bet. Yes, a shadow I see, you can start to Twitter, hash tag: Six more weeks of winter!"

The forecast was delivered after a steady pre-dawn rain turned to snow as temperatures dropped from the high 30s to around freezing. They were forecast to keep dropping over much of the state, prompting the state Department of Transportation to lower the speed limit to 45 mph for many interstate highways which were already wet and expected to freeze or be covered with snow as the day wore on.

The rain kept some revelers away, with state police estimating the crowd at around 11,000, slightly smaller than in recent years when upward of 15,000 attended.

Despite the German leg-



AP Photo/Gene J. Puskas

Groundhog Club handler Ron Ploucha, center, holds Punxsutawney Phil, the weather prognosticating groundhog, during the 129th celebration of Groundhog Day on Gobbler's Knob in Punxsutawney, Pa. Monday. Phil's handlers said that the groundhog has forecast six more weeks of winter weather.

end, Phil's handlers don't wait to see if he sees his shadow — as he likely would not have on such an overcast day. Instead, the Inner Circle decide on the forecast ahead of time and announce it on Gobbler's Knob, a tiny hill in the town for which the groundhog is named, about 65 miles northeast of Pittsburgh.

Records going back to 1887 show Phil has now predicted more winter 102 times while forecasting an early spring just 17 times. There are no records for the remaining years.

Phil's counterpart in New York City, Staten Island Chuck, delivered a conflicting message in calling for an

early spring after not seeing his shadow.

Chuck emerged from his home at the Staten Island Zoo early Monday and took part in a new ceremony that didn't include being held by New York City Mayor Bill de Blasio.

Last year, in de Blasio's first time at the annual ceremony, the rodent slipped from his grasp and fell to the ground. It died weeks later.

A medical exam revealed it died of internal injuries, but zoo officials said it was unclear if they were caused by the fall from de Blasio's arms. Zoo officials didn't make the death public for months.

The accident became a source of teasing for the mayor, and de Blasio himself suggested Monday that "teams of animal behavior experts and scientists have consulted from all over the country" to keep the groundhog safe.

In Wisconsin, the mayor of Sun Prairie might not be getting too close to a groundhog again.

During a celebration Monday, the handler of Jimmy the groundhog held the animal next the face of Mayor Jonathan Freund, and Jimmy promptly bit down on the mayor's left ear.

Freund flinched, but went on with the event.

Obama's record budget: Tax the rich, help middle class

By ANDREW TAYLOR
Associated Press

WASHINGTON — Promising to help America's middle class, President Barack Obama on Monday sent Congress a record \$4 trillion budget that would hammer corporate profits overseas and raise taxes on the wealthy while boosting tax credits for families and the working poor.

Obama's budget also would steer hundreds of billions of dollars to the nation's crumbling infrastructure of roads and bridges, help provide two years of free community college and reverse the across-the-board, automatic budget cuts that have slammed the Pentagon and nearly every government department.

In the face of certain opposition from Republicans, an optimistic Obama hailed a "breakthrough year for America" of new jobs, lower unemployment and shrinking deficits after the great recession of 2008, and he called for moving past years of "mindless austerity." The blueprint for the 2016 budget year that begins Oct. 1 represents a 6.4 percent increase over estimated spending this year, projecting that the deficit will decline to \$474 billion.

However, Obama's plan ignores the new balance of power in Washington, with Republicans running both the House and Senate. The GOP found plenty to criticize in his proposed tax hikes that would total about \$1.5 trillion.

Republicans cited the nation's \$18 trillion debt and assailed what they call Obama's tax-and-spend policies for failing to address the spiraling growth of benefit programs such as Social Security and Medicare.

"Today President Obama laid out a plan for more taxes, more spending, and more of the Washington grid-

lock that has failed middle class families," said House Speaker John Boehner, R-Ohio. "This plan never balances — ever."

Republicans aren't offering specifics yet but will respond this spring with their own plan, a balanced-budget outline promising to get rid of "Obamacare," ease the burdens of the national debt on future generations, curb the explosive growth of expensive benefit programs and reform a loophole-cluttered tax code in hopes of promoting economic growth.

While Obama's plan was rejected out of hand on budget day, proposals to ease automatic cuts and boost transportation funding are likely to return later in the year and require extensive negotiation.

"These proposals are practical, not partisan," Obama said of his overall plans. "They'll help working families feel more secure with paychecks that go further, help American workers upgrade their skills so they can compete for higher-paying jobs, and help create the conditions for our businesses to keep generating good new jobs for our workers to fill."

Some people would pay more. Many wealthy Americans would be able to take tax deductions at the 28 percent rate only even if their incomes were taxed at 39.6 percent, and some would also see an increase in their maximum capital gains rate.

However, a couple earning up to \$120,000 a year would qualify for a new "second earner" tax credit of up to \$500 as well as a maximum \$3,000 per-child tax credit for child care for up to two children, triple the current credit of \$1,000.

Obama's initiatives to tax the wealthy and to welcome an influx of immigrants into the United States are going nowhere in the new GOP-run Congress.

Ukraine troops fight to avoid being surrounded by rebels

By PETER LEONARD
Associated Press

DEBALTSEVE, Ukraine — As Ukrainian troops fought Monday to defend a strategic railway hub, Russian-backed separatists pledged to boost the size of their force and Washington pondered whether to expand its assistance to Ukraine to include lethal aid.

President Barack Obama has so far opposed sending lethal assistance, but an upsurge in fighting in eastern Ukraine has spurred the White House to take a fresh look at supplying Ukraine with such aid, a senior administration official said.

Since the unrest in eastern Ukraine surged anew in early January, the separatists have made notable strides in clawing territory away from the government in Kiev. Their main offensive is now directed at Debaltseve — a government-held railway junction once populated by 25,000 people that lies between the rebel-held cities of Luhansk and Donetsk.

Almost 2,000 residents have fled in the last few days alone.

Rebel forces have mounted multiple assaults on government positions in Debaltseve but all were repelled, a spokesman for Ukrainian military operations in the east, Andriy Lysenko, said Monday.

"The units that have arrived in support of our troops in Debaltseve are counterattacking and denying the enemy the opportunity to complete the encirclement," he said.

Separatist fighters burst through Ukrainian lines last week in the village of Vuhlehirsk on the road west of Debaltseve, getting access to a ridge overlooking the highway running north from the town.

On Monday, Associated Press reporters saw Ukrainian tanks shooting from open fields at the tree line on that ridge. Minutes later, the tanks rolled back onto the highway, leaving a heavy trail of mud in their wake, and taking up new field positions a few hundred meters (yards) away.

In a coordinated defensive maneuver, Ukrainian forces fired barrages from Grad multiple-rocket launchers toward the same area.



AP Photo/Sergei Chuzakov

Volunteers of the Aidar battalion picket in front of the Ministry of Defense as they protest against a decision to change the leadership of the battalion in Kiev, Ukraine, Monday. The Aidar battalion, a volunteer force, and the Defense Minister have agreed that the battalion will be divided into two units.

Russia has acknowledged that some of its citizens are fighting among the rebels as volunteers, but rejects the Ukrainian and Western charge that it's backing the insurgency with troops and weapons. Western experts say, however, that the sheer amount of heavy weapons under rebel control shows extensive help from Moscow.

"While we still have time before the spring, new detachments will be able to receive military training," Zakharchenko said. "We expect mobilization to yield at least five additional brigades — five motorized brigades, one artillery brigade and a tank brigade."

Zakharchenko blamed Ukraine for the collapse of the latest round of peace talks in the Belarusian capital Minsk over the weekend and argued that the rebel offensive was the only way to protect residential areas from Ukrainian shelling.

"Force is the only way to protect our cities, villages and streets from the shelling," Zakharchenko said.

The U.S. official said Obama is reconsidering sending lethal assistance to Ukraine, but continues to have concerns about the effectiveness of that step and the risks of a proxy war between the U.S. and Russia.

The official, who insisted on anonymity because he wasn't authorized to discuss the matter publicly, said Obama is specifically concerned about the besieged Ukrainian military's capacity for using high-powered, American-supplied weaponry. The president has also argued that no amount of arming the Ukrainians would put them on par with Russia's military prowess.

The U.S. so far has limited its supplies to the Ukrainian military to non-lethal aid, such as gas masks and radar technology to detect incoming fire.

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Hostage killings highlight threat, meager options for Japan

TOKYO (AP) — The killing of two Japanese taken hostage by the Islamic State group has savagely driven home the high stakes Japan faces and limited options it can muster in such circumstances.

Journalist Kenji Goto's beheading, seen in an online video over the weekend, also offers a glimpse into how Japan is struggling to handle the rising menace of terrorism.

Until this crisis, Japan had not become directly embroiled in the fight against the militants, who now control about a third of both Syria and neighboring Iraq in a self-declared caliphate. Tokyo's backing for U.S.-led air strikes against the Islamic State group is confined to financial and humanitarian aid for refugees and other non-military support for countries affected by the conflict.

That proved no hindrance for the jihadists. "What we should realize is that the Japanese are no exception to terrorist targets. We really should open our eyes to see this reality," Kunihiko Miyake, a former diplomat and researcher at a private think tank in Tokyo, told a news show on TV Asahi.

"The levels of safety precautions Japan has taken up until now are not enough," he said. "We must review and step up security for Japanese, not only those abroad but here in Japan."

Japan's options for trying to free the hostages were limited. Tokyo lacks a strong diplomatic presence in the region and has a very small corps of Arab experts. Moreover, the military is confined by the constitution, drafted by U.S. occupying forces after World War II, to a strictly self-defense role and would be unable to stage a rescue attempt.

The video showing Goto's killing, purportedly from the Islamic State militants, carried chilling threats to single out Japanese anywhere as targets.

Addressing Prime Minister Shinzo Abe, a man resembling a militant shown in other beheading videos by the Islamic State group says, "because of your reckless decision to take part in an unwinnable war, this knife will not only slaughter Kenji, but will also carry on and cause carnage wherever your people are found. So let the nightmare for Japan begin."

Abe has made security a top priority of his administration. He ordered greater vigilance at airports and at Japanese facilities overseas, such as embassies and schools. The government already was considering sending troops for overseas rescue.

In parliament Monday, opposition lawmakers questioned Abe over his response to the crisis and challenged his desire to expand the scope of Japan's military.

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