



PHOTO: AFP
A group of supporters of the healthcare bill celebrates outside the Capitol after the House passed the bill late Sunday night in Washington, DC while US President Barack Obama delivers a statement to the nation following the vote (Inset).

US Congress passes health overhaul

AFP, Washington

The US Congress narrowly passed an historic health overhaul, taking the United States closer to universal medical care and handing Barack Obama the biggest triumph of his presidency.

After weeks of behind the scenes wheeler-dealing and bitter debate, the Democrat-held House of Representatives voted 219-212 late Sunday to approve a bill extending health coverage to 32 million more Americans in the most sweeping social policy shift in four decades.

"Tonight we answered the call of history as so many Americans have before us. We did not avoid our responsibility we embraced it. We did not fear our future, we shaped it," Obama said after the vote.

No Republicans voted for the bill, already passed by the Senate, and they have warned that Obama will face a political backlash for the measure, which will cost hundreds of billions of dollars over

the next decade.

But the president, who was expected to sign the bill into law within days, praised lawmakers for defying the predictions that the mammoth legislation would collapse in the face of political setbacks and unyielding partisan rifts.

Tired after a week in which he met or spoke to nearly 100 lawmakers, but evidently savouring the hard-fought triumph on his top domestic goal, Obama told the US public: "This is what change looks like."

As the vote count crept past the 216 needed to ensure passage, Democrats clapped, cheered, hugged and called out Obama's "Yes, we can" 2008 campaign slogan.

All 178 Republicans and 34 conservative Democrats opposed the measure, spurred on by hundreds of protesters who chanted "Kill the bill" during a loud day-long vigil outside the Capitol.

With Vice President Joe Biden on his side, Obama acknowledged Republican

warnings that Democrats would pay a steep political price in November midterm elections that will decide control of Congress.

"I know this wasn't an easy vote for a lot of people. But it was the right vote," said the president, who has vowed to help Democrat inswing districts win re-election.

The Senate now takes up a free-standing package of changes, which the House approved 220-211, as early as Tuesday in a bid to complete its work on the overhaul.

Together, the Senate bill and changes would remake US health care a century after President Teddy Roosevelt called for a national approach, extending coverage to 95 percent of the under-65 population.

The bill bans insurance company practices like denying care for preexisting conditions, imposing lifetime caps on coverage, while providing subsidies to buy private insurance in newly-created marketplaces called "exchanges."

Iran detains grandson of powerful cleric

AP, Tehran

An Iranian news agency says authorities detained the grandson of influential former president Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani.

The semi-official Fars news agency says Hasan Lahouti was arrested in Tehran airport upon arrival from London late Sunday.

The Monday report did not elaborate on why Lahouti was detained.

Rafsanjani, a powerful figure in Iran's clerical establishment, supported opposition leader Mir Hossein Mousavi in his challenge to President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, who the opposition says won June elections by fraud.

Iranian government has arrested thousands and put more than 100 on trial in a crackdown on the opposition since the election.

Two novel ways to kill TB

ANI, London

Scientists have discovered two novel ways of killing the bacteria that cause tuberculosis (TB).

According to researchers at Albert Einstein College of Medicine of Yeshiva University, their findings could lead to a potent TB therapy that would also prevent resistant TB strains from developing.

"This approach is totally different from the way any other anti-TB drug works. In the past few years, extremely drug resistant strains of TB have arisen that can't be eliminated by any drugs, so new strategies for attacking TB are urgently needed," said William R Jacobs, Jr, the study's senior author and professor of microbiology and immunology and of genetics at Einstein, as well as a Howard Hughes Medical Institute investigator.

Galaxy in early Universe went through 'teenage growth spurt'

ANI, Washington

Reports indicate that an international team of scientists has found a massive galaxy in the early Universe creating stars like our sun up to 100 times faster than the modern-day Milky Way, which they have described as "a teenager going through a growth spurt".

Due to the amount of time it takes light to reach Earth, the scientists observed the galaxy as it would have appeared 10 billion years ago - just three billion years after the Big Bang.

They found four discrete star-forming regions within the galaxy known as SMM J2135-0102.

Each region was more than 100 times brighter than star-forming regions in the Milky Way, such as the Orion Nebula.

The researchers suggested that star formation was more rapid and vigorous in the early Universe as galaxies went through periods of huge growth.

The findings provide a unique insight into how stars formed in the early Universe, the scientists added.

EU slams Israel over settlement building

AFP, Brussels

EU foreign ministers yesterday called for a total freeze on Jewish settlement building in the Palestinian territories, as Israeli foreign minister Avigdor Lieberman visited Brussels.

"We asked for a total freeze of settlement activities and we will pursue this policy," said Spanish Foreign Minister Miguel Angel Moratinos, whose country holds the rotating EU presidency.

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's green light for more settlers' homes is "completely unacceptable," his Finnish counterpart Alexander Stubb said, while adding that the recent rocket fire from the Gaza Strip into Israel was equally unacceptable.

EU foreign affairs chief Catherine Ashton, who made her first official trip to the Middle East last week, stressed that "there has to be a recognition that the talks have to get moving."

The talks in question are so-called "proximity talks" which means the Israeli and Palestinian representatives are in the same building, with US mediation, but not meeting face-to-face.

Ex-British PM Tony Blair, the Middle East envoy for the quartet of the EU, UN, US and Russia, was in Brussels to address the assembled foreign ministers ahead of talks in Moscow on Friday, where the possibility of the indirect talks will be discussed.

Israel's Lieberman was also in Brussels for bilateral talks with his German, Italian, Dutch, Lithuanian and Maltese counterparts.

Netanyahu, however, cancelled a planned 24-hour visit to Brussels later in the week, an Israeli official said on Monday.

Netanyahu had been scheduled to meet EU president Herman Van Rompuy and the prime ministers of Belgium, Italy and The Netherlands on his return from a visit to the United States.

British ruling party hit by lobbying claims as vote looms

AFP, London

British Prime Minister Gordon Brown's Labour Party was at the centre of lobbying allegations Sunday just weeks before an election, after some of its lawmakers were caught in an undercover sting.

Senior Labour members of parliament (MPs) were filmed apparently offering to use their connections with government in return for money - although they all subsequently denied wrongdoing.

They included former cabinet minister Stephen Byers, who boasted he was a "cab for hire" and asked for up to 5,000 pounds (7,500 dollars, 5,500 euros) a day for his services.

Settlements in E Jerusalem hurt talks, says Hillary

US to block Iran on nukes, sanctions will take time

AFP, Washington

US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton said yesterday that building Israeli settler homes in east Jerusalem and the West Bank undermined mutual trust, the peace talks and the US mediating role.

In a speech to the pro-Israel lobby AIPAC, Clinton said Washington condemned planned settlements in east Jerusalem -- that have caused a US-Israeli rift -- in order to preserve trust and ensure new peace talks go ahead.

"New construction in east Jerusalem or the West Bank undermines that mutual trust and endangers the proximity talks that are the first step toward the full negotiations that both sides say they want and need," the chief US diplomat said.

"And it exposes daylight between Israel and the United States that others in the region could

hope to exploit," she told an estimated 7,500 delegates at the annual policy conference of the American Israel Public Affairs Committee.

"It undermines America's unique ability to play a role -- an essential role, in the peace process," she said.

Hillary insisted that US condemnation of the March 9 announcement -- which came during a visit to Israel by US Vice President Joe Biden to highlight new Palestinian-Israeli talks -- was not about "wounded pride."

Earlier Hillary said the United States will not "compromise its commitment" to prevent Iran getting a nuclear bomb, but sanctions that bite will take time.

In excerpts of a speech she will deliver to the pro-Israel lobby AIPAC, Hillary said it "is taking time to produce these sanctions... but we will not compromise our commitment to preventing Iran from acquiring these weapons."

Sarkozy to rejig govt after polls defeat

AFP, Paris

French President Nicolas Sarkozy moved to shake up his government on Monday after a humiliating defeat in regional elections put pressure on him to recast his reform drive.

Sarkozy met with his Prime Minister Francois Fillon at the Elysee palace to plan the cabinet reshuffle following Sunday's debacle, which left Sarkozy's right-wing UMP in charge of only one of France's mainland regions.

The president's chief of staff Claude Gueant dismissed rumours that Fillon would offer to resign after the heavy defeat in the two-round election -- the last ballot-box test of Sarkozy's popularity before the 2012 presidential vote.

But he said that Fillon and Sarkozy at their meeting would discuss a "technical reshuffle" of the government -- signalling a new start in Sarkozy's campaign to persuade France to swallow difficult reforms.

Sarkozy "expected these results to be disappointing. He said before the regionals that an election always has a meaning and a message. He has decided to hear it," Gueant told AFP.

The results were "a big wake-up call for quick and effective action" to tackle unemployment and other effects of the economic crisis, he added.

Thousands march to press for US immigration reform

AFP, Washington

Tens of thousands of people marched outside the White House Sunday to press Congress to move on a long-delayed immigration reform, which President Barack Obama told the protesters "won't happen overnight."

Organisers hope the 100,000-strong "March for America" will put immigration reform, which failed in Congress in 2006 and 2007, back on the agenda after a year dominated by health care reform, the economy and wars in Iraq and Afghanistan.

As the march made its way to the Congress building, lawmakers were busy inside debating a health care bill that immigration reform advocates said once passed into law should free up the legislative agenda to take up the plight of an estimated 11 million illegal immigrants in the country.

"The question for our leaders is what they will do starting Monday, March 22 to deliver on the promise of reform. We have heard promises before," Clarissa Martinez of the Hispanic organisation La Raza said on Friday, previewing the march.

As a sea of signs, flags and waving hands filled the National Mall -- the long, grassy esplanade between the US Congress and the Lincoln Memorial, demonstrators were surprised to hear a taped message from Obama beamed over loudspeakers.



PHOTO: AFP
Protesters participate in a "March for America" demonstration calling for immigration reform near the Washington Monument on Sunday in Washington, DC. According to the organisers hundreds of groups from almost every state marched for immigration reform from the National Mall to RFK Stadium.

Gujarat declared most polluted state in India

ANI, Ahmedabad

The Central Pollution Control Board (CPCB) has declared Gujarat as the most polluted State in the country.

The conclusion has been based on the increasing levels of pollution and toxic wastes.

There are seven states in the country, which account for 80 percent of the total hazardous wastes and among these Gujarat tops the list followed by Maharashtra and Andhra Pradesh.

Even after being declared as the most polluted State, Gujarat Government has not taken any necessary measures to prevent the problem aggravating further.

Four Europeans on shortlist for simulated Mars mission

AFP, Noordwijk

Four Europeans vying to become guinea pigs for a 500-day simulated mission to Mars said Monday they were proud to be putting their young lives on hold for the sake of scientific advancement.

"I want to help humanity take a step forward by improving our level of knowledge," 28-year-old Belgian candidate Jerome Clevers said at the European Space Agency's (ESA) Dutch offices where he and his colleagues were introduced to the media.

Added 26-year-old Italian Diego Urbina: "When the first humans step on Mars I can say: yeah I helped do that."



PHOTO: AFP
Marine biologists dressed as mermaids and Poseidon (L), the god of water, wave as they float past on Sydney Harbour on a six-metre-long "iceberg" to celebrate World Water Day yesterday. The shipping container made to look like ice represents the average amount of water the standard Australian house could save over six months by installing a water saving device.

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