

English

Unemployment rate unchanged as 36K jobs lost

WASHINGTON – The unemployment rate held at 9.7 percent in February as employers shed 36,000 jobs, fewer than expected. The figures suggested the job market is slowly healing but that significant hiring has yet to occur.

The Labor Department wouldn't quantify how the snowstorms that hampered the East Coast last month affected job losses. Economists said the storms probably inflated job losses but by less than predictions of 100,000 or more. Without the storms, the economy likely would have seen a net jobs gain in February for only the second time since the recession began two years ago.

Doubts about last month's data arose because the snowstorms occurred on the same week that the government surveys businesses about their payrolls. Employees who couldn't make it to work and weren't paid weren't included on those payrolls.

"It looks like the impact of weather was not as large as we thought it would be," said Marisa DiNatale, an economist at Moody's Economy.com.

Some economists said the data suggest that the job market is now pointed in the right direction and that the unemployment rate may have peaked. Nigel Gault, chief economist at IHS Global Insight, said private employers will likely add jobs in March and continue to generate jobs for the rest of the year.

Still, hiring is likely to be weak for much of that time. The recession eliminated about 8.4 million jobs. And it takes 100,000 new jobs per month just to keep up with population growth and keep the unemployment rate from rising.

Even optimistic economists don't expect employers to add much more than 150,000 jobs a month this year — and not until the second half of the year. Gault expects the jobless rate will remain above 9.5 percent by the end of 2010.

On Thursday, the House passed legislation giving companies that hire the jobless a temporary payroll tax break. Economists doubt, though, that it'll create many jobs. President Barack Obama and the Democratic Party are under pressure to address the jobs crisis in a congressional election year.

"The report today shows a labor market with no momentum," said Larry Mishel, president of the liberal Economic Policy Institute. "Employment is not growing. And even a generous interpretation of the snow's impact suggests that the underlying trend is insufficient to drive down unemployment in the near future."

Nearly 14.9 million Americans are unemployed — nearly twice the total when the recession began. The Labor Department revised its estimate of job losses for January from 20,000 to 26,000.

Hiring for the 2010 Census accounted for 15,000 jobs last month, the department said. The government expects to hire 1 million temporary census workers this year.

The February Census gains were countered by steep losses in local government jobs, particularly in education. Overall, government at all levels lost 18,000 jobs.

Shadow of Saddam hangs over Iraq polls

BAGHDAD. – Saddam Hussein was executed more than three years ago but the dictator's shadow hangs over Iraq's election, with hundreds of candidates barred over alleged links to his outlawed Baath Party.

The fierce row over their exclusion has dominated the campaign for Sunday's vote and sparked accusations that Iraq's "de-Baathification" programme was being used for political advantage.

At the centre of it all is Ali al-Lami, executive director of the Justice and Accountability Committee (JAC) which has barred around 500 candidates from the polls. Controversially, he himself is running in the poll.

"The JAC decisions have been made according to the law," the 46-year-old father of six insisted.

"Some of them (the barred candidates) are Baathists, and others are working as spies," he told AFP. "All of them are dangerous."

Lami was speaking in the Baghdad home of his friend Ahmed Chalabi, chairman of the JAC, a parliamentary candidate, and the man whose faulty intelligence on weapons of mass destruction spurred the United States to invade Iraq in 2003.

He said that on January 1 his committee received from the election commission a list of the names of all 6,500-odd candidates in the poll with the request that their pasts be checked to see if they had any part in the Sunni dictator's oppression of his people.

It cross-checked the names with three databases, whose details he did not specify, and built dossiers of candidates' alleged links to the Baath Party, said Lami, who like Chalabi is running on the Iraqi National Alliance slate.

Within 10 days, a list of 511 names had been compiled. Twenty-eight have since been reinstated, but political parties have largely either withdrawn the remaining candidates or replaced them with new names.

Lami noted that two-thirds of the names on the list were from the majority Shiites, while the remaining third were Sunni.

Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki quickly embraced the JAC's findings, saying that only "criminals" and "murderers" would be affected.

Iraq, he added, had "no intention of reconciling with those who regard... Saddam as a martyr," referring to the December 2006 hanging of the toppled Iraqi president for crimes against humanity.