

Senate approves minimum wage hike

By JIM KUHNHEIN
THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

WASHINGTON

The Senate voted overwhelmingly Thursday to boost the federal minimum wage by \$2.10 to \$7.25 an hour over two years but packaged the increase with controversial tax cuts for small businesses and higher taxes for many \$1 million-plus executives.

The increase in the minimum, the first in a decade, was approved by a 94-3 vote, capping a nine-day debate over how to balance the wage hike with the needs of businesses that employ low-wage workers.

A top priority of Democrats, the wage hike has both real and symbolic consequences. It would be one of the first major legislative successes of the new Democratic-controlled Congress.

"Passing this wage hike represents a small but necessary step to help lift America's working poor out of the ditches of poverty and onto the road toward economic prosperity," said Sen. Edward Kennedy, D-Mass.

President Bush urged the House to support the measure, including the tax help for small business.

"The Senate has taken a step toward helping maintain a strong and dynamic labor market and promoting continued economic growth," he said.

The bill must now be reconciled with the House version passed Jan. 10 that contained no tax provisions. House Democrats have insisted they want a minimum wage bill with no strings attached, though some have conceded the difficulty of passing the legislation in the Senate without tax breaks.

Republicans stressed the importance of the business tax breaks in the bill, though it was a significantly smaller tax package than Republicans had sought during previous attempts to raise the minimum wage.

"The Senate's reasonable approach recognizes that small businesses have been the steady engine of our growing economy and that they have been a source of new job creation, a source of job training," said Sen. Michael Enzi, R-Wyo., who helped manage the debate for the GOP.

Besides increasing the minimum wage from the current \$5.15 an hour, the bill would extend for five years a tax credit for businesses that hire the disadvantaged and provide expensing and depreciation advantages to small firms.

The tax breaks would be paid for by closing loopholes on offshore tax shelters, by capping deferred compensation payments to corporate executives and by removing the deductibility of punitive damage payments and fines.

Harry Potter's back for final book July 21

By HILLEL ITALIE
THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

NEW YORK

Let it begin: the countdown, the party planning, the predictions, the meaning of it all.

The tears — for the end of Harry Potter.

The world's most anticipated book finale, "Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows," will come out midnight, July 21, according to author J.K. Rowling and her British and U.S. publishers, Bloomsbury and Scholastic, Inc.

Ten years, and a few hundred million sales, after the first Potter book was released, Rowling will wrap up the magical adventures of the boy wizard, his friends and his enemies.

The author posted a brief announcement on her Web site Thursday, followed soon by releases from her publishers.

The news landed like a silent meteor. "Deathly Hallows" almost instantly topped the best seller lists on Amazon.com and Barnes & Noble.com, displacing another industry titan, an Oprah Winfrey pick, Sidney Poitier's "The Measure of a Man."

THE WAR IN IRAQ



Gen. George W. Casey Jr. answers a question during a Senate Armed Services Committee hearing on Capitol Hill in Washington on Thursday. Casey said that fewer than half the 21,500 U.S. troops President Bush wanted were necessary to secure Baghdad.

General: Smaller troop buildup would suffice

Commander wants half the number of U.S. soldiers Bush asked for

By DAVID ESPO
THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

WASHINGTON

The outgoing top U.S. general in Iraq diplomatically aired his differences with the commander in chief on Thursday, telling lawmakers that President Bush has ordered thousands more troops into Iraq than needed to tamp down violence in Baghdad.

Gen. George Casey quickly added he understood how his recently confirmed successor, Lt. Gen. David Petraeus, could want the full complement of 21,500 additional troops that Bush has ordered to Iraq. Casey said they could "either reinforce success, maintain momentum or put more forces in a place where the plans are not working."

As the general spoke at a confirmation

hearing into his nomination to become Army chief of staff, the full Senate lurched toward a widely anticipated debate on the administration's policy, the first since midterm elections in which public opposition to the war helped install a new Democratic majority.

One day after critics of Bush's revised war strategy merged two competing Senate measures, the White House worked to hold down the number of GOP defections while two liberal Democrats attacked the compromise as too weak. An early test vote on the issue is tentatively set for Monday.

"It is essentially an endorsement of the status quo, an endorsement I simply cannot make in light of the dire circumstances in Iraq and the need for meaningful action now," said Sen. Christopher Dodd of Connecticut, who is seeking the

2008 Democratic presidential nomination.

Casey endured occasional sharp criticism as he appeared before the Senate Armed Services Committee.

"I do not in any way question your honor, your patriotism or your service to our country, I do question some of the decisions and judgments you have made over the past two and a half years as commander of Multi-National Forces in Iraq," said Sen. John McCain, R-Ariz.

"During that time, things have gotten markedly and progressively worse, and the situation in Iraq can now best be described as dire and deteriorating."

So far, no senators have announced plans to oppose Casey's elevation to chief of staff, although McCain, as well as Sens. Lindsey Graham, R-S.C. and Joseph Lieberman, I-Conn., said they were undecided how to vote.

150 wounded, 45 killed in Shiite market bombing

By ROBERT H. REID
THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

BAGHDAD, Iraq

A pair of suicide bombers detonated explosives Thursday among shoppers in a crowded outdoor market in a Shiite city south of Baghdad, killing 45 people and wounding 150, police said. Bombs and a mortar attack killed at least 17 others in both Shiite and Sunni areas of Baghdad.

Overall, about 100 people were killed or found dead across the country, reflecting the ongoing wave of sectarian and insurgency bloodletting as the U.S. military gears up for a major security operation to stem the violence.

The biggest attack took place in the center of Hillah, a city about 60 miles south of Baghdad. Police and witnesses said the two bombers strolled into the Maktabat market about 6 p.m. when the area was packed with shoppers buying food for the evening meal.

One of the bombers detonated his explosives when he was approached by police and the other blew himself up moments later, according to police spokesman Capt. Muthanna Khaled, who gave the casualty figures.

The blasts sent bodies hurling through the air and set fire to wooden stalls where vendors sold fruits and vegetables, witnesses said. Shoppers fled screaming in

panic, while others stopped to help rescuers carry away the wounded.

No group claimed responsibility for the attack, the latest in a long series that have occurred in Hillah since the insurgency erupted in late 2003. The Shiite city was the scene of one of Iraq's deadliest attacks — a February 2005 suicide car bombing that killed 125 people.

Elsewhere, a U.S. soldier died Thursday of wounds suffered two days ago in Anbar province, a Sunni insurgent stronghold west of Baghdad, the military said. Three civilians were killed in separate shootings in the northern city of Mosul, and a policeman died in a car bombing in the city of Qaim on the Syrian border, police said.

Exxon posts record profit

By JOHN PORRETTO
THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

HOUSTON

Oil giant Exxon Mobil topped its own record for the biggest annual profit by a U.S. company last year, racking up earnings that amounted to \$4.5 billion an hour for the world's largest publicly traded oil company.

It reported the record net income — \$39.5 billion — despite a 4 percent drop in earnings in the final three months of 2006, as prices for oil and natural gas fell from extraordinary levels earlier in the year.

Lower commodity prices may linger for at least the first part of 2007, even as the cost of doing business rises because of factors such as a shortage of drilling equipment and labor.

So while big players like Exxon Mobil Corp., Chevron Corp. and ConocoPhillips are expected to con-

tinue to rake in piles of cash, the totals aren't likely to be the eye-popping amounts of recent quarters.

"I'd say overall, if you look for earnings to decline 5 to 15 percent from the huge highs this past year, you're probably going to see most of these companies fall within that range," said John Parry, a senior analyst at energy consulting firm John S. Herold Inc.

Exxon Mobil's profits didn't go unnoticed on Capitol Hill, where one lawmaker called them outlandish and said oil companies have benefited too long from a Republican-backed energy policy that cheats American taxpayers.

Exxon Mobil's 2006 profit beat its own previous record for a U.S. company of \$36.13 billion set in 2005. Its net income for 2006 equals the approximate gross domestic product, a measure of all goods and services produced within a country in a given year.

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Scientists: Global warming man-made

Report shows threat a reality

By SETH BORENSTEIN
THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

PARIS

A long-awaited report says global warming is very likely man-made, the most powerful language ever used on the issue by the world's leading climate scientists, delegates who have seen the report said Thursday.

And the document, the most authoritative science on the issue, says the disturbing signs are already visible in rising seas, killer heat waves, worsening droughts and stronger hurricanes.

There was another signal, too: The City of Light dimmed the lights.

It was an expression of concern over the state of the planet as the world awaited the report's release today. Slowly, starting first with the iconic Eiffel Tower and then spreading to the hotel where many scientists were staying, Paris quieted and dimmed ever so slightly, even as those still fine-tuning the document burned the midnight oil.

The report from the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change — a group of hundreds of scientists and representatives of 113 governments — unanimously portrays the science of global warming as an existing and worsening threat, officials said.

"There's no question that the powerful language is intimately linked to the more powerful science," said one of the study's many co-authors, Andrew Weaver of the University of Victoria, who spoke by phone from Canada.

The scientists wrote the report, based on years of peer-reviewed research; government officials edited it with an eye toward the required unanimous approval by world governments.

In the end, there was little debate on the strength of the wording about human activity most likely to blame.

The panel quickly agreed Thursday on two of the most contentious issues: attributing global warming to man-made burning of fossil fuels and connecting it to a recent increase in stronger hurricanes.

Negotiations over a final third difficult issue — how much sea level rise is predicted by 2100 — went into the night Thursday with a deadline approaching for the report.

While critics call the panel overly alarmist, it is by nature relatively cautious because it relies on hundreds of scientists, including skeptics.

"I hope that policymakers will be quite convinced by this message," said Ribeta Abeta, a delegate whose island nation Kiribati is threatened by rising seas. "The purpose is to get them moving."