

Congress hands Obama major win on trade

By **CHARLES BABINGTON** and **DAVID ESPO**
Associated Press

WASHINGTON — In a triumph of divided government, the Republican-controlled Congress passed major trade legislation Wednesday that was long-sought by President Barack Obama but vehemently opposed by most lawmakers in his party.

The measure to strengthen Obama’s hand in global trade talks cleared the Senate on a vote of 60-38, and will go to the White House for his signature — less than two weeks after it was temporarily derailed in the House in an uprising of Democratic lawmakers who argued it would cost American jobs.

A companion bill, to renew an expiring program of federal aid for workers disadvantaged by imports, passed by voice vote less than an hour later. Final approval in the House is expected on Thursday.

The rapid sequence of events capped the end of a back-and-forth struggle that played out slowly over months, with Obama, Speaker John Boehner, R-Ohio, and Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell, R-Ky., on one side, and the union-backed Democratic leadership of the House and Senate on the other.

The pace accelerated dramatically less than two weeks ago, when House Democrats prevailed in an early showdown that sent the White House and congressional GOP leaders into a rescue operation.

On Wednesday, McConnell, a frequent Obama antagonist, praised the president and Democrats who joined the GOP on the bipartisan measure vigorously sought by the nation’s chief executive.

“We were really pleased to see President Obama pursue an idea we’ve long believed in,” McConnell said. “We thank him for his efforts to help us pass a bill to advance it.”

The measure would allow Obama to negotiate global trade deals that Congress could approve or reject, but not change. The administration was seeking the “fast

track” as it works to complete a round of trade negotiations involving 12 nations along both sides of the Pacific Ocean, including Japan.

Obama’s victory comes at a pivotal juncture in his second term. He is bracing for a Supreme Court ruling on his landmark health care law, and next week’s deadline is approaching for reaching a deal on Iran’s nuclear program.

The trade bill drew the support of 47 Republicans and 13 Democrats, while 31 Democrats, five Republicans and two independents were opposed. Republican Sen. Mike Lee of Utah missed the vote, as did GOP presidential hopeful Marco Rubio of Florida.

Sen. Orrin Hatch, R-Utah, and chairman of the Senate Finance Committee, hailed the measure as “the most important bill that will pass the Senate this year,” and one that will prove to be an aid to the economy.

Sen. Sherrod Brown, D-Ohio, countered shortly before the vote that it would be nothing of the sort. He said it would lead to “corporate handouts, worker sellouts,” as he said had been the case with the North American Free Trade Agreement and other deals across the past two decades.

The issue of global trade had opened the most striking breach between a Democratic president and the lawmakers who overwhelmingly backed him on health care and other hard-fought issues. But the White House tried to cast a soft light on the division.

“We have Republican majorities in Congress working closely with Democratic minorities in Congress to build bipartisan support for legislation that then arrives on the desk of a Democratic president,” said White House spokesman Josh Earnest. That’s how policy should be made “in an era of divided government,” he told reporters.

Boehner, the Republican House speaker, called the trade votes “a big win for the American people. Trade is good for American farmers, for manufacturers and small businesses.”

Hostages’ families given leeway to pay ransom demands

By **JULIE PACE**
AP White House Correspondent

WASHINGTON — President Barack Obama conceded Wednesday that the U.S. government must let down the families of Americans held hostage by terrorists and promised they would not face criminal prosecution for paying ransoms to their loved ones’ captors.

“These families have already suffered enough and they should never feel ignored or victimized by their own government,” Obama said as he detailed the results of a six-month review of U.S. hostage policy.

The president said for the first time that U.S. government officials can communicate directly with terrorists and help families negotiate for the release of hostages. More than 30 Americans are being held hostage abroad, White House officials said.

The review was sparked by sharp criticism of the Obama administration from families of Americans kidnapped by the Islamic State, al-Qaida and other groups. Families have complained about receiving confusing and contradictory information from the government and bristled at threats of prosecution for considering paying terrorists to secure the release of hostages.

By clearing the way for payment of ransom without fear of criminal charges, Obama is essentially allowing families to take actions the U.S. government

has long said put Americans at risk. While the government will continue to abide by prohibitions on paying ransoms or making other concessions to terrorists, the Justice Department indicated it would ignore the law in situations involving families.

European governments routinely pay ransom to win the release of hostages. However, Obama and his predecessors have argued that policy provides terrorists with funds to fuel dangerous activities and puts Americans at greater risk of kidnapping.

Critics of the White House review argue that allowing families to do what the government will not could lead to those same troubling consequences.

“We have had a policy in the United States for over 200 years of not paying ransom and not negotiating with terrorists,” said House Speaker John Boehner, R-Ohio. “The concern that I have is that by lifting that long-held principle you could be endangering more Americans here and overseas.”

White House officials drew a distinction between the concessions private individuals could make to terrorists, which are largely financial, and the more wide-ranging deals the U.S. government could strike, including military activity and other foreign policy priorities.

Still, officials acknowledged that allowing some concessions and banning others could be perceived as a contradictory policy.

As South Carolina honors victims, Alabama lowers Confederate flags

Associated Press

COLUMBIA, S.C. — State senator and pastor Clementa Pinckney was carried Wednesday into the Statehouse where he served the people for nearly 20 years, becoming the first African-American since Reconstruction to rest in honor in the South Carolina Rotunda. Hours later, his congregation returned to the scene of a massacre, keeping up his work of saving souls.

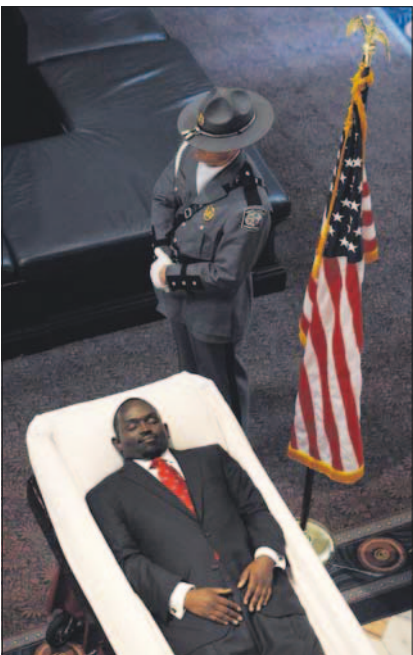
Meeting for Wednesday night Bible study exactly one week after Pinckney and eight others were fatally shot, a crowd of people packed the basement of Charleston’s Emanuel African Methodist Church where the shootings took place to show their faith and restore their sanctuary.

“Because of our faith we have shown up once more again to declare that Jesus lives and because he lives, we can face tomorrow,” interim pastor Norvel Goff intoned before a gathering that included several family members of shooting victim Myra Thompson.

“It is a powerful testimony that they are able to come,” Goff said of Thompson’s relatives, who were applauded by others in the audience.

The killings are creating waves of soul-searching that are reverberating far beyond the historic black church and the state Capitol where Pinckney’s widow and two young daughters met his horse-drawn carriage, evoking memories of black and white images of other slain civil rights figures five decades earlier.

In state after state, the Confederate symbols embraced by the shooting suspect have suddenly come under official disrepute. Gov. Nikki Haley started the groundswell Monday by calling on South Carolina lawmakers to debate taking down the Confederate battle flag flying in front of the Statehouse. But Alabama’s governor was



AP Photo/Rainier Ehrhardt

A South Carolina Highway Patrol honor guard stands over Sen. Clementa Pinckney’s body during a public viewing in the Statehouse, Wednesday in Columbia, S.C. President Barack Obama is scheduled to deliver the eulogy at Pinckney’s funeral Friday morning at the College of Charleston.

able to act much more swiftly, issuing an executive order that brought down four secessionist flags on Wednesday.

In Montgomery, where the Confederacy was formed 154 years ago and where Jefferson Davis was elected president, Gov. Robert Bentley, a conservative Republican, compared the banner to the universally shunned symbols of Nazi Germany, a stunning reversal in a region where the flag has played a huge cultural role.

The iconic Confederate battle flag in particular “is offensive to some people because unfortunately, it’s like the

Long-detained migrant families to be released

By **JUAN A. LOZANO**
Associated Press

HOUSTON — Federal officials plan to end the long-term detention of hundreds of migrant families who are being held mainly at two large facilities in Texas after illegally entering the country, Homeland Security Secretary Jeh Johnson announced Wednesday.

However, the change in policy did little to end criticism of the facilities from immigration advocates and some lawmakers or stop ongoing efforts seeking to permanently close them.

Johnson said he has approved a plan that would offer appropriate and reasonable bond amounts for families at the centers who can present a credible case that they fear persecution in their home countries.

“I have reached the conclusion that we must make substantial changes in our detention practices with respect to families with children,” Johnson said in a statement. “In short, once a family has established eligibility for asylum or other relief under our laws, long-term detention is an inefficient use of our resources and should be discontinued.”

It was not known how quickly the new plan would be put in place. The Department of Homeland Security did not immediately respond to an email seeking clarification.



AP Photo/Eric Gay, File

In this Sept. 10, 2014 file photo, detained immigrant children line up in the cafeteria at the Karnes County Residential Center, a temporary home for immigrant women and children detained at the border, in Karnes City, Texas.

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After tens of thousands of migrant families, most from Central America, crossed the Rio Grande into Texas last summer, the government poured millions of dollars into two large detention centers meant to hold women and children. The centers are in Karnes City and Dilley, both located south of San Antonio. A third facility is located in Berks County, Pennsylvania.

At the end of last month, there were 1,835 individuals being held at the three facilities, according to immigration officials.

Johnson said the detention of families “will be short-term in most cases” but still allow enough time for officials to confirm addresses and sponsor information and educate families about their responsibilities, including attending future immigration court hearings.

But Johnson advocated for the continued use of the centers, saying the facilities “will allow for prompt removal of individuals who have not stated a claim for relief under our laws.”

Immigration attorneys and advocates said they were disappointed the federal government still believes the detention of immigrant families is necessary and expressed doubt the announced changes would result in the release of many families.

“I’m extremely disappointed the secretary just doesn’t seem to get that family detention is wrong and is not necessary,” said

Laura Lichter, a Denver immigration attorney who has represented families held at the centers in Karnes City and Dilley.

Johnson’s announcement comes after a delegation of eight congressional Democrats visited the two detention facilities in Texas earlier this week.

Democratic Whip Steny Hoyer, one of the members of Congress who visited the Karnes City facility, said the detention centers need to be closed.

“I continue to be deeply concerned that children in these facilities lack basic health and educational resources ... Detaining children puts them at risk of medical and developmental problems in the short term and later in life,” Hoyer said in a statement.

Some 130 House Democrats and 33 senators have called on the government to halt family detention, while a federal judge in California has tentatively ruled that the policy violates parts of an 18-year-old court settlement that says immigrant children cannot be held in secure facilities.

In a statement this week, U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement said the centers are “an effective and humane alternative for maintaining family unity as families go through immigration proceedings or await return to their home countries.”

BRIEFLY

Boston Marathon bomber Tsarnaev apologizes for first time

BOSTON (AP) — Moments before a judge sentenced him to death, Boston Marathon bomber Dzhokhar Tsarnaev broke more than two years of silence Wednesday and apologized to the victims and their loved ones for the first time. “I pray for your relief, for your healing,” he said.

“I am sorry for the lives that I’ve taken, for the suffering that I’ve caused you, for the damage that I’ve done — irreparable damage,” the 21-year-old former college student, speaking haltingly in his Russian accent, said after rising to his feet in the hushed federal courtroom.

Carter: NATO must bolster cyberdefense

BRUSSELS (AP) — NATO must improve its ability to defend itself against cyberattacks before it tries to build its offensive cyberwarfare capabilities, Defense Secretary Ash Carter told alliance leaders Wednesday amid rising tensions with Russia, which has proven its willingness to launch computer-based attacks against other nations.

Carter’s message runs counter to some experts and leaders who believe NATO should begin to develop cyberweapons, in order to deter opponents in the 21st century.

Senior defense officials said cybersecurity was one theme of Carter’s remarks to the allies and to defense ministers he’s met with.

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