

Obama Administration on the Defensive

From VOA Learning English, this is In the News.

President Obama this week found himself on the defensive on three different issues. Political observers say the issues could threaten his plan of action for his second term as president.

Critics say the most serious threat right now to the Obama administration involves the federal tax agency, the Internal Revenue Service. The IRS has admitted that agency officials targeted conservative political groups which sought to become tax-exempt. Organizations that are tax-exempt do not have to pay federal taxes. The groups targeted for special attention by the IRS oppose many of the administration's spending and tax policies.

Late Wednesday, the president announced that Treasury Secretary Jack Lew had asked for and received the resignation of the acting director of the IRS. Mr. Obama spoke after meeting with top officials to discuss a report from the Treasury Department inspector general.

"I've reviewed the Treasury Department watchdog's report, and the misconduct that it uncovered is inexcusable. It is inexcusable, and Americans are right to be angry about it, and I am angry about it."

Attorney General Eric Holder has ordered a criminal investigation of the actions by the IRS. On Thursday, the president said he did not know about the abuses until they were described in news reports last week.

The administration is also on the defensive over the Justice Department's seizure of telephone records from the Associated Press news agency. The AP said on Monday that the government secretly obtained two months of phone records for some of its reporters and editors.

Administration officials say the Justice Department is investigating who may have provided information for an AP story last year. The story described an American intelligence operation in Yemen that stopped an al-Qaida bomb plot.

On Tuesday, reporters questioned White House Press Secretary Jay Carney about the phone records. He said President Obama supports the constitutional right of freedom of the press.

"The president is committed to the press's ability to pursue information, to defending the First Amendment. He is also, as a citizen and as commander-in-chief, committed to the proposition that we cannot allow classified information that can do harm to our national security interests or to endanger individuals to be leaked. And that is a balance that has to be struck."

Attorney General Holder said he had no direct involvement in the Justice Department's examination of the phone records. He said the seizure was part of an investigation into what he called a grave national security leak. President Obama said he makes "no apologies" for a criminal investigation into national security leaks.

Also this week, the administration released 100 pages of e-mails about the attacks on the American diplomatic mission in Benghazi, Libya. Ambassador Chris Stephens and three other Americans died in the attacks last September 11.

Administration officials first described the events in Benghazi as a spontaneous attack, with no sign of a plot. But they later called it an act of terrorism. Republicans say the administration wanted to avoid admitting it was terrorism while Mr. Obama was seeking re-election.

And that's In the News from VOA Learning English. I'm Steve Ember.