

Rival Palestinian Factions Reach Agreement

GAZA CITY, Gaza Strip (AP) — Rival Palestinian groups said they reached an agreement Wednesday on reuniting their governments in the West Bank and Gaza after years of bitter infighting that weakened them politically and caused the deaths of hundreds in violent clashes and crackdowns since.

Even as the tentative agreement revived hopes among Palestinians that they might be able to form a unified front, unity between the rival groups Fatah and Hamas appeared unlikely to jump start negotiations with Israel for an independent Palestinian state.

Israel swiftly rejected the prospect of a Palestinian government including Hamas, citing the militant group's stated goal of destroying the Jewish state. The U.S. expressed similar concerns.

The plan, brokered by Egypt, calls for the formation of a single caretaker government in the coming days. The government would administer day-to-day business until new presidential and legislative elections are to be held in a year's time.

"The people want to end the division ... and we say: what you demanded has been achieved today," said Azzam al-Ahmed, the chief Fatah negotiator at a news conference in Cairo with his Hamas counterpart. The two groups inked an initial deal Wednesday.

Violent Weather Rips Through The South

JEFF BUSBY PARK, Miss. (AP) — A wave of thunderstorms with winds blowing near hurricane force strafed the South on Wednesday, killing at least 11 people from Arkansas to Alabama, including a father struck by a tree while protecting his daughter at a Mississippi campsite.

The system laced with suspected tornadoes spread destruction Tuesday night and Wednesday from Texas to Georgia. An earlier flare-up of storms this week had already killed 10 people in Arkansas and one in Mississippi.

Forecasters warned that even worse weather could be on its way. The system was forecast to hit Georgia, Tennessee and Kentucky on Wednesday night and then the Carolinas.

"Today is the day you want to be careful," said Greg Carbin of the National Weather Service's Storm Prediction Center in Oklahoma.

On Wednesday morning, a Louisiana police officer on a camping trip in Choctaw County, Miss., was killed when a towering sweetgum tree fell onto his tent as he shielded his young daughter with his body, said Kim Korhuis, a supervisor with the National Park Service. The girl wasn't hurt.

Nevada Gov. Names Heller To Replace Ensign

CARSON CITY, Nev. (AP) — U.S. Rep. Dean Heller will enter next year's U.S. Senate race from the perch of incumbency after Gov. Brian Sandoval on Wednesday said Heller will succeed John Ensign next month.

Heller's appointment was anticipated and sets up a political scramble on how his House seat will be filled. State law says a special election must be held within 180 days of a vacancy.

Ensign, 53, has been dogged by an ethics investigation after acknowledging in 2009 to having an extramarital affair with a former staffer. The Senate Ethics Committee was investigating whether he tried to illegally cover it up.

First elected in 2000, Ensign last month said he would not seek re-election in 2012, then abruptly announced his resignation effective May 3.

Heller last month said he would run for Ensign's seat next year, and Sandoval quickly endorsed him.

Afghan Pilot Kills 9 Americans

BY RAHIM FAIEZ AND LOLITA C. BALDOR
Associated Press

KABUL, Afghanistan — An Afghan military pilot killed eight American soldiers and a U.S. contractor at the Kabul airport Wednesday after they argued at a meeting, officials said.

It was the deadliest episode of an Afghan turning against his coalition partners. The veteran military pilot was killed during the attack and five Afghan soldiers were injured.

Pentagon spokesman Col. Dave Lapan said all nine of those killed by the pilot were Americans. The Afghan Defense Ministry said the pilot fired on the Americans after an argument in an operations room of the Afghan Air Corps at Kabul airport.

"Suddenly, in the middle of the meeting, shooting started," said Afghan Air Corps spokesman Col. Bahader, who uses only one name. "After the shooting started, we saw a number of Afghan army officers and soldiers running out of the building. Some were even throwing themselves out of the windows to get away."

An Afghan pilot who spoke on condition of anonymity, identified the gunman as Ahmad Gul from Tarakhail district of Kabul province.

Dr. Mohammad Hassan Sahibi, the brother of the shooter, said his brother had been battling

financial troubles. But Sahibi said his brother had no ties to insurgents.

"He was 48 years old," Sahibi told Tolo, a private television station in Kabul, "He served his country for years. He loved his people and his country. He had no link with Taliban or al-Qaida."

"He was under economic pressures and recently he sold his house. He was going through a very difficult period of time in his life."

Afghan President Hamid Karzai condemned the shooting and offered his condolences to the relatives of the victims. He said those killed were trainers and advisers for the Afghan air force. The president ordered his defense and security officials to investigate the recent incidents to determine why they occurred.

It was the seventh time so far this year that members of the Afghan security forces, or insurgents impersonating them, have killed coalition soldiers or members of the Afghan security forces.

The Taliban claimed responsibility for the attack. In a statement, Taliban spokesman Zabiullah Mujahid said the gunman was impersonating an army officer and that others at the facility helped him gain access.

However, Defense Ministry spokesman Gen. Mohammad Zahir Azimi said the gunman was an Afghan military pilot of 20 years.

Panetta

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\$18.1 billion less than the administration proposed.

In outlining his deficit-reduction plan, Obama called for slashing another \$400 billion from defense over the next 12 years. The president's bipartisan fiscal commission recommended Pentagon cuts of \$1 trillion over a decade.

Enter Panetta, an eight-term congressman, former chairman of the House Budget Committee, one-time head of the Office of Management and Budget, White House chief of staff for President Bill Clinton and current CIA director.

"People are looking at the military budget in much sterner terms," said former Rep. Bill Frenzel, R-Minn., who worked closely with Panetta on the Budget Committee. "They're digging deeper than the president to settle the fiscal crisis. Defense has to give more. ... This will make Leon's job

extremely difficult and very sensitive."

If confirmed by the Senate, the 72-year-old Panetta will face a chocked-block agenda — Pentagon spending, two wars and the ongoing U.S. military operation in Libya, certification that the military is ready to deal with openly gay members in its ranks, and the selection of a new chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff.

Gates told senior staff that he had recommended Panetta to Obama six months ago.

A senior administration official, speaking on condition of anonymity in advance of the formal White House announcement, said Panetta was initially reluctant to leave the CIA for the Pentagon but eventually relented and decided he couldn't refuse the president.

"His approach to problems is very pragmatic," said former Rep. Lee Hamilton, D-Ind., who served with Panetta in the House and worked with him on the Iraq Study Group in 2006. "He's not hung up on ego or ideology. He doesn't die on his sword if others disagree with him."

Obama

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"We do not have time for this kind of silliness," Obama said in hurriedly announced appearance in the White House briefing room. "We've got better stuff to do."

He portrayed himself as the voice of reason in a loud, lingering debate, essentially saying that the nation was above all this. The president also sought to push to the national fringe anyone who refused to accept the facts about his birth, taking an indirect swipe at Trump, who has been loudly stirring up the matter.

"We're not going to be able to solve our problems if we get distracted by sideshows and carnival barkers," Obama said before TV cameras at the White House.

Trump, the real estate developer who was making campaign-like stops in New Hampshire, proudly took the credit for getting Obama to show further proof of his birth in Hawaii.

"I hope it's true so we can get

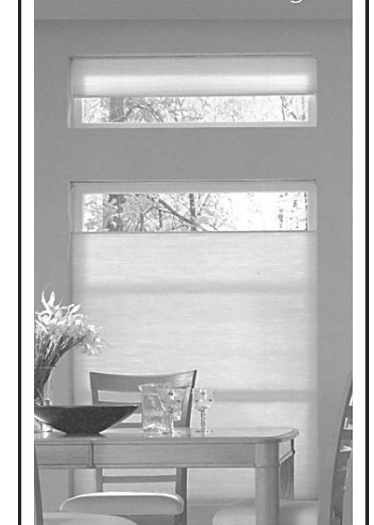
on to much more important matters," Trump said.

Obama had released a standard short form of his birth certificate before he was elected in 2008 but requested copies of his original birth certificate from Hawaii officials in hopes of killing the controversy. Until Wednesday, the White House had insisted that the short form certificate was the appropriate legal document confirming Obama's birth and no further proof was needed.

In addition, officials in Hawaii had said the longer version could not be released, and the White House had not tried to get past that.



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