

IN BRIEF

Civil rights leader John Lewis dropped his support for Sen. Hillary Clinton's presidential bid Wednesday in favor of Barack Obama. Lewis, a Democratic congressman from Atlanta, is the most prominent black leader to defect in the face of near-unanimous black support for Obama in recent voting. He also is a superdelegate.

Aides to Clinton, coming to terms with the idea that she must win contests in both Texas and Ohio next week or face enormous pressure to drop out of the race for the Democratic presidential nomination, are pouring all of the campaign's dwindling resources into the March 4 primaries.

Internal polling showed Obama still trailing in both states, although the gap was narrowing.

— FROM WIRE REPORTS

Election

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Convention, switched allegiances from the New York senator to the Illinois senator.

Obama has made a core campaign theme of his long-held opposition to the war in Iraq, which was authorized before he entered the Senate. He has chided his Democratic rival, Clinton, for voting in 2002 for the Iraq war resolution — a vote she now says was a mistake based on faulty intelligence.

McCain has been a staunch supporter of U.S. involvement in Iraq as a way to put a check on international terrorism. McCain also has been an ardent supporter of the U.S. military surge. He has attacked Democratic calls for a timetable for a withdrawal of American troops from Iraq, contending that was a timetable for surrender.

"If we left, they wouldn't be establishing a base," McCain said of al-Qaida. "They'd be taking a country and I'm not going to allow that to happen, my friends. I will not surrender. I will not surrender to al-Qaida."

But Obama took one of McCain's stock campaign lines — that he wants to follow Osama bin Laden to the "Gates of Hell" — and said "so far all (McCain's) done is follow George Bush into a misguided war in Iraq that has cost us thousands of lives and billions of dollars." Obama vowed a renewed effort against al-Qaida in Afghanistan and along the Pakistan border "like we should have been doing in the first place."

"That's the news, John McCain," Obama said.

With only days remaining before next Tuesday's primaries that will likely decide the fate of her campaign, Clinton told reporters aboard her chartered plane en route to Zanesville that she would focus her message on ways to improve Ohio's economy.

"We're sliding into a recession and the price of everything is going up at the same time," Clinton said. "This is a very difficult terrain to try to navigate through."

Clinton said she was pleased by her performance against Obama in Tuesday night's debate in Cleveland — the last before next week's primaries and, with 7.8 million viewers, MSNBC's highest-rated broadcast ever — and said talk that she failed to deliver a knockout should be reserved for a "prize fight, that's not a debate."

"I think that a lot of people who watched it would come away and feel very positive and comfortable about what I said and what I presented as my credentials and my positions on these issues, and I think there were some real contrasts that were drawn," she said.



BOB HALLINEN/ANCHORAGE DAILY NEWS

Oil spill crews use pressure washers to blast oil from the beach at Smith Island on Alaska's Prince William Sound.

Sympathetic ear

High court seems amenable to reducing \$2.5 billion in punitive damages

By ERIKA BOLSTAD
McCLATCHY NEWSPAPERS

WASHINGTON — The Supreme Court appeared sympathetic Wednesday to Exxon Mobil Corp.'s efforts to reduce a \$2.5 billion punitive-damages award for its role in one of the nation's most catastrophic oil spills.

But the oil giant met with resistance when it came to overturning the award outright. While justices seemed to grapple with the size of the damages awarded, they indicated that they thought Exxon had failed to make an argument that it wasn't subject to punitive damages under maritime law.

If the court moves to reduce the award, it could mean a smaller payout for the

fisherman and other plaintiffs in the case, who've been waiting since 1994 to see the money that a jury in Anchorage, Alaska, awarded. That would be an injustice, said Jeffrey Fisher, the Stanford University professor who argued the case for the plaintiffs.

"What you have today are 32,000 plaintiffs standing before this court, each of whom have received only \$15,000 for having their lives and livelihood destroyed and haven't received a dime of emotional distress damages," Fisher told the court.

From the start of the 90-minute hearing, many of the justices seemed critical of Exxon's central argument: That 200 years of maritime law has little precedent for levying punitive damages

against a company for the actions of its agents at sea.

Within minutes, Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg poked holes in the argument that an 1818 case was the final word on punitive damages in maritime law.

"It's rather, I think, an exaggeration to call it a long line of settled decisions in maritime law," she said.

Exxon based its appeal on a case that holds that ship owners aren't liable for punitive damages for the actions of their agents at sea unless they're complicit in their behavior. Justice Antonin Scalia jokingly referred to the case — known as the *Amiable Nancy*, for the ship involved — as the "Amiable whatever-it-is."

Clearly, money was on the

minds of many of the justices. When Fisher suggested that the justices took the case to settle fundamental maritime legal issues, Scalia was again the joker.

"That, and \$3.5 billion," he said to laughter.

Several justices suggested that there might be a more conservative framework for awarding punitive damages within maritime law. They might consider capping punitive damages at twice the compensatory damages, Justice David Souter said. In 1994, a jury awarded the plaintiffs \$287 million in compensatory damages.

The criminal code, which allows punitive damages to be double the loss, also could be the model, Justice Anthony Kennedy said.

Lessons for Katrina in Valdez

By JOSHUA NORMAN
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On Wednesday the U.S. Supreme Court began hearing the case against Exxon Corp. regarding its liability in the Valdez oil-spill disaster in Prince William Sound, Alaska, almost 19 years after the fact.

Though there's no way to know if Katrina insurance litigation will draw out as long or as painfully, some social scientists do want to point out the lessons learned by that ongoing disaster and apply them to the Gulf Coast's physical and mental recovery.

"True community recovery lies in perceptions — the mental health and social quality of life of survivors," said Steve Picou, a University of South Alabama researcher and self-described practical sociologist. Picou has been following the mental and physical health of Prince William Sound residents since the spill in an ongoing series of interactive community surveys.

"We've moved into a more complex pattern of (post-disaster community) impacts that we need to have new ideas in terms of interventions. It's a formidable challenge to traditional emergency response and traditional mental-health services."

Picou pointed out in a recent interview it took many Alaskans years to even show symptoms from the disaster; a rash of suicides related to slow recovery did not occur until four years later.

Picou said he plans to apply lessons he's learned to a newly funded set of surveys and community-resiliency exercises in South Mississippi and greater New Orleans. His efforts will include attempts at helping survey participants



Picou

find real solutions to the myriad problems they'll face in the coming years.

On the surface, the dozen or so other mental-health studies released or under way seem to be little more than academic exercises. But many, like the National Institutes of Health-funded, Harvard-based Hurricane Katrina Community Advisory Group, seek to avoid making the subjects feel like guinea pigs by offering some solutions to their woes. Problems remain, though; many subjects said in recent interviews reaping real-world benefits is not straightforward.

Sorting through those problems remains an imperfect art, Picou said.

"We all have trials and tribulations in our lifetime, but when people are put in a situation where their future is uncertain, what we learned about those civic institutions being there for us — when that fails, they have a hard time functioning in a sustainable manner for long periods of time," Picou said. "That uncertainty leads to stress and of course stress leads to various types of problems in day-to-day life."

Picou said he created a series of surveys that not only asked Alaskans how they were doing, but how the surveys could help. The result was a reduction in uncertainty as community-support groups formed and resources were found. He called it "give hugs not shrugs."

Others, like Ronald Kessler, the Harvard professor heading the Katrina Advisory

Group, say their experiences after disasters such as the Oklahoma City bombing and 9/11 have shown the need to get a firmer grasp on the social and mental needs of disaster-affected populations.

"We're learning more and more of the high level of unmet needs of the people of this population," Kessler said. "That information is being fed to Congress so they can make rational decisions on how to allocate resources. We think that what we're doing is very useful at the moment. It's a spitting-in-the-ocean kind of thing."

KAG has a core of a little more than 1,000 participants from across the storm-affected region, local and displaced, who will be interviewed about once a year or so over a five-year period regarding their mental state and unmet needs.

The results of the KAG surveys have been eye-opening for many; of the many published studies out there, they are the most cited in news reports and congressional actions.

The results from KAG's most recent survey, published in the Archives of General Psychology, found nearly half of participants displayed some kind of mood disorder. Though the overall prevalence of mood disorders did not rise significantly between the first two post-Katrina surveys, the overall level of unmet needs did. In other words, people were bad to begin with but did not get worse per se, but those who were bad off to begin with are having a harder time finding help. Still, the things stressing people overall were found not to have improved significantly.

When surveyors hear something not right in the participating, they immediately offer

Vetoes

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than \$2 billion.

Coming up on the five-year anniversary of the invasion, a new estimate from a Nobel laureate puts the cost of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan at more than \$3 trillion.

That estimate from Noble Prize-winning economist Joseph Stiglitz also serves as the title of his new book, "The Three Trillion Dollar War," which hits store shelves Friday.

— McCLATCHY NEWSPAPERS

Reductions less likely

The commander of U.S. forces in the Middle East says he will endorse a brief pause in troop reductions from Iraq this summer, but then will seek a resumption of withdrawals to ease stress on the overall military and allow him to balance deployments across the volatile region.

Those comments by Adm. William J. Fallon, leader of the military's Central Command, added to indications that American troop levels in Iraq would hold at about 140,000, at least temporarily, after the departure by July of five additional combat brigades ordered to Iraq last year by President Bush.

— NEW YORK TIMES NEWS SERVICE

Sunni

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2006, according to Iraqi officials, U.S. commanders and 20 Awakening leaders across Iraq. Some U.S. military officials say they are growing concerned that the Sunni insurgent group al-Qaida in Iraq has infiltrated Awakening forces in some areas.

"Now, there is no cooperation with the Americans," said Haider Mustafa al-Kaisy, an Awakening commander in Baqouba, the capital of Diyala province, an insurgent stronghold that U.S. and Iraqi forces are still struggling to control. "We have stopped fighting al-Qaida."

U.S. military officials and commanders say they are seeking to defuse the rising tensions before hard-won U.S. gains are jeopardized. "Despite some of the frustrations, the frictions and the attacks on the Sons of Iraq, they are continuing to volunteer. As an interim solution, it seems to be working well," said Col. Bill Buckner, a senior U.S. military spokesman. "It's clear Iraq remains a fragile security environment. We want to address many of their concerns as best as we can, so that they continue to be part of the solution to the security situation in Iraq."

Awakening leaders say threats against their fighters are rising. Attacks against Awakening members went from 26 in October to 100 in January, according to a U.S. military official, who added that February's numbers are on track to be nearly as high as January's.

But the growing threats have not been matched with added resources.

Rafah Kassim, 37, an Awakening leader in the oil-producing city of Baiji, lost two fighters in mid-February when gunmen ambushed their car. Speaking at their funeral, Kassim said he did not expect the Shiite-led Iraqi government, which fears the Awakening movement could one day turn against it, to embrace his fighters. He had applied six times to join the Iraqi army and police, he said, but was never accepted. He said he expected his new ally, the U.S. military, to back his struggle. Instead, he said, U.S. commanders have limited his force to 40 fighters when he needs at least 100 to protect his area.