

Alerts

This Week in Washington - December 25, 2011 December 25, 2011

DOMESTIC POLICY MATTERS

Although they will not formally adjourn for more than three days in order to foreclose any possibility of recess appointments or pocket vetoes, the House and Senate have returned to their districts for the holiday recess. The House will reconvene on January 17 and the Senate will reconvene on January 23.

Fiscal Year (FY) 2012 Appropriations. On Friday, the President signed the FY 2012 “megabus” appropriations package, as the current short-term continuing resolution (CR) expired at midnight that day. This final package completes the work on FY 2012 appropriations, containing the text of the underlying Military Construction-Veterans Affairs bill and eight other spending measures: Defense, Energy-Water, Financial Services, Homeland Security, Interior-Environment, Labor-HHS-Education, Legislative Branch, and State-Foreign Operations. In November, Congress enacted a “minibus” containing the other three spending bills: Agriculture, Commerce-Justice-Science, and Transportation-Housing.

Payroll Tax Cut Extension. The House returned this past week to address the Senate-passed two-month extension of payroll tax cuts. On Tuesday, the House voted 229 to 193 to set aside the Senate-passed bill and request a formal House-Senate conference to negotiate a compromise. However, following Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid’s (D-Nevada) refusal to call the Senate back to conference and pressure from the White House, Senate Republicans, Republican strategist and former Bush adviser Karl Rove, and the Wall Street Journal to agree to a two-month extension, Speaker of the House John Boehner (R-Ohio) announced Thursday evening that he had reached a deal with the Senate to extend the payroll tax cut and unemployment benefits for two months, with a fix to ease the implementation burden on businesses. To facilitate the deal, Majority Leader Reid agreed to appoint conferees to negotiate a longer term agreement in the weeks ahead. Both the House and Senate formally approved the deal by unanimous consent on Friday morning, sending the new compromise bill on to President Barack Obama for his signature. The President signed the bill Friday afternoon, calling on Congress “to keep working without drama” to extend the payroll tax cut and unemployment benefits through 2012 when Congress returns in January.

On Monday, the Supreme Court announced it will hear oral arguments on the legality of the health care reform law on March 26 – 28. AT&T announced on Monday that it has abandoned its proposed \$39 billion purchase of T-Mobile because of government objections. On Tuesday, Senator Tom Coburn (R-Oklahoma) released a new oversight report, “Wastebook 2011,” that highlights \$6.5 billion in “wasteful” government spending over the last year. On Wednesday, the Environmental Protection Agency unveiled new national standards to limit power plant output of mercury and other toxic air pollutants that have been linked to developmental disorders and childhood asthma. President Obama has yet to sign the FY 2012 Defense Authorization bill, but Attorney General Eric Holder confirmed Wednesday that the President will issue a signing statement on terrorist detainees when he does sign the bill.

Political News. A new Washington Post-ABC News national poll released Tuesday showed former Speaker of the House Newt Gingrich and former Massachusetts Governor Mitt Romney tied for the Republican presidential bid. The same poll found that President Obama’s overall approval rating has recovered slightly among key groups, including independents, young adults, and seniors. Former New Mexico Governor Gary Johnson announced on Tuesday that he will withdraw from the Republican primaries to seek the Libertarian Party presidential nomination. Customs and Border Protection Commissioner Alan Bersin announced on Thursday that he will leave his position before his recess appointment expires on December 31.

FOREIGN POLICY MATTERS

North Korea. Following reports of the death of North Korea’s National Defense Commission Chairman Kim Jong Il, late Sunday, President Obama spoke with South Korean President Lee Myung-bak about the current situation in the Korean Peninsula. On Monday, President Obama similarly spoke with Japanese Prime Minister Yoshihiko Noda. Secretary Clinton met Monday with Japanese Foreign Minister Koichiro Gemba, with the primary topic of discussion focused on Kim Jong Il’s death and the Six Party Talks. The Secretary also welcomed the Foreign Minister’s news that he intends to visit Burma soon, saying there exists “real opportunity through sustained diplomacy to test the new government and to overcome the obstacles in the way to Burma achieving its rightful place in the community of nations.”

Iraq. After the Iraqi Prime Minister issued an arrest warrant for Iraqi Vice President Tareq al-Hashemi earlier this week, Vice President Biden spoke Tuesday with Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki and separately with the Council of Representatives Speaker Osama al-Nujaifi about the need for an inclusive partnership government and U.S. support for the Iraq government to act "in a manner consistent with the rule of law and Iraq's constitution." The Vice President also shared the United States is monitoring events in Iraq closely. On Thursday, White House Press Secretary Jay Carney said the United States "strongly" condemns the terrorist attacks that killed 67 people earlier that day. Today, Secretary Clinton commended the Iraqi government for signing an agreement with the United Nations to temporarily relocate and eventually resettle the estimated 3,000 residents of Camp Ashraf to a former U.S. military base (Camp Victory) in Iraq. The Secretary noted the agreement needs the full support of the Camp's residents, urging the residents (comprised largely of a dissident group that opposes the government of Iran and aligned itself with former Iraqi leader Saddam Hussein) to work with the U.N. on the relocation.

Syrian Conflict. The State Department said Wednesday the Assad regime did not evince "behavior of a government that is getting ready to implement the Arab League proposals," specifically underscoring the increased violence by the regime. Also Wednesday, White House Press Secretary Jay Carney again reiterated the Administration's call for Syrian President Bashar al-Assad to leave power and expressed concern over "reports that the Assad regime continues to indiscriminately kill scores of civilians and army defectors."

On Monday, President Obama called Tunisia's interim Prime Minister Hamadi Jebali to congratulate him on his appointment, praised Tunisia for its inclusive transition, and underscored America's strong support for Tunisia's democratic transition. Last Sunday (18th), Secretary Clinton expressed deep concern about the continuing reports of violence in Egypt, urging the Egyptian security forces to protect universal human rights, such as free expression and assembly. The Secretary spoke with the new Egyptian Prime Minister Ganzouri, where she congratulated him on his appointment and spoke to him about the transition underway. On Thursday, the Pentagon said NATO coalition forces acted "in self-defense and with appropriate force after being fired upon" by Pakistani security forces and the lack of distrust between the United States and Pakistan contributed to the tragic death of 24 Pakistani troops last month. Pakistan's military refused to cooperate during the investigation and reportedly rejected the findings of the U.S. inquiry.

Monday, President Obama signed a new Executive Order instituting a National Action Plan on Women, Peace, and Security. The National Action Plan will incorporate the perspective of women into U.S. foreign policy. The President also issued a condolence statement Monday after the tragic loss of life over last weekend's floods in the Philippines. Last Saturday (17th), Secretary Clinton offered U.S. assistance to the government. On Tuesday, President Obama spoke with Spanish President-elect Mariano Rajoy to congratulate him on his election and to emphasize U.S. support for his economic reform agenda. Thursday, President Obama announced an additional \$113 million in emergency relief assistance for the Horn of Africa.

Secretary Clinton participated in the inaugural meeting of the Foreign Affairs Policy Board on Monday and later hosted a dinner for the Board members. The Secretary held a bilateral meeting Tuesday with Cypriot Foreign Minister Erato Kozakou-Marcoullis, discussing the Cyprus problem, the E.U. presidency, and the effect of Arab Spring in the Middle East and North Africa. Also, Tuesday, Secretary Clinton issued a statement of deep disappointment over the Democratic Republic of the Congo Supreme Court's decision to uphold the electoral commission's provisional results without fully evaluating widespread reports of irregularities. On Wednesday, the State Department expressed concern about an Ethiopian court's recent conviction of two Swedish journalists on a terrorism-related charge, saying the "verdict appears to equate reporting about terrorism with support for terrorism." Friday, Secretary Clinton and former President Bill Clinton, along with former Secretary of State Madeleine Albright, traveled to Prague, Czech Republic, to attend the funeral of former Czech President Václav Havel. Also Friday, The United States and Romania jointly announced the Ballistic Missile Defense Agreement on deployment of the U.S. ballistic missile defense system in Romania entered into force. Assistant Secretary of State for International Security and Nonproliferation Affairs Thomas Countryman said Friday the United States was pleased with the outcome of the 7th Review Conference of the Biological and Toxin Weapons Convention, which concluded Thursday in Geneva, Switzerland.