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**Senate opens Burris probe; Downstate prosecutor initiates perjury investigation -- senator says he's innocent, will cooperate**

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Staff reporters

The U.S. Senate dramatically turned up the heat on Sen. Roland Burris on Tuesday by launching an ethics inquiry into perjury allegations against the embattled Illinois Democrat as calls for his political scalp grew louder.

The move, which ultimately could lead to sanctions or Burris' expulsion from the Senate, followed a Downstate prosecutor's decision earlier Tuesday to open a perjury investigation against former Gov. Rod Blagojevich's choice to succeed President Obama in the Senate.

The two extraordinary developments grew out of an exclusive Chicago Sun-Times report Saturday outlining how Burris appeared to give incomplete and conflicting testimony last month to a House panel that pushed for Blagojevich's impeachment.

The newspaper revealed Burris quietly filed a revised affidavit with the House committee that detailed previously unknown conversations concerning campaign fund-raising with Blagojevich's brother. The affidavit also disclosed discussions Burris had about his potential appointment with other Blagojevich insiders.

Burris made neither fact known in a Jan. 5 sworn statement to the committee or during testimony before the panel three days later in which he confirmed speaking to only one Blagojevich ally about his appointment and denied any quid pro quos took place leading up to it.

"Whenever allegations of improper conduct are brought to the attention of the Senate Ethics Committee, we open a preliminary inquiry," said Natalie Ravitz, a spokeswoman for Sen. Barbara Boxer (D-Calif.), who chairs the six-member, bipartisan Senate Select Committee on Ethics.

The Senate ethics inquiry could take several weeks before it is clear whether it will blossom into a full-blown investigation.

"The evidence suggests Sen. Burris lied under oath when he failed to disclose these contacts earlier," said Melanie Sloan, executive director of Citizens and Responsibility in Washington, an ethics watchdog that welcomed the probe and called on the Senate to expel Burris.

The last time the Senate expelled one of its members was in 1862. More recently, the Senate ethics panel recommended expulsion for former Sen. Harrison Williams (D-N.J.) in 1981 for his role in the ABSCAM corruption case and former Sen. Robert Packwood (R-Ore.) for sexual misconduct in 1995, but both resigned before being ousted.

During an appearance in Peoria on Tuesday, Burris reaffirmed his innocence and pledged cooperation in the Senate probe and the Sangamon County perjury investigation.

"I welcome the opportunity to go before any and all investigative bodies, including those referred by Illinois Attorney General Lisa Madigan and the Senate ethics committee to answer any questions they have," Burris said.

On Monday, Burris confirmed that Robert Blagojevich, chairman of his brother's campaign fund, asked Burris for a campaign contribution of $10,000 or $15,000 prior to the appointment. Burris also disclosed that he attempted to raise money for the ex-governor. Burris did not raise money or donate after those conversations with the ex-governor's brother.

Neither of those details was made clear in any of his statements, including his most recent one Feb. 4. Burris told the House panel there was no quid pro quo associated with his appointment by Blagojevich.

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