



AP Photo/Carlos Giusti
High winds and rain sweep through the streets of the Matelnillo community during the passage of hurricane Irma, in Fajardo, Puerto Rico, Wednesday.

Irma lashes at Puerto Rico, leaves tiny Barbuda devastated

SAN JUAN, Puerto Rico (AP) — Hurricane Irma lashed Puerto Rico with heavy rain and powerful winds Wednesday night, leaving nearly 900,000 people without power as authorities struggled to get aid to small Caribbean islands already devastated by the historic storm.

Florida rushed to prepare for a possible direct hit on the Miami area by the Category 5 storm with potentially catastrophic 185 mph winds.

Nearly every building on the island of Barbuda was damaged when the eye of the storm passed almost directly overhead early Wednesday and about 60 percent of the island’s roughly 1,400 people were left homeless, Antigua and Barbuda Prime Minister Gaston Browne told The Associated Press.

“Either they were totally demolished or they would have lost their roof,” Browne said after returning to Antigua from a plane trip to the neighboring island. “It is just really a horrendous situation.”

He said roads and telecommunications systems were destroyed and recovery will take months, if not years. A 2-year-old child was killed as a family tried to escape a damaged home during the storm, Browne told the AP.

As the storm moved

west, it tore up the small islands in its path. On St. Thomas, in the U.S. Virgin Islands, Laura Strickling spent 12 hours hunkered down with her husband and 1-year-old daughter in a boarded-up basement apartment with no power as the storm raged outside. They emerged to find the lush island in tatters, with many of their neighbors’ homes damaged and the once-dense vegetation largely gone.

“There are no leaves. It is crazy. One of the things we loved about St. Thomas is that it was so green. And it’s gone,” said Strickling, who moved to the island with her husband three years ago from Washington, D.C. “It will take years for this community to get back on its feet.”

Significant effects were also reported on St. Martin. Photos and video circulating on social media showed major damage to the airport in Philipsburg and the coastal village of Marigot heavily flooded. France sent emergency food and water rations there and to the French island of St. Bart’s, where Irma ripped off roofs and knocked out all electricity.

Dutch marines who flew to St. Martin and two other Dutch islands hammered by Irma reported extensive damage but no deaths or injuries.

Trump overrules GOP with deal on spending, debt

WASHINGTON (AP) — President Donald Trump briskly overruled congressional Republicans and his own treasury secretary Wednesday to cut a deal with Democrats to keep the government operating and raise America’s debt limit. The immediate goal was ensuring money for hurricane relief, but in the process the president brazenly rolled his own party’s leaders.

In deal-making mode, Trump sided with the Democratic leaders — “Chuck and Nancy,” as he amiably referred later to Senate Minority Leader Chuck Schumer and House Minority Leader Nancy Pelosi — as they pushed for the three-month deal, brushing aside the urgings of GOP leaders and Treasury Secretary Steven Mnuchin for a much longer extension to the debt limit. Republicans want that longer allowance to avoid having to take another vote on the politically toxic issue before the 2018 congressional elections.

The session painted a vivid portrait of discord at the highest ranks of the Republican Party. After an angry August that Trump spent lobbying attacks at fellow Republicans, specifically targeting Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell for the failure of health care legislation, the president wasted little time once Congress came back this week in demonstrating his disdain for the GOP House and Senate leaders charged with shepherding his agenda into law.

At first, in Wednesday’s Oval Office meeting, the Republicans lobbied for an 18-month debt ceiling extension, then 12 months and then six, but Trump waved them off. As Mnuchin continued to press an economic argument in favor of a longer-term deal, Trump tired of it and cut him off mid-sentence.

At another point, the meeting totally lost focus when Ivanka Trump entered to raise an unrelated issue on child care tax credits. Details of the meeting were disclosed by several people briefed on the proceedings who spoke only on condition of anonymity because they were not authorized to talk publicly.

One photo taken through the window of the Oval Office showed an animated Schumer pointing his finger in Trump’s face as the president smiles with his hands on his fellow New Yorker’s arms.

After the meeting, Trump boarded a plane to North Dakota with Democratic Sen. Heidi Heitkamp in an effort to garner bipartisan support for tax legislation that Republican leaders on Capitol Hill are crafting on a purely partisan basis. That continued the day of bizarre disconnects between the president and the leaders of his party.

Trump called Heitkamp to the stage



AP Photo/Evan Vucci
President Donald Trump pauses during a meeting with, from left, Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell, R-Ky., Senate Minority Leader Chuck Schumer, D-N.Y., House Minority Leader Nancy Pelosi, D-Calif., and other Congressional leaders in the Oval Office of the White House, Wednesday.

at his Dakota event and praised her as a “good woman.” She will be running for re-election against a Republican in November 2018.

Heitkamp later issued a statement saying she needs to know more about Trump’s tax plan before offering her support.

Aboard Air Force One, Trump told reporters, “We had a very good meeting with Nancy Pelosi and Chuck Schumer.” He didn’t mention Republicans McConnell and House Speaker Paul Ryan, who also had been present. “We agreed to a three-month extension on debt ceiling, which they consider to be sacred, very important.”

“I think the deal will be very good,” Trump added.

Barely an hour earlier, Ryan had slammed the Democrats’ demand for a three-month extension as “ridiculous and disgraceful.” He issued no public statement on the final deal.

McConnell, in his own reserved fashion, did not sugar-coat what happened when he addressed reporters a short time later.

“In the meeting down at the White House, as I indicated, the president agreed with Sen. Schumer and Congresswoman Pelosi to do a three-month CR and a debt ceiling into December, and that’s what I will be offering based on the president’s decision,” McConnell said. “CR” refers to a continuing resolution, which will extend existing government funding levels into mid-December, when the prospect of an enormous new round of deal-making now looms.

Asked whether he was surprised to see the president side with Democrats against his own party leadership, McConnell responded, “Look, the president can speak for himself, but his feeling was we needed to come together, not create a picture of divisiveness at a time of genuine national crisis, and that was the rationale.”

In fact, Trump achieved the opposite. “The Pelosi-Schumer-Trump deal is bad,” Sen. Ben Sasse, R-Neb., said over Twitter.

“Hopefully we’ll realize that negotiating with Democrats doesn’t normally produce outstanding results,” said Rep. Mark Meadows of North Carolina, chairman of the House Freedom Caucus.

Late Wednesday, with criticism pouring in from Republicans, Mnuchin himself made a rare appearance in the Air Force One press cabin, as the president traveled back to Washington from North Dakota, to defend the deal.

“Our No. 1 priority was getting money for Harvey. Let me very clear: That’s the president’s number one agenda and we accomplished that,” Mnuchin insisted.

Mnuchin also claimed several times that the president actually could have had a one-year package but didn’t want to lose the opportunity to raise military spending in new budget bills before then. Aides to Schumer and Pelosi responded with incredulous disbelief to this claim.

The outcome was especially striking coming just a day after Trump announced he would be dismantling immigration protections for younger immigrants.

BRIEFLY

Facebook: Accounts from Russia bought ads during U.S. campaign

WASHINGTON (AP) — Hundreds of fake Facebook accounts, probably run from Russia, spent about \$100,000 on ads aimed at stirring up divisive issues such as gun control and race relations during the 2016 U.S. presidential election, the social network said Wednesday.

Although the number of ads is relatively small, the disclosure provides a more detailed peek into what investigators believe was a targeted effort by Russians to influence U.S. politics during the campaign, this time through social media.

The 470 accounts appeared to come from a notorious “troll farm,” a St. Petersburg-based organization known for promoting pro-Russian government positions via fake accounts, according to two people familiar with the investigation. The people were granted anonymity because they weren’t authorized to publicly discuss details of the investigation.

Facebook has turned over its findings to federal authorities investigating Russian interference in the U.S. presidential election. Robert Mueller, the special counsel, is charged with overseeing Russian meddling in the U.S. election and any potential coordination with associates of President Donald Trump.

In addition to the 470 accounts that appeared to be run from Russia, Stamos said its investigators also discovered an additional 2,200 ads that “might have originated in Russia.”

Putin urges North Korea talks, not more sanctions

SEOUL, South Korea (AP) — While condemning North Korea over its latest nuclear test, the leaders of Russia and South Korea seemed far apart on the issue of stepping up sanctions against the country.

Speaking after the meeting Wednesday with South Korean President Moon Jae-in in the Russian port city of Vladivostok, Russian President Vladimir Putin called for talks with North Korea, saying sanctions are not a solution to the country’s nuclear and missile development.

Moon had urged Moscow to support stronger sanctions against North Korea, which conducted its sixth nuclear test on Sunday in what it claimed was a detonation of a thermonuclear weapon built for missiles capable of reaching

the U.S. mainland.

“We should not give in to emotions and push Pyongyang into a corner,” Putin said in a news conference after the meeting, held on the sidelines of a conference on economic development of Russia’s Far East. “As never before everyone should show restraint and refrain from steps leading to escalation and tensions.”

Moon said the leaders agreed that reducing regional tension and “quickly solving” the security challenges posed by North Korea’s nuclear and missile program were critical. Ahead of his meeting with Putin, Moon said the situation could get out of hand if North Korea’s missile and nuclear tests aren’t stopped.

GOP, Dem senators calmly discuss bolstering Obama health law

WASHINGTON (AP) — Republicans and Democrats serenely discussed ways to curb premium increases for individual insurance policies on Wednesday at a Senate hearing that veered away from years of fierce partisanship over the failed GOP effort to revoke President Barack Obama’s health care law.

Senators and state insurance commissioners from both parties embraced the idea of continuing billions in federal subsidies to insurers for reducing out-of-pocket expenses for millions of people, flouting President Donald Trump’s oft-repeated threats to halt those payments. There were even bipartisan words of support for proposals to provide money to states to help insurance companies afford to cover customers with serious, costly medical conditions.

Disagreements remain, including over Republican demands to also make it easier for insurers to sell policies that might offer skimpier coverage than Obama’s statute allows. But if nothing else, the Senate health committee hearing underscored both sides’ willingness to try casting aside hostility from the GOP drive to repeal Obama’s 2010 law and seek a modest pact that would instead bolster that statute by protecting the affordability of constituents’ coverage.

Menendez ‘sold his office’ for ritzy trips

NEWARK, N.J. (AP) — U.S. Sen. Bob Menendez “sold his office for a lifestyle he couldn’t afford” by accepting luxury trips and other favors from a wealthy doctor seeking political

influence, a government prosecutor told jurors Wednesday during opening statements of the Democrat’s corruption trial.

Menendez’s attorney responded that gifts from Florida ophthalmologist Salomon Melgen, Menendez’s longtime friend, didn’t equate to a bribery agreement. Menendez’s meetings with government officials — though they could have aided Melgen’s business interests — were “what members of Congress do” and were meant to influence future policy, attorney Abbe Lowell said.

Menendez and Melgen were indicted in 2015 and face multiple fraud and bribery charges in a case that could threaten Menendez’s political career and potentially alter the makeup of a deeply divided U.S. Senate if he’s convicted.

If he is expelled or steps down before Gov. Chris Christie leaves office Jan. 16, the Republican would pick Menendez’s successor. A Democrat has a large advantage in November’s election to replace Christie.

Catalonia sets vote for independence on Oct. 1

MADRID (AP) — Voters in Spain’s prosperous Catalonia region will be asked to choose in less than a month if they want to secede from Spain, the region’s pro-independence ruling government announced Wednesday in a move that puts it in open defiance of central authorities in Madrid.

Regional President Carles Puigdemont signed a decree that officially calls for a “self-determination referendum of Catalonia” to be held on Oct. 1.

The referendum clashes with the Spanish Constitution, which only gives national authorities the right to call such a vote. But Catalonia’s pro-independence lawmakers approved a bill earlier Wednesday that is meant to provide a legal justification for the independence vote.

A central government official told The Associated Press that Spanish Prime Minister Mariano Rajoy has urged the country’s top legal consultative body to review the bill. The official said Madrid is expected to challenge the law in the country’s Constitutional Court on Thursday.

Catalonia’s renewed push for secession has opened one of Spain’s deepest political and institutional crises of recent years. Although much of the blame has been put on the pro-independence bloc, Rajoy’s government has been criticized for letting the situation build this far.

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