

NATION/WORLD DIGEST

Two Photojournalists Killed In Libya

MISRATA, Libya (AP) — Two Western photojournalists including an Oscar-nominated film director were killed Wednesday in the besieged city of Misrata while covering battles between rebels and Libyan government forces. Two others working alongside them were wounded.

British-born Tim Hetherington, co-director of the documentary "Restrepo" about U.S. soldiers on an outpost in Afghanistan, was killed inside the only rebel-held city in western Libya, said his U.S.-based publicist, Johanna Ramos Boyer. The city has come under weeks of relentless shelling by government troops.

Hetherington tweeted Tuesday: "In besieged Libyan city of Misrata. Indiscriminate shelling by Qaddafi forces. No sign of NATO."

"Tim was in Libya to continue his ongoing multimedia project to highlight humanitarian issues during time of war and conflict," Hetherington's family said in a statement. "He will be forever missed."

Chris Hondros, a New York-based photographer for Getty Images, was also killed.

"He has an intimacy in his work," said Swayne Hall, a longtime friend who works as a photo editor with The Associated Press. "Some people will use a long lens so they don't have to get up close. But Chris will get up close, he's just not afraid to be with whatever he's photographing."

BP Spill A Year Later: A Day Of Remembrance

NEW ORLEANS (AP) — Relatives flew over Gulf of Mexico waters on Wednesday where 11 oil rig workers died a year ago, residents gathered in quiet prayer vigils onshore and President Barack Obama vowed to hold BP and others accountable for "the painful losses that they've caused."

Somber remembrances marked the one-year anniversary of the rig explosion that caused the worst offshore oil spill in American history. But all is not bleak. Beaches, restaurants and hotels are filling up again, and experts say the resilient Gulf is on the mend.

The disaster began on the night of April 20, 2010, when the Deepwater Horizon rig burst into flames and killed the 11 men. The rest of the crew evacuated, but two days later the rig toppled into the Gulf and sank to the sea floor. Over the next 85 days, 206 million gallons of oil — 19 times more than the Exxon Valdez spilled — spewed from the well.

Parents, siblings and wives of the workers — whose bodies were never recovered — boarded a helicopter Wednesday to see the waters where their loved ones perished. The helicopter took them from New Orleans out to the well site, circled around so that people on both sides of the aircraft could see and then returned to shore, said Arleen Weise, whose son, Adam, was killed on the rig. The only indication they were at the site was an announcement from the pilot, she said.

"It was just a little emotional, seeing where they were," Weise said by phone from Houston, where rig owner Transocean planned an evening memorial service.

FAA: New Rules For Flights With First Lady

WASHINGTON (AP) — Aircraft carrying the first lady or vice president will receive a higher level of scrutiny from air traffic controllers following an aborted landing of a plane carrying Michelle Obama this week, the Federal Aviation Administration said Wednesday.

From now on flights carrying Mrs. Obama or Vice President Joe Biden will be handled by an air traffic supervisor rather than a controller, the agency said in a statement. The new rules apply to approaches and departures handled by a regional air traffic facility in Warrenton, Va., and takeoffs and landings at Andrews Air Force Base in Maryland where the presidential fleet is based.

Flights with the president on board are already required to be handled by a supervisor.

Also on Wednesday, the National Transportation Safety Board said it has opened an investigation into the aborted landing Monday at Andrews of a plane carrying Mrs. Obama.

While aborted landings are not unusual, and Mrs. Obama apparently wasn't in serious danger, the episode has become another embarrassment for the FAA. Agency officials have been struggling to calm public jitters about flying raised by nine suspensions of air traffic controllers and supervisors around the country in recent weeks, including five for sleeping on the job.

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Thousands Protest In Syria, Brushing Off Reforms

BY ZEINA KARAM
Associated Press

BEIRUT (AP) — Thousands of students held demonstrations Wednesday against Syria's authoritarian regime, brushing off President Bashar Assad's sweeping declarations of reform as the country's growing protest movement vowed to stage the biggest rallies to date on Friday.

The monthlong uprising in Syria has posed the biggest challenge to the 40-year ruling dynasty of President Bashar Assad and his father before him. On Tuesday, Syria did away with 50 years of emergency rule — but emboldened and defiant crowds accused Assad of simply trying to buy time while he clings to power.

"We are preparing for a huge demonstration on Friday," said an activist in the southern city of Daraa, where anti-government protests first erupted last month and later spread nationwide.

Prolonged instability in Syria could have serious repercussions well beyond its borders. The closed-off nation punches above its weight in terms of regional influence because of its alliances with militant groups like Lebanon's Hezbollah and with Shiite powerhouse Iran. That has given Damascus a pivotal role in most of the flashpoint issues of the Middle East, from the Arab-Israeli peace process to Iran's widening influence.

Protesters have vowed to keep up their demonstrations. In recent days, the movement has crossed a significant threshold, with increasing numbers now seeking nothing less than the downfall of the regime.

At least 200 people have been killed as the government cracked down on the protesters.

On Wednesday, 4,000 university students from Daraa and surrounding areas protested near the city's al-Omari Mosque. Activists also said dozens of students protested Wednesday at Aleppo University in the country's north, adding there were confrontations on campus between pro and anti-government students.

The witnesses spoke by telephone on condition of anonymity for fear of reprisals.

The regime has coupled its crackdown with a series of concessions, including an end to the state of emergency, which gives authorities almost boundless powers of surveillance and arrest.

Abolishing the reviled laws was once the key demand of the uprising against Assad, a British-trained eye doctor who took power 11 years ago but has failed to fulfill early promises of reform.

A resident of the city of Homs in central Syria also said preparations for Friday protests were under way, but declined to go into details over the phone.

Homs has been tense since clashes between protesters and security forces killed at least 12 people Sunday. On Tuesday, security forces there opened fire with live ammunition and tear gas on hundreds of anti-government demonstrators during a pre-dawn raid that killed several people.

The resident said there was heavy security presence in Homs on Wednesday, with many opting to stay at home.

In Washington, Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton rapped the Syrian government for its crackdown on the protests, saying Damascus "must stop the arbitrary arrests, detentions and torture of prisoners, and it must cease the violence."

Britain's Foreign Office on Wednesday said U.K. nationals should consider leaving Syria on commercial flights, after it upgraded warnings about unrest there. In a statement, the ministry said it had changed its advice "in light of the deterioration in the security situation in Syria."

British diplomats had warned that violent clashes are anticipated between local security forces and demonstrators.

Also Wednesday, human rights activists said Syrian authorities arrested an opposition figure at his home during an overnight raid, hours after the government announced an end to emergency rule.

Syrian Human Rights League chief, Abdul-Karim Rihawi, said security agents picked up Mahmoud Issa from his home in the central city of Homs after an interview he gave to Al-Jazeera satellite TV late Tuesday.

US To Give Libyan Rebels \$25M In Non-Lethal Aid

BY MATTHEW LEE
Associated Press

WASHINGTON — The Obama administration plans to give the Libyan opposition \$25 million in non-lethal assistance in the first direct U.S. aid to the rebels after weeks of assessing their capabilities and intentions, officials said Wednesday.

Amid a debate over whether to offer the rebels broader assistance, including cash and possibly weapons and ammunition, the administration has informed Congress that President Barack Obama intends to use his so-called "drawdown authority" to give the opposition, led by the Transitional National Council in Benghazi, up to \$25 million in surplus American goods to help protect civilians in rebel-held areas threatened by Libyan leader Moammar Gadhafi's forces.

Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton, who recommended that Obama authorize the assistance, said the aid would go to support the council and "our efforts to protect civilians and the civilian populated areas that are under threat of attack from their own government in Libya." She said the aid "will be drawn down from items already in government stocks that correspond with the needs that we have heard from the Transitional National Council."

Congress was notified in writing of the plan late last week and was briefed in greater detail on Tuesday by Gene Cretz, the U.S. ambassador to Libya, officials said.

Initially, the administration had proposed supplying the rebels with vehicles and portable fuel storage tanks but those items were dropped from the list of potential aid on Wednesday after concerns were expressed that those could be converted into offensive military assets, the officials said.

The list is still being revised but now covers items such as medical supplies, uniforms, boots, tents, personal protective gear, radios and Halal meals, the officials said.

Most of the items are expected to come from Pentagon stocks, they said.

"There is an urgency in providing these commodities," the State Department said in a notice sent last Friday to lawmakers and obtained by The Associated Press.

"This is not a blank check," Clinton told reporters, adding that the move was consistent with the U.N. mandate that authorized international action to protect Libyan civilians and acknowledging that the opposition is in dire need of help.

"This opposition, which has held its own against a brutal assault by the Gadhafi forces was not an organized militia," she said. "It was not a group that had been planning to oppose the rule of Gadhafi for years. It was a spontaneous response within the context of the broader Arab spring. These are mostly business people, students, lawyers, doctors, professors who have very bravely moved to defend their communities and to call for an end to the regime in Libya."

The move comes as U.S. allies step up their aid to the rebels, with Britain, France and Italy sending military advisers amid calls for the U.S. to offer direct assistance outside its participation in NATO military operations. France and Italy have both recognized the Transitional National Council as Libya's legitimate government, something the U.S. has yet to do.

White House press secretary Jay Carney said Wednesday that Obama was aware of the allies' decision to send in advisers "and hopes — believes — that it will help the opposition. But it does not at all change the president's policy on no boots on the ground for American troops."

There has been much debate over whether to supply the rebels with weapons and the officials said that option remains on the table.

The officials said the non-lethal assistance would be monitored to ensure it is used properly, although they noted that the items to be sent present a low risk of misuse.

LEFT IN THE ASHES



RON T. ENNIS/FORT WORTH STAR-TELEGRAM/MCT
A row of homes in Gains Bend on Possum Kingdom Lake, northwest of Fort Worth, Texas, is left in ashes on Wednesday.

Second Firefighter Dies In TX Fires

DALLAS (AP) — Federal firefighters and officials from several U.S. agencies joined the fight against a massive wildfire burning 70 miles west of Fort Worth on Wednesday, the same day a Texas firefighter died from injuries suffered while battling a blaze earlier this month.

The fire at Possum Kingdom Lake is among several that have scorched about 1 million acres across bone-dry Texas in the past two weeks. The federal team joined local personnel to help fight a blaze that has burned nearly 150,000 acres and destroyed about 50 homes, said Haven Cook, a spokeswoman for the Southern Area Incident Management Team.

A spokesman for University Medical Center in Lubbock said Elias Jacquez of Cactus, Texas, died Wednesday morning, 11 days after he was critically injured fighting a fire about 40 miles north of Amarillo.

Texas Forest Service spokesman Marq Webb said weather conditions Wednesday allowed firefighters to make "great progress" in building containment lines because the wind was down and humidity was up.

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