

NATION/WORLD DIGEST

Angry Afghans Attack UN Compound, Kill 7

KABUL, Afghanistan (AP) — Afghans angry over the burning of a Quran at a small Florida church stormed a U.N. compound in northern Afghanistan on Friday, killing seven foreigners, including four Nepalese guards.

Afghan authorities suspect insurgents melded into the mob and they announced the arrest of more than 20 people, including a militant they suspect was the ringleader of the assault in Mazar-i-Sharif, the provincial capital of Balkh province. The suspect was an insurgent from Kapisa province, a hotbed of militancy about 250 miles (400 kilometers) southeast of the city, said Rawof Taj, deputy provincial police chief.

The topic of Quran burning stirred outrage among millions of Muslims and others worldwide after the Rev. Terry Jones' small church, Dove Outreach Center, threatened to destroy a copy of the holy book last year. The pastor backed down but the church in Gainesville, Florida, went through with the burning last month.

Four protesters also died in the violence in Mazar-i-Sharif, which is on a list of the first seven areas of the country where Afghan security forces are slated to take over from the U.S.-led coalition starting in July. Other demonstrations, which were peaceful, were held in Kabul and Herat in western Afghanistan, fueling resentment against the West at a critical moment in the Afghan war.

Protesters burned a U.S. flag at a sports stadium in Herat and chanted "Death to the U.S." and "They broke the heart of Islam." About 100 people gathered at a traffic circle near the U.S. Embassy in Kabul. One protester carried a sign that said: "We want these bloody bastard Americans with all their forces to leave Afghanistan."

Senate Asked For No-Fly Zone Before Action

WASHINGTON (AP) — Some lawmakers are grousing loudly that President Barack Obama sent the nation's military to Libya without Congress' blessing. They're ignoring a key fact: The Senate a month ago voted to support imposing a no-fly zone to protect civilians from attacks by Col. Moammar Gadhafi's forces.

With no objections, the Senate on March 1 backed a resolution strongly condemning "the gross and systematic violations of human rights in Libya" and urging the U.N. Security Council to take action, "including the possible imposition of a no-fly zone over Libyan territory." There was no recorded vote. It was simply approved by unanimous consent.

No one in Washington is interpreting that resolution as a full-blown authorization for military action, especially as the no-fly zone expanded to airstrikes on Gadhafi's tanks and munitions sites. But the measure undercuts the congressional criticism that Obama was totally off on his own. Defense Secretary Robert Gates pointedly reminded lawmakers of that during his marathon testimony on Thursday.

"There have been a lot of concerns expressed about the consultation with the Congress, but in its own way, the Congress consulted with the president, and particularly this body that unanimously in a resolution called for the imposition of a no-fly zone," Gates told the Senate Armed Services Committee.

Obama Believes Deal Close On Budget Cuts

WASHINGTON (AP) — A bullish President Barack Obama said Friday that compromise is close with Republicans on \$33 billion in budget cuts, and he warned that without a deal the ensuing government shutdown would "jeopardize our economic recovery" just as jobs are finally being created.

Despite his assessment, negotiators reported little progress, Senate Democrats backtracked on a key concession from earlier in the week and Congress' top Republican sounded less optimistic than the president that a breakthrough was imminent.

"There is no number. There is no agreement on a number" on how much to cut, insisted House Speaker John Boehner, who is under pressure from tea party-backed conservatives not to give too much ground. Still, he added, "I am not preparing for a government shutdown."

Funding for the government expires next Friday at midnight, and without action by Congress, a partial shutdown would follow.

The day's events occurred against a backdrop of unusually upbeat news about the economy, which is still recovering from the worst recession since the Great Depression. The Labor Department reported that companies added 216,000 jobs last month and the unemployment rate fell slightly to 8.8 percent.

Fighting Rages Near Ivory Coast Palace

ABIDJAN, Ivory Coast (AP) — Laurent Gbagbo's 10-year grip on the Ivory Coast seemed to be in its final hours Friday after fighters encircled both his residence and the presidential palace and battled to unseat the man who has refused to recognize his defeat in last year's election.

Even in the face of a rapid military advance that has swept across Ivory Coast, the world's largest cocoa producer, and arrived at his doorstep, Gbagbo rejected calls to step down.

His aides defiantly said they will never give in, even though nearly 80 percent of the country and now large swaths of its largest city are controlled by an armed group fighting to install the internationally recognized winner of the election, Alassane Ouattara.

"There is no question of ceding," said Gbagbo's presidential aide, Fred Anderson. "It's not up to the international community to impose our leader."

In the Cocody neighborhood where the presidential mansion is located, families slept in bathrooms and on the floor as successive blasts punctuated the all-night assault.

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Highway Deaths Fall To Their Lowest Level Since 1949

BY KEN THOMAS
Associated Press

WASHINGTON — Highway deaths have plummeted to their lowest levels in more than 60 years, helped by more people wearing seat belts, better safety equipment in cars and efforts to curb drunken driving.

The Transportation Department estimated Friday that 32,788 people were killed on U.S. roads in 2010, a decrease of about 3 percent from 2009. It's the fewest number of deaths since 1949 — during the presidency of Harry Truman — when more than 30,000 people were killed.

The Pacific Northwest region, which includes Washington state, Oregon, Idaho, Montana and Alaska, saw fatalities fall 12 percent. Western states including

Arizona, California and Hawaii also posted large declines.

Government officials said the number of deaths was still significant but credited efforts on multiple fronts to make roadways safer.

"Too many of our friends and neighbors are killed in preventable roadway tragedies every day," said Transportation Secretary Ray LaHood. "We will continue doing everything possible to make cars safer, increase seat belt use, put a stop to drunk driving and distracted driving and encourage drivers to put safety first."

The numbers are projections for 2010. The government expects to release final data on deaths and injuries, including specific state-by-state totals, later this year.

Traffic deaths typically decline during an economic downturn because many motorists cut back on discretionary travel. The number of deaths fell in the early 1980s and early 1990s, when the U.S. economy was struggling.

But people spent more time in their cars last year, making the estimates more noteworthy. The number of miles traveled by

American drivers in 2010 grew by 20.5 billion, or 0.7 percent, compared with 2009, according to the Federal Highway Administration. The number of miles traveled increased slightly in 2009 after declines in the previous two years.

Separately, the rate of deaths per 100 million miles traveled is estimated to have hit a record low of 1.09 in 2010, the lowest since 1949. The previous record was in 2009, which had a rate of 1.13 deaths per 100 million miles traveled.

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