

New York brings tension to a boil

Associated Press

NEW YORK — As Democrats readied for their first debate-stage clash in a month, Florida officials declared Thursday they would not prosecute Donald Trump’s campaign manager for misdemeanor battery, the latest extraordinary development in a turbulent presidential primary season now focused on New York.

Trump joined other presidential contenders from both parties who hustled into New York City ahead of the state’s Tuesday presidential primaries, a critical test as both parties’ front-runners fight to beat back surging challengers. New conflicts flared between Democrats Hillary Clinton and Bernie Sanders hours before the evening debate in Brooklyn as protesters clogged the Manhattan sidewalk outside a state GOP dinner where all three Republican White House hopefuls were scheduled to appear.

Trump was the target of rowdy protesters who hung an effigy of the billionaire businessman and chanted, “How do you spell racist? T-R-U-M-P.”

The raucous scene came shortly after Florida prosecutors dismissed a criminal complaint against Trump’s campaign manager, Corey Lewandowski, two weeks after local police charged him with grabbing a reporter.

Florida state attorney Dave Aronberg declared police were right to charge Lewandowski, yet the burden on prosecutors to prove the case was higher.

“Although there was probable cause to make an arrest, the evidence cannot prove all legally required elements of the crime alleged and is insufficient to support a criminal prosecution,” Aronberg said during an afternoon news conference.

Lewandowski initially denied grabbing the reporter before video surveillance surfaced of the early March incident. Trump accused the reporter of exaggerating and changing her story.

Prosecutors said Thursday that a simple apology might have avoided the criminal complaint. Lewandowski was “gratified” by the prosecutor’s decision, the campaign said in a brief



AP Photo/Bryan R. Smith

A driver watches as Donald Trump supporters rally outside the New York State GOP Gala on Thursday in New York.

statement declaring, “The matter is now concluded.”

On the Democratic side, Sanders jabbed Clinton while courting black leaders before the debate as he outlined policy prescriptions for jobs, education and criminal justice.

“If you believe that those issues can be addressed by establishment politics and establishment economics, you’ve got a very good candidate to vote for but it’s not Bernie Sanders,” the Vermont senator declared.

The Democratic race has become increasingly heated in New York — including Sanders first questioning Clinton’s qualifications to be president and then reversing himself — and the tensions were likely to spill onto the debate stage.

Early Thursday, Sanders distanced himself from comments made by a surrogate the day before that voters shouldn’t “continue to elect corporate Democratic whores.” Sanders said on Twitter that the comment “was inappropriate and insensitive.” “There’s no room for language like that in our political discourse,” he wrote.

Jennifer Palmieri, the Clinton campaign’s communications director, responded on Twitter that it was “very

distressing language to say the least.”

Front-runners Clinton and Trump hope New York’s April 19 primaries can propel them past stubborn challengers and into the general election. Preference polls show Clinton and Trump leading their respective contests.

Sanders, a Vermont senator who was born in Brooklyn, has been touting his local roots as he seeks to upset Clinton in New York. While he is on a winning streak in primaries and caucuses, he needs a big victory in the state to cut into Clinton’s delegate lead and slow her march to the nomination.

Sanders broadened his attack on his party’s front-runner in a new ad unveiled Thursday.

“Nothing will change until we elect candidates who reject Wall Street money,” the narrator says.

Trump, meanwhile, hopes New York marks an end to the worst period of his candidacy, a stretch that raised new questions about his policy abilities and revealed his campaign’s lack of preparedness for a delegate fight if the GOP race heads to a contested convention.

A big victory in New York could increase his chances of clinching the nomination before the convention.

BRIEFLY

Russia rejects criticism of fly-by near U.S. Navy destroyer

MOSCOW (AP) — Russia’s defense ministry has rejected complaints by U.S. officials who said Russian attack planes buzzed dangerously close to a U.S. Navy destroyer in the Baltic Sea this week.

The U.S. European command says the Russian planes buzzed a U.S. ship multiple times Monday and Tuesday in what the U.S. officials described as an unsafe and unprofessional manner.

Secretary of State John Kerry told CNN Espanol that under U.S. military rules of engagement, the Navy ship could have opened fire. He condemned the Russian actions.

Maj. Gen. Igor Konashenkov, spokesman for the Russian defense ministry, said Thursday that the pilots of Russian Su-24 jets saw the ship and turned back “while using all measures of precaution.” Konashenkov said he was baffled by what he described as the “distressed reaction of our American counterparts.”

“It may have been in international waters and therefore may not be any violation of international law, but it is still irresponsible behavior,” said NATO Deputy Secretary General Alexander Vershbow, a former US ambassador to Russia.

“It illustrates that Russia is contributing to tensions,” he said, speaking on the sidelines of a security conference in Kiev, the Ukrainian capital.

Board OKs parole for former Manson cult member

CHINO, Calif. (AP) — A California panel recommended parole Thursday for former Charles Manson follower Leslie Van Houten more than four decades after she went to prison for the notorious killings of a grocer and his wife.

The decision will now undergo administrative review by the Board of Parole Hearings. If upheld it goes to Gov. Jerry Brown, who has the final word on whether the now-66-year-old Van Houten is released.

Brown previously blocked the parole of former Manson follower

Bruce Davis, citing the gravity of his offenses and his refusal to fully accept responsibility for his role in the murders of a stunt man and a musician.

Van Houten was “numb” after the parole board decision was made at the California Institution for Women, said her attorney Rich Pfeiffer.

Van Houten, a one-time homecoming princess, participated in the killings of Leno La Bianca and his wife Rosemary a day after other so-called “Manson family” members murdered actress Sharon Tate and four others in 1969.

The killings were the start of what Manson believed was a coming race war. He dubbed it “Helter Skelter” after a Beatles song.

Van Houten was the youngest Manson follower to take part in one of the nation’s most notorious killings after she descended into a life of drugs and joined Manson’s cult in the 1960s. Since then, she has completed college degrees and commended as a model prisoner.

Microsoft sues U.S. over secret demands for customer data

SAN FRANCISCO (AP) — Microsoft is suing the government over a federal law that lets authorities examine its users’ email or online files without their knowledge.

It’s the latest conflict between the tech industry and U.S. officials over individual privacy rights. Law enforcement officials want freedom to view a treasure trove of information — including emails, photos and financial records — that customers are storing on electronic gadgets and in so-called “cloud” computing centers.

Microsoft says the U.S. Justice Department is abusing the 1986 Electronic Communications Privacy Act, which allows authorities to obtain court orders requiring it to turn over customer files stored on its servers, while in some cases prohibiting the company from notifying the customer. Microsoft says those “non-disclosure” orders violate its constitutional right to free speech, as well as its customers’ protection against unreasonable searches.

Dozens arrested in pot raids targeting exporters

Associated Press

DENVER — Police and federal agents arrested more than 40 people and seized piles of pot plants and elaborate growing equipment Thursday during raids of homes and warehouses throughout the Denver area, part of a multi-state investigation into the illegal distribution of marijuana outside Colorado.

Authorities described the case as the latest example of drug traffickers seeking safe haven in the state’s flourishing marijuana industry in order to ship the drug out of state, where it can sell for more than double what it would in Colorado. Several raids in recent weeks have taken aim at out-of-state drug rings, including a sweep last month that focused on unlicensed pot grows of varying sizes.

The yearlong investigation that led to Thursday’s raids began after residents living near the grows complained about the smell of weed, a law enforcement official with knowledge of the investigation told



AP Photo/P. Solomon Banda

Investigators load marijuana plants onto a Colorado National Guard truck outside a suspected illegal grow operation in north Denver early Thursday.

The Associated Press. The official wasn’t authorized to comment on the ongoing investigation and did so on the condition of anonymity.

The official said the case involves people who moved to Colorado from Texas specifically to grow marijuana that would be illegally exported.

Officers searched about 30 properties during the raids, which spanned from the Denver area south to

Colorado Springs. The North Metro Drug Task Force and the U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration referred questions to the state attorney general’s office, which refused to comment.

At one home in a residential neighborhood, agents confiscated grow lights and laid them on the lawn and driveway. In an industrial spot in Denver, large pot branches were stacked up in bushy piles outside a trailer

and loaded onto a National Guard vehicle, the pungent stench drawing curious onlookers.

Traffickers hide among the state’s sanctioned warehouses and farms, but also in neighborhoods where concerned neighbors sometimes tip police, authorities say.

In Pueblo, about 115 miles south of Denver, seven separate investigations this month have led to the arrests of 12 people from Florida, many of whom are originally from Cuba. The Pueblo County sheriff’s office has said all were growing the drug for shipment to more lucrative markets. Some had relocated to Colorado just weeks earlier.

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