

Race barrels toward critical primary day

By JULIE PACE AND KATHLEEN RONAYNE
Associated Press

NORTH CANTON, Ohio — The tumultuous presidential primary season barreled toward a potentially decisive day for both Republicans and Democrats, with enough delegates up for grabs Tuesday to turn Donald Trump and Hillary Clinton from front-runners to likely nominees.

The biggest prizes are Florida and Ohio, states with a long history of making or breaking White House aspirations. Missouri, Illinois, and North Carolina also offer a crucial cache of delegates that could help Trump and Clinton pull further away from their rivals.

Ohio Gov. John Kasich and Florida Sen. Marco Rubio hoped the two big states would give them a boost instead. Kasich seemed to have a better chance at that than Rubio.

The contests come at a remarkable moment in the presidential race for Republicans. Animosity toward Trump has risen to the point where he can rarely get through an event without being interrupted by protesters. The front-runner is also under scrutiny for appearing to encourage his supporters to physically confront those protesters, deepening divisions within the Republican Party.

In a lightly veiled jab at Trump, Republican House Speaker Paul Ryan of Wisconsin said candidates “need to take responsibility for the environment at their events.”

“There is never an excuse for condoning violence, or even a culture that presupposes it,” Ryan told WRJN, a radio station in Racine, Wisconsin.

Even with the new controversy, Trump holds a comfortable lead in the GOP delegate count and could put himself well on his way to the nomination if he sweeps Tuesday’s contests. He’s displayed an unmatched ability to tap into voter frustration with Washington and an economy that many feel is leaving them behind.

But he still has obstacles. Heading into Tuesday, the billionaire businessman is locked in a tight contest in Ohio with Kasich, the state’s governor. Seeking a final boost in his home state, Kasich spent Monday campaigning alongside Mitt Romney, the 2012 Republican nominee and a fierce critic of Trump.



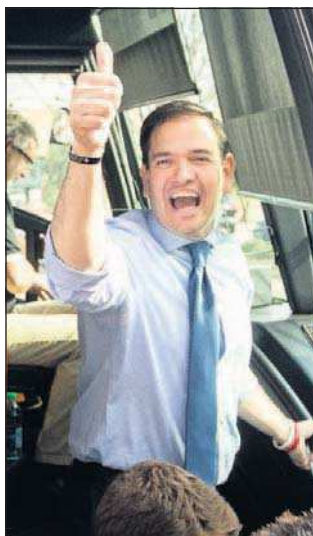
Donald Trump



Ted Cruz



John Kasich



Marco Rubio

“This is the guy Ohio has to vote for, and America’s counting on you,” Romney told the crowd at a Kasich event in North Canton. While Romney has not endorsed Kasich, he’s said he’ll do whatever is needed to help all of Trump’s rivals.

Florida Sen. Rubio also hopes to block Trump in a do-or-die primary in his home state, though polling suggests he’s slipping further behind. The senator tried to stay upbeat Monday, perhaps his final full day of campaigning in the 2016 race.

“Tomorrow’s the day where we are going to shock the country,” Rubio said during a stop in Jacksonville.

If Trump sweeps Tuesday’s contests, he’d still have to keep winning in order to clinch the nomination. But he would cross an important threshold by collecting more than 50 percent of the delegates awarded so far.

Trump’s closest competition has come from Texas Sen. Ted Cruz, who has defeated the businessman in seven states. He’s also the only remaining GOP candidate

who still says unequivocally that he would support Trump if he becomes the nominee.

Asked what could cause him to change his mind, Cruz said, “If, for example, he would go out on 5th Avenue and shoot somebody, I would not support him.”

His comment was a reference to a previous statement by Trump that he could shoot someone on the famous Manhattan street and not lose support.

Among Democrats, Clinton has been itching to look ahead to the general election but continues to face persistent competition from Bernie Sanders. While Clinton maintains a commanding lead in the delegate count, Sanders breathed new life into his campaign with a surprising victory last week in Michigan.

Reprising a theme that helped propel that Michigan win, Sanders on Monday pounded Clinton’s past support for trade deals such as the North American Free Trade Agreement. He’s escalated his criticism in recent days, hoping to undercut her edge among minorities and

expand his advantage with white working-class voters.

“When it came down whether you stand with corporate America, the people who wrote these agreements, or whether you stand with the working people of this country, I proudly stood with the workers,” Sanders said in Youngstown, Ohio. “Secretary Clinton stood with the big money interests.”

Clinton’s team is attempting to tamp down expectations for Tuesday night, stressing that the race remains close in the Midwest, despite public polling showing her with a sizable lead. Still, she urged Democrats to unify behind her bid so they can begin focusing on Trump.

“We have the way forward to be able to start talking about not only unifying the Democratic party but unifying our country,” she said during a stop in Chicago.

The campaign next shifts to the West, where Sanders’ advisers have suggested he could rattle off a win streak and enter April with the chance to put a dent in Clinton’s delegate lead.

BRIEFLY

Putin orders start of Russian military pullout from Syria

MOSCOW (AP) — President Vladimir Putin ordered the Russian military to withdraw most of its forces from Syria, timing his move to coincide with the launch of Syria peace talks Monday — an end game that allows the Russian leader to cash in on his gains and reduce his risks in the conflict.

The start of the negotiations in Geneva offers Putin an opportune moment to declare an official end to the 5½-month Russian air campaign that has allowed Syrian President Bashar Assad’s army to win back some key ground and strengthen his positions ahead of the talks. With Russia’s main goals in Syria achieved, the pullback will allow Putin to pose as a peacemaker and help ease tensions with NATO member Turkey and the Gulf monarchies vexed by Moscow’s military action.

At the same time, Putin made it clear that Russia will maintain its air base and a naval facility in Syria and keep some troops there. Syria’s state news agency also quoted Assad as saying that the Russian military will draw down its air force contingent but won’t leave the country altogether.

The Syrian presidency said Assad and Putin spoke on the phone Monday and jointly agreed that Russia would scale back its forces in Syria. It rejected speculation that the decision reflected a rift between the allies and said the decision reflected the “successes” the two armies have achieved in fighting terrorism in Syria and restoring peace to key areas of the country.

The Syrian army said it would continue its operations against the Islamic State group, the Nusra Front and other terrorist organizations “with the same tempo.”

Brothers accused in recording attack that left officer dead

CHEVERLY, Md. (AP) — An undercover narcotics officer was mortally wounded by one of his colleagues as he responded to an attack on his police station by a gunman with a death wish, their police chief angrily explained on Monday.

And while Officer Jacai Colson lay dying, the gunman’s two brothers coldly recorded Sunday’s firefight on their cellphones, Prince George’s County Police Chief Hank Stawinski said, tapping a podium and trying to contain his emotions.

The gunman, Michael Ford, dictated a “last will and testament” just minutes before his two brothers drove him to the station, where he began spraying bullets at passing cars and even an ambulance to draw officers outside, police said.

Colson arrived at the station after the firing began. He was wearing civilian clothes without body armor and leaping out of an unmarked car.

“Police officers run to disorder. They run to the sound of shots,” the chief said. “It’s my sad duty to have to share with you that, circumstantially, we believe the fired round that led to Detective Colson’s death was fired by one of his fellow Prince George’s County officers reacting to this.”

Train derails in Kansas, injures 32

CIMARRON, Kan. (AP) — An Amtrak train carrying more than 140 people derailed in rural Kansas early Monday, moments after an engineer noticed a significant bend in a rail and applied the emergency brakes, authorities said.

At least 32 people were hurt, two of them critically, authorities said.

A federal transportation official said the investigation would focus on the condition of the rails. Local authorities said they were checking whether a vehicle crash may have damaged the track before the accident.

The engineer of the train known as the Southwest Chief noticed the deformity in the rail and pulled the brakes, said Earl Weener of the National Transportation Safety Board. He put the train’s speed at the normal limit of 60 mph.

Historic vote begins in Myanmar

NAYPYITAW, Myanmar (AP) — Myanmar’s parliament has opened a historic session to elect the country’s new president.

Htin Kyaw, a longtime confidant of Nobel laureate Aung San Suu Kyi, is expected to be selected in Tuesday’s vote by 652 members of parliament. Five lawmakers were absent from the 657-seat legislature. He is among three final candidates to become the country’s first democratically elected leader in more than half a century.

Suu Kyi led her National League for Democracy party to a sweeping victory in Nov. 8 elections but is blocked by the constitution from becoming president.

Justice Department: States shouldn’t jail poor defendants over fine nonpayment

WASHINGTON (AP) — The Justice Department is discouraging state court systems from jailing poor defendants who fail to pay fines or fees, warning against practices that it says run afoul of the Constitution and erode community trust.

A letter being sent Monday by the federal government to state court administrators makes clear that judges should consider alternatives to jail, such as community service, for poor defendants who don’t pay their fines. It also says judges must consider whether defendants have the ability to pay, and should not turn to incarceration without first establishing that the missed payment was willful.

The memo arose of a December meeting convened by the White House and Justice Department that brought together judges, court administrators, prosecutors and others to discuss improvements in how court fees and fines are assessed.

The new guidance comes amid concerns that some local courts across the country are effectively punishing poor people for their poverty by imposing crippling fines and fees that, when unpaid, can result in

jail time. “The consequences of the criminalization of poverty are not only harmful — they are far-reaching,” Attorney General Loretta Lynch said in a statement. “They not only affect an individual’s ability to support their family, but also contribute to an erosion of our faith in government.”

That practice was exposed last year in a scathing federal report on the Ferguson, Missouri city government in which the Justice Department concluded that the municipal court levied exorbitant fines for petty offenses and routinely issued arrest warrants to residents who had missed court appearances or failed to settle their debts.

Though the state court system operates independently of the Justice Department, the memo is intended to put local judges on notice that ordering jail time for unpaid fines can violate federal law, open the door to constitutional challenges and trap residents in a cycle of escalating debt, unnecessary incarceration and unemployment.

“Furthermore, in addition to being unlawful, to the extent that these practices are

geared not toward addressing public safety, but rather toward raising revenue, they can cast doubt on the impartiality of the tribunal and erode trust between local governments and their constituents,” reads the letter from Vanita Gupta, the head of the Justice Department’s Civil Rights Division, and Lisa Foster, who directs the department’s Office for Access to Justice.

The letter also says courts must give defendants adequate notice when enforcing fines or fees, should not use arrest warrants to coerce the payment of court debt and should not impose bonds that a defendant has no ability to pay.

“Bail that is set without regard to defendants’ financial capacity can result in the incarceration of individuals not because they pose a threat to public safety or a flight risk, but rather because they cannot afford the assigned bail amount,” the letter says.

Also Monday, the Justice Department was announcing \$2.5 million in competitive grants to state and local governments that want to explore changes in how court fees and fines are assessed and enforced.



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