

US MIDTERM ELECTION I

Voting underway in key polls battle

Democratic power at risk

REUTERS, Washington

After a long and bitter campaign, Americans cast their votes yesterday in elections that could sweep Democrats from power in Congress and slam the brakes on President Barack Obama's legislative agenda.

Anxiety over the stumbling economy and discontent with Obama and government in Washington have propelled Republicans to the threshold of huge gains that could give them a majority in the House of Representatives and perhaps even the Senate.

Opinion polls and independent analysts project Republican gains of at least 50 House seats, far more than the 39 they need to take control and topple Democratic House Speaker Nancy Pelosi from power.

Republicans are also expected to make big gains in the Senate, although it appears more difficult -- but not impossible -- for them to pick up the 10 seats they need for a majority.

Polls opened before dawn in some areas of the eastern United States and will start to close at 6 pm EDT, but it will be hours after that before results are known in many crucial races.

All 435 House seats, 37 of the 100 Senate seats and 37 of the 50 state governorships are at stake in Tuesday's voting.

Obama won office two years ago on a wave of hope he could lead the United States out of a deep economic crisis, but persis-



Stanly Emond (L) and Ziqir "Ziggy" Berisha (R) participate in a Tea Party Express rally on Waterbury Green on Monday in Connecticut. Americans start casting their votes yesterday in elections that could sweep Democrats from power in Congress.

US mail bomb plotters 'used dry run'

AFP, Washington

The United States intercepted parcels from Yemen in September thought to be a test run for the package bomb plot, a US official said, as Western governments tightened freight and passenger security.

Two parcels addressed to Jewish institutions in Chicago and containing the lethal explosive PETN hidden in ink toner cartridges were uncovered Thursday in Britain and Dubai on cargo planes en route to the United States.

But now it has emerged that US agents first found suspicious packages from Yemen back in September and linked them "several weeks ago" to al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula, according to a US official.

"The boxes were stopped in transit and searched," the official told AFP late Monday, confirming that the packages contained no explosives.

"At the time, people obviously took notice and -- knowing of the terrorist group's interest in aviation -- considered the possibility that AQAP might be exploring the logistics of the cargo system," the official added.

"When we learned of last week's serious threat, people recalled the incident and factored it in to our government's very prompt response."

ABC News, which broke the news of the test run, said it had been told by senior officials that ever since the September discovery US intelligence agencies had specific concerns about AQAP's interest in Chicago.

The dry run contained household goods including books, religious literature, and a computer disk and were shipped by "someone with ties to al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula," a US official told ABC.

China rejects US mediation in island row

AFP, Beijing

China and Japan alone should resolve their dispute over contested islands in the East China Sea, Beijing said yesterday, rejecting a US offer for three-way talks to address the simmering row.

The Asian neighbours have been locked in their worst diplomatic spat for years since Tokyo arrested a Chinese trawler captain involved in a collision with two Japanese coastguard vessels near the islets in early September.

US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton stepped into the fray last week at a regional summit in Vietnam, telling both sides that Washington was willing to host a trilateral meeting to ease tensions, but Beijing balked at the notion.

"I want to emphasise that this is only a US idea," foreign ministry spokesman Ma Zhaoxu said Tuesday in a statement.

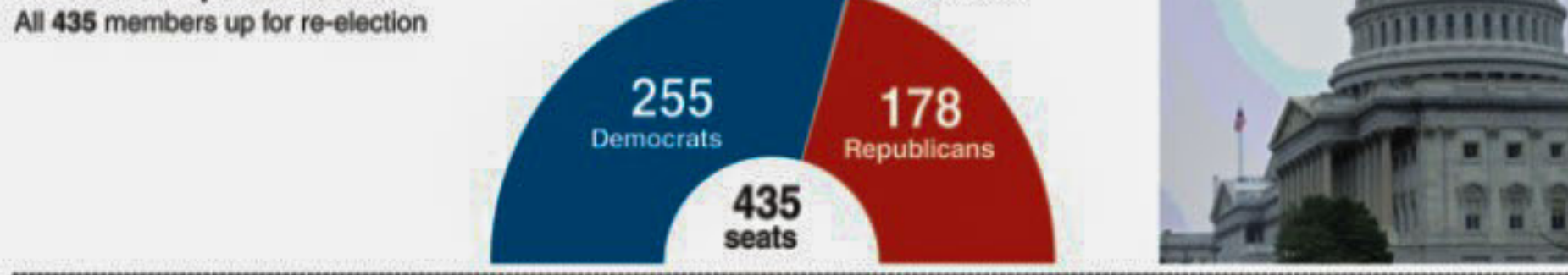
"China always believes that we should make full use of the current various dialogue and cooperation mechanisms in the Asia Pacific region," Ma said.

Battle for Congress

All 435 House of Representatives seats, 37 Senate spots and three dozen governorships are up for grabs during 2 November mid-term elections in the US.



House of Representatives



Governors



tent high unemployment and a gaping budget deficit have turned many voters against him.

The political mood gave rise to the Tea Party, a loosely organized conservative movement that backed less government, lower taxes and reduced spending.

Obama's signature overhaul of the healthcare system, a decades-long goal for Democrats, has prompted a backlash from many voters.

"They're trying to ruin all the healthcare," said Sharon Krumins, a doctor at Walt Disney World, as she left a polling station on Tuesday morning in Winter Park, Florida.

Republican control of even one chamber of Congress would likely spark a long bout of legislative gridlock, weakening Obama's hand in fighting over extending tax cuts put in place under his Republican predecessor George W. Bush and passing comprehensive climate change or immigration bills.

Republican candidates have pushed an agenda of spending cuts, deficit reduction and the repeal of at least portions of the healthcare overhaul, but Obama would wield veto power over Republican initiatives.

Dozens of races are considered too close to call. Candidates in both parties launched a frenetic round of last-minute

campaign stops and fundraising appeals on Monday.

HARRY REID IN TROUBLE

In perhaps the country's most high-profile race, Senate Democratic leader Harry Reid is embroiled in a neck-and-neck re-election fight with Republican Sharron Angle. Former President Bill Clinton campaigned in West Virginia for Democratic Senate candidate Joe Manchin.

Republicans need to string together wins in seven of eight tight races in California, Washington, Nevada, Wisconsin, Colorado, Pennsylvania, Illinois and West Virginia to win a Senate majority.

Democrats mounted a huge get-out-the-vote operation to ensure supporters made it to the polls. They were encouraged by their lead among early voters in some key states.

"The other guys say they're going to take both houses, I'm saying we're going to retain both houses," Democratic National Committee chairman Tim Kaine said on MSNBC.

Democrats have battled a sour political climate all year, with voters in a foul mood over persistent high unemployment, a growing budget deficit and the perceived failures of government in Washington.

The political climate put Democrats on the defensive in dozens of once-safe House and Senate seats, with the

non-partisan Cook Political Report estimating there are now more than 90 endangered Democratic-held House seats.

Tea Party-backed Republican candidates Ken Buck in Colorado, Joe Miller in Alaska and Angle in Nevada are threatening to knock off incumbents in tight Senate races, and Rand Paul in Kentucky has a big lead in opinion poll.

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