

The Florida Times-Union

Friday
APRIL 7, 2017
\$2

2017 MASTERS TOURNAMENT

'Dream' round gives Hoffman tourney lead

Sports, D-1

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WATCH: 3 p.m. today on ESPN



HOME RUN
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Sports, D-1



COMING SATURDAY

Memories of 2007 humane society fire still burn as new building nears completion



DON RICKLES
King of insult comedy dies at 90
Nation, A-5

U.S. blasts Syria base with missiles

The Washington Post

The U.S. military launched approximately 50 cruise missiles at a Syrian military airfield late on Thursday, in the first direct American assault on the government of President Bashar Assad since

that country's civil war began six years ago.

The operation, which the Trump administration authorized in retaliation for a chemical attack killing scores of civilians this week, dramatically expands U.S. military involvement in Syria and ex-

MORE INSIDE

International pressure builds on Syria's Assad. **A-4**

poses the United States to heightened risk of direct confrontation with Russia and Iran, both backing Assad in his attempt to crush his opposition.

The attack may put hundreds of American troops now stationed in Syria in greater danger. They are advising local forces in advance of a major assault on the Syrian city of Raqqa, the Islamic State's de facto capital.

The decision to strike

follows 48 hours of intense deliberations by U.S. officials, and represents a significant break with the previous administration's reluctance to wade militarily into the Syrian civil war and shift any focus from the campaign against the Islamic State.

Senior White House officials met on the issue of Syria on Wednesday evening in a session that lasted into early Thursday, and Defense Secretary Jim Mattis, Secretary of State Rex Tillerson and Army

SYRIA continues on **A-4**

Senate goes 'nuclear,' clears way for Gorsuch

By Erica Werner
Associated Press

WASHINGTON | Republicans invoked the "nuclear option" in the Senate on Thursday, unilaterally rewriting the chamber's rules to allow President Donald Trump's nominee to ascend to the Supreme Court.

Furious Democrats objected until the end, but their efforts to block Judge Neil Gorsuch failed as expected. Lawmakers of both



Gorsuch

parties beanoed the long-term implications for the Senate, the court and the country.

"We will sadly point to today as a turning point in the history of the Senate and the Supreme Court," said Minority Leader Chuck Schumer, D-NY.

The maneuvering played out in an atmosphere of tension in the Senate chamber with most senators in their seats, a rare and theatrical occurrence.

Democrats mounted a filibuster in an effort to block Gorsuch by denying him the 60 votes needed to advance to a final vote. Then Majority Leader Mitch McConnell, R-Ky, raised a point of order, suggesting Supreme Court nominees should not be subjected to a 60-vote threshold, but instead a simple majority in the 100-member Senate.

McConnell was overruled, but appealed the ruling. On that he prevailed on a 52-48 party line vote.

GORSUCH continues on **A-4**

Curry pitches pension reform to council as 'new beginning'



Jacksonville Mayor Lenny Curry made his presentation on pension reform to the City Council. (Photos by Bob Self/Florida Times-Union)

Plan would free up millions, but most would go to higher salaries

By David Bauerlein and Nate Monroe
The Times-Union

Top officials in Mayor Lenny Curry's administration laid out a high-stakes choice for City Council members Thursday: Approve the mayor's complex pension-reform package or face a \$59 million hit on ever-rising retirement costs next year that would force drastic cuts in city services.

Wielding newly released financial projections, Curry's team showed his plan would free up \$263 million

over the next three years that would otherwise go toward ever-increasing pension costs — an enticing possibility in a revenue-starved city. But there's a hitch.

Higher salaries for city employees — also a part of Curry's sweeping reform plan — would consume \$234 million. Curry also wants to end pensions for future employees.

That's the kind of trade-off that permeates the financial projections

PENSION continues on **A-4**



At Thursday's public meeting, several council members said they would reserve bigger questions for private meetings with the mayor's staff.

Weather
Windchill
Forecast on A-2

70 Today's high

40 Saturday morning's low

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Classified C-4 Life E
Comics E-6 Legals D-5
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Pressure building on Syria's Assad

By Bassem Mroue
& Ian Phillips
Associated Press

BEIRUT | President Bashar Assad's government came under mounting international pressure after a chemical attack in northern Syria, with even key ally Russia saying its support is not unconditional and the U.S. launching a barrage of cruise missiles at a government-controlled air base in Syria.

Turkey, meanwhile, said samples from victims of Tuesday's attack, which killed more than 80 people in the town of Khan Sheikhoun, indicate they were exposed to sarin, a highly toxic nerve agent.

Syria rejected the accusations, and Moscow warned against apportioning blame until an investigation has been carried out.

Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said in an interview with The Associated Press on Thursday

that "unconditional support is not possible in this current world."

But he added that "it is not correct to say that Moscow can convince Mr. Assad to do whatever is wanted in Moscow. This is totally wrong."

Russia has provided military support for the Syrian government since September 2015, turning the balance of power in Assad's favor. Moscow has used its veto power at the Security Council on several occasions since the civil war began six years ago to prevent sanctions against Damascus.

The two countries "enjoy a relationship of co-operation, of exchange of views and full mutual support," said Peskov, a spokesman for President Vladimir Putin. Assad and his army are "the only real power in Syria that can resist terrorists on the ground," he said.

Syria maintains it didn't use chemical weapons,

blaming opposition fighters for stockpiling the chemicals. Russia's Defense Ministry said the toxic agents were released when a Syrian airstrike hit a rebel chemical weapons arsenal and munitions factory on the eastern outskirts of Khan Sheikhoun.

"I stress, once again, that the Syrian Arab Army did not and will not use such weapons even against the terrorists who are targeting our people," Syria's Foreign Minister Walid Moallem told reporters in Damascus.

U.S. President Donald Trump said the attack crossed "many, many lines," and put the blame squarely on Assad's forces. Speaking Thursday on Air Force One, Trump said the attack "shouldn't have happened, and it shouldn't be allowed to happen."

Early Friday morning Syrian time, the United States fired cruise missiles into Syria in a surprise strike that marked

a striking reversal for Trump, who warned as a candidate against the U.S. getting pulled into the Syrian civil war, now in its seventh year.

About 60 U.S. Tomahawk missiles, fired from warships in the Mediterranean Sea, targeted an air base in retaliation for a chemical weapons attack that American officials believe Syrian government aircraft launched with a nerve agent, possibly sarin.

Trump called on "all civilized nations" to join the U.S. in seeking an end to the carnage in Syria.

Earlier, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan had said he hopes Trump will take military action, Turkey's state-run Anadolu Agency quoted him as saying.

Erdogan said Turkey would be prepared to do "whatever falls on us" to support possible military action, the news agency reported.

SYRIA

Continued from A-1

Lt. Gen. H.R. McMaster, the national security adviser, have communicated repeatedly since Tuesday's chemical attack, the officials said.

The U.S. Central Command has had plans for striking the Syrian government for years and currently has significant assets in the region, enabling a quick response once a decision was made.

While the Obama White House began operations against the Islamic State in 2014, it backed away from a planned assault on Syrian government sites a year earlier after a similar chemical attack on Syrian civilians.

Tuesday's apparent nerve gas attack in northern Idlib, with its widely circulated images of lifeless children, appears to have galvanized President Donald Trump and some of his top advisers to harden their position against the Syrian leader.

The assault adds new complexity to Syria's prolonged conflict, which includes fighters battling the Syrian government and others focused on combating the Islamic State, which despite over two years of American and allied attacks remains a potent force.

Within the administration, some officials urged immediate action against Assad, warning against what one described as "paralysis through analysis." But others were concerned about second- and third-order effects, including the response of Russia, which also has installed sophisticated air-defense systems in Syria, according to the officials, who spoke on the condition of anonymity to discuss internal deliberations.

The Trump administration's position on the strongman appears to have quickly shifted in the wake of the chemical attack, as senior officials voiced new criticism of the Syrian leader.

Earlier Thursday, Tillerson suggested that the United States and other nations would consider somehow removing Assad from power, but he did not say how. Just a few days ago, the White House had said that removing Assad was not realistic with press secretary Sean Spicer saying it was necessary to accept the "political reality" in Syria.

"We are considering an appropriate response for this chemical weapons attack," Tillerson said in Palm Beach, Florida, where Trump was meeting Thursday with Chinese President Xi Jinping. "It is a serious matter. It requires a serious

response," he said.

The summit with the Chinese leader will continue Friday, and some U.S. officials believe the strike will also serve as a warning of U.S. willingness to strike North Korea, if China does not act to curtail the nuclear ambitions of the government there.

It was not immediately clear whether Thursday's assault marked the beginning of a broader campaign against the Assad government. While Thursday's operation was the first intentional attack on Syrian government targets, the United States accidentally struck a group of Syrian soldiers in eastern Syria last year in what officials concluded was the result of human error.

The Obama administration had insisted that Assad could never remain in any postwar Syria, and it supported rebel groups that have tried unsuccessfully to oust him.

A senior State Department official said Tillerson spoke on the phone Wednesday with Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov about the chemical attack.

"We sought the Russian analysis or readout of what they thought had happened," the official said.

It is unclear if the U.S. provided any warning to Russia about the attack on Assad's military facilities.

The United States has a broad arsenal already in the region, including dozens of strike aircraft on the USS George H.W. Bush, an aircraft carrier that is deployed to the Middle East and accompanied by guided-missile destroyers and cruisers that can also launch Tomahawk cruise missiles.

Additionally, an amphibious naval force in the region includes the 24th Marine Expeditionary Unit with Harrier jets and Cobra gunships. The Pentagon also has scores of aircraft in the region flying operations every day against the Islamic State group, including from Incirlik air base to the north in Turkey.

It was not immediately clear if the attack only involved missiles or also included manned aircraft. U.S. fighter planes, if used, would have to contend with a modest web of Syrian air defenses and potentially more advanced types of surface-to-air missiles provided by Russia.

One of Assad's more prevalent systems, the S-200, was used to target Israeli jets last month, but missiles were intercepted by Israeli defense systems. The S-200 has a range of roughly 186 miles, according to U.S. military documents, and can hit targets flying at altitudes of around 130,000 feet.

PENSION

Continued from A-1

surrounding Curry's proposal, a sweeping series of legislation supporters and critics agree would have historic implications for Jacksonville's future. The City Council could vote on his plan as soon as this month.

In brief remarks before council members, Curry said his plan was possibly the most important decision before city leaders since the boundaries of the old city and county consolidated into one government nearly 50 years ago. Curry called his plan a "new beginning" for Jacksonville's financial health.

Several council members — seeing the financial details of Curry's plan for the first time — said they would reserve bigger questions they had for private meetings with the mayor's staff and asked for any minor points of clarification during Thursday's public meeting. Most members seemed optimistic about the vote. City Councilman Reggie Gaffney, for example, said he was "amazed and stunned" after the presentation from Curry's staff.

Curry's plans center around the revenue generated by a half-penny sales tax voters approved over the summer. The tax would begin after an existing half-penny tax expires in 2030, so relying on the tax to generate financial relief from pension costs in the near-term requires financial creativity.

By deferring a bulk of pension payments until the sales tax begins in 2031, Curry's plan promises more money — hundreds of millions — in the short term that can be spent instead on parks, police and downtown improvement projects.

That immediate financial relief, however, comes with a price tag totaling about \$4 billion more through 2049 compared to the status quo of pension reform enacted two years ago.

There still remain some



Mayor Lenny Curry addresses the media in the atrium of City Hall after he presented his pension-reform plan to the City Council Thursday. (Bob Self/Florida Times-Union)

unanswered questions: For starters, it's not clear when the city's three pension plans would be fully funded. The sales tax will end in 2060 or when the pension plans are 100 percent funded, whichever comes first.

Over the summer, Curry told voters his plan would fund the pensions by about 2048, causing the sales tax to terminate at that time. But the financial data released Thursday runs projections through 2049 without showing what the funding levels would be on a year-by-year basis. Officials in his office estimated the plans would hit 100 percent funding around 2050-51, but that is not clearly reflected in the projections they released.

That sort of information has routinely been made available in the past. Curry's office did not respond to questions after the meeting about funding levels.

He and employee unions have agreed to place future hires into 401(k)-style plans, which would make Jacksonville the first major city in America to offer such benefits to all employees, including police officers and firefighters. The city's match on those accounts would be unusu-

ally high by the expectations of many private-sector employees: It tops out at 25 percent of pay for police officers and firefighters.

Talking to reporters after his remarks to City Council, Curry said placing all future hires into 401(k)-type plans means "we're getting out of the pension business that is crippling cities all over the United States. We're getting out of these dinosaurs."

City employees also would get their first pay raises in almost a decade. Public safety employees would get a 20 percent bump over three years, while general employees would get a 14 percent increase over three years. Curry said police and firefighters deserve the raises, and he tied the increased salaries to the battle against violent crime.

He said shifting a chunk of pension costs to the period after the sales tax starts doesn't risk recreating the same financial mess for future city leaders.

"I reject that premise and assumption," he said, pointing to the sales tax as the first time the city has secured a dedicated funding source for paying down

the massive pension debt.

He said until the sales tax starts, safeguards will be in place to ensure enough money goes into the plans in the meantime.

"We are not taking ourselves off the hook to solve this problem," he said. "This is a very well thought-out plan. I drew on my accounting and finance background. I worked with my team to make sure we put forward a comprehensive solution."

Curry has kept tight control of financial information as he developed the plan over the past year. Even at the Thursday council meeting, the mayor's staff handed out the 35-page report to council members, the media and the public one page at a time during the presentation.

Curry said "all the numbers" were going to council.

"We have done everything in a transparent manner," he said. "We have shared everything with the voters, and now here at the final step before City Council makes a vote, they're getting everything and the public is getting everything."

Times-Union writer Christopher Hong contributed to this report.

GORSUCH

Continued from A-1

The 60-vote filibuster requirement was effectively gone and, with it, the last vestige of bipartisanship on presidential nominees in an increasingly polarized Senate.

A final confirmation vote on Gorsuch is expected Friday. He could then be sworn in, in time to take his seat on the court later this month and hear the final cases of the term.

The maneuvering played out with much hand-wringing from all sides about the future of the Senate, as well as unusually bitter accusations and counter-accusations as each side blamed the other. The rules change is known as the "nuclear option" because of its far-reaching implications.

McConnell accused Democrats of forcing his hand by trying to filibuster

a highly qualified nominee in Gorsuch, 49, a 10-year veteran of the 10th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals in Denver with a consistently conservative record. McConnell vowed the rules change would block the Gorsuch filibuster and all future ones, a change many lawmakers lamented could lead to an even more polarized Senate, court and country.

"This will be the first, and last, partisan filibuster of a Supreme Court nominee," McConnell declared. "This is the latest escalation in the left's never-ending judicial war, the most audacious yet, and it cannot and will not stand."

Supreme Court filibusters have been nearly unheard of in the Senate, but the confrontation is playing out amid an explosive political atmosphere with liberal Democrats furious over the Trump presidency



Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell, R-Ky, led the GOP majority to change Senate rules and lower the vote threshold for Supreme Court nominees from 60 votes to a simple majority. (AP Photo/J. Scott Applewhite)

and Republicans desperate to get a win after months of chaos from Trump.

Democrats also remain livid over McConnell's decision last year to deny consideration to then-

President Barack Obama's Supreme Court nominee, Judge Merrick Garland, who was ignored for the better part of a year by Senate Republicans after the death of Justice Antonin

Scalia. Instead, McConnell kept Scalia's seat open, a calculation that is now paying off hugely for Republicans and Trump, who will be able to claim the biggest victory of his presidency to date if Gorsuch is confirmed as expected.

"We believe that what Republicans did to Merrick Garland was worse than a filibuster," Schumer said.

Emotions were running high ahead of the votes with raised voices on the floor where proceedings are normally sedate. All involved were keenly aware of the long-term implications of the proceedings — some of them hard to predict for the future of Trump's presidency and the 2018 midterm elections, when Republicans will be defending their slim 52-48 Senate majority and 10 vulnerable Democrats in states Trump won will be up for re-election.

Senators on both sides

of the aisle lamented the trajectory they were on, though they themselves were in positions to prevent it from happening and failed to do so.

Moderate Republican Sen. Susan Collins of Maine said roughly 10 senators of both parties worked over the weekend to come up with a deal to stave off the "nuclear option," but couldn't come to agreement.

In 2005, a bipartisan deal headed off GOP plans to remove the filibuster barrier for lower-court nominees, but in 2013 Democrats took the step, leaving the filibuster in place only for Supreme Court justices.

Now it, too, is gone. For now the filibuster barrier on legislation will remain, though many fear it could be the next to go.

With the final vote set, Gorsuch counts 55 supporters in the Senate.