

Gun Control Backers: Defeat Won't Stop Us

WASHINGTON (AP) — One day after the demise of gun control legislation, Senate supporters of the measure vowed to try again, while a leading opponent accused President Barack Obama of taking the "low road" when he harshly criticized lawmakers who voted against key provisions.

"When good and honest people have honest differences of opinion about what policies the country should pursue about gun rights...the president of the United States should not accuse them of having no coherent arguments or of caving to the pressure," said Sen. John Cornyn, R-Texas.

The fate of the bill was sealed in a string of votes on Wednesday, when Republicans backed by a small group of rural-state Democrats rejected more extensive background checks for gun purchasers and also torpedoed proposed bans on assault weapons and high-capacity ammunition magazines.

The Senate delivered its verdict four months after a shooting at an elementary school in Newtown, Conn., left 20 first graders and six educators dead. The tragedy prompted Obama to champion an issue that Democrats had largely avoided for two decades, and that he himself ignored during his first term in the White House.

Though the gun control bill was moribund for the foreseeable future, the Senate approved two minor amendments on Thursday. One by Sen. John Barrasso, R-Wyo., cutting aid to state and local governments that release information on gun owners, was approved 67-30. Another by Sens. Tom Harkin, D-Iowa, and Lamar Alexander, R-Tenn., bolstering federal mental health programs passed 95-2.

Senators Unveil Sweeping Immigration Bill

WASHINGTON (AP) — Four Democratic and four Republican senators formally unveiled a sweeping immigration bill Thursday at a news conference attended by traditional opponents from big business and labor, conservative groups and liberal ones. The lawmakers argued that this time, thanks to that broad-based support, immigration overhaul legislation can succeed in Congress.

"Powerful outside forces have helped defeat certain other initiatives in Washington, but on immigration, the opposite is proving true," Sen. Chuck Schumer, D-N.Y., said a day after senators under intense lobbying pressure blocked a major gun control package. "I am confident this issue will not fall victim to the usual partisan deadlock."

Support for the bill is already being put to the test as conservatives grow more vocal in opposition. Two Republican senators held a dueling news conference with law enforcement officials to bash the bill's security provisions, and several conservative bloggers seized on one provision of the legislation to falsely claim that it would allow people here illegally to get free cellphones.

The 844-page bill is designed to secure the border, allow tens of thousands of new high- and low-skilled workers into the country while requiring employers to verify their legal status, and put 11 million people here illegally on a path to citizenship, as long as certain border security goals are met first.

"Yes, we offer a path to citizenship to people who didn't come here legally," said Sen. John McCain, R-Ariz., anticipating opposition to that provision. "They're here, and realistically there is nothing we can do to induce them all to return to their countries of origin."

Woman Gets Prison Time For Killing Grandson

PONTIAC, Mich. (AP) — A 75-year-old Detroit-area woman who killed her grandson expressed remorse Thursday but repeatedly accused his parents of dumping a troubled boy at her doorstep during a desperate, emotional plea to avoid a prison sentence that likely means death behind bars.

The judge wasn't swayed, sending Sandra Layne away for at least 22 years and capping a wrenching case that revealed family strife, adolescent rebellion and fatal consequences.

Jonathan Hoffman was shot six times, including twice in the back, last spring in Oakland County's West Bloomfield Township. Layne, a former teacher and real estate agent, said she shot him out of fear during a physical altercation, but a jury in March rejected her claim of self-defense.

Prosecutors said there were no signs of Layne being injured by Hoffman. A recording of a 911 call shows him being shot again while pleading for help — a critical piece of evidence that jurors played over and over during deliberations. Judge Denise Langford Morris zeroed in on it, too, wondering why Layne simply didn't call police if she felt helpless.

"Grandmothers are supposed to protect. ... Why did you keep shooting and how could you keep shooting?" Morris asked. "You didn't have to keep shooting. Those were hollow-pointed bullets designed for a devastating impact."

Planets For Life? Telescope Sees Distant Worlds

WASHINGTON (AP) — NASA's planet-hunting telescope has discovered two planets that seem like ideal places for some sort of life to flourish. And they are just the right size and in just the right place.

One is toasty, the other nippy. The distant duo are the best candidates for habitable planets that astronomers have found so far, said William Borucki, the chief scientist for NASA's Kepler telescope. And it's got astronomers thinking that similar planets that are just about right for life — "Goldilocks planets" — might be common in the universe.

The discoveries, published online Thursday in the journal Science, mark a milestone in the search for planets where life could exist. In the four years that Kepler has been trailing Earth's orbit, the telescope has found 122 exoplanets — planets outside our solar system.

In the past, those planets haven't fit all the criteria that would make them right for life of any kind from microbes to man.

House Passes Pro-Business Cybersecurity Bill

WASHINGTON (AP) — Pro-business legislation aimed at helping companies fend off sophisticated foreign hackers sailed through the House on Thursday despite a White House veto threat and an outcry from privacy advocates and civil liberties groups that say it leaves Americans vulnerable to spying by the military.

The House vote, 288-127, puts the spotlight on the Senate, which hasn't taken up the issue and is consumed with other high-profile issues such as gun control and immigration. The lack of enthusiasm in the Senate and objections by the White House mean that the legislation is in limbo despite an aggressive push by lobbyists representing nearly every corner of industry.

The Cyber Intelligence Sharing and Protection Act, or CISPA, is widely backed by industry groups that say businesses are struggling to defend themselves against aggressive and sophisticated attacks from hackers in China, Russia and Eastern Europe.

Hackers haven't been able to deliver crippling blows to the U.S. economy or infrastructure, but they have been able to wreak havoc on some key commercial systems. Most recently several news outlets including the *New York Times* acknowledged that their systems had been penetrated, while banks are said to be quietly fighting daily intrusions. North Korea was recently held responsible for a cyberattack that shut down tens of thousands of computers and servers at South Korean broadcasters and banks.

Texas

Crews Seek Survivors After Blast

More Than 160 Hurt By Fertilizer Plant Explosion

BY NOMAAN MERCHANT AND JOHN L. MONE
Associated Press

WEST, Texas — Rescuers searched the smoking remnants of a Texas farm town Thursday for survivors of a thunderous fertilizer plant explosion, gingerly checking smashed houses and apartments for anyone still trapped in debris or bodies of the dead.

Initial reports put the number of fatalities as high as 15, but later in the day, authorities backed away from any estimate and refused to elaborate. More than 160 people were hurt.

A breathtaking band of destruction extended for blocks around the West Fertilizer Co. in the small community of West. The blast shook the ground with the strength of a small earthquake and leveled dozens of homes, an apartment complex, a school and a nursing home. Its dull boom could be heard dozens of miles away from the town about 20 miles north of Waco.

Waco police Sgt. William Patrick Swanton described ongoing search-and-rescue efforts as "tedious and time-consuming," noting that crews had to shore up much of the wreckage before going in.

Searchers "have not gotten to the point of no return where they don't think that there's anybody still alive," Swanton said. He did not know how many people had been rescued.

There was no indication the blast, which sent up a mushroom-shaped plume of smoke and left behind a crater, was anything other than an industrial accident, he said.

The Wednesday night explosion rained burning embers and debris down on terrified residents. The landscape was wrapped in acrid smoke and strewn with the shattered remains of buildings, furniture and personal belongings.

Dogs with collars but no owners trotted nervously through deserted streets in cordoned-off neighborhoods around the decimated plant. The entire second floor of a



A fire burns at a fertilizer plant in West, Texas after an explosion Wednesday.

nearby apartment complex was destroyed, leaving bricks and mattresses among the rubble. One rescue crew going from apartment to apartment gave special attention to a room where only a child's red and blue bunk bed remained.

While the community tended to its deep wounds, investigators awaited clearance to enter the blast zone for clues to what set off the plant's huge stockpile of volatile chemicals.

"It's still too hot to get in there," said Franceska Perot, a spokeswoman for the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms.

The precise death toll was uncertain. Three to five volunteer firefighters were initially believed to be among the dead, which authorities said could number as many as 15. But by late Thursday afternoon, the state Department of Public Safety would not confirm how many had been killed.

Swanton said he would "never second-guess" firefighters' decision to enter the plant because "we risk our lives every day." The many injuries included broken bones, cuts and bruises, respiratory problems and minor burns. Five people were reported in intensive care. Five more were listed in critical condition.

In the hours after the blast, residents wandered the dark, windy streets searching for shelter. Among them was Julie Zahirmiako, who said she and her son, Anthony, had been at a school playground near the plant when the explosion hit.

The explosion threw her son four feet in the air, breaking his ribs. She said she saw people running from the nursing home, and the roof of the school rose into the sky.

"The fire was so high," she said. "It was just as loud as it could be. The ground and everything was shaking."



President Barack Obama speaks at an interfaith prayer service for victims of the Boston Marathon attack titled "Healing Our City," at the Cathedral of the Holy Cross Thursday in Boston.

Obama Honors Bombing Victims In Boston

BY JULIE PACE
AP White House Correspondent

BOSTON — Called upon to console a grieving city and reassure a shaken nation, President Barack Obama on Thursday promised that Boston would "run again" after deadly twin bombings at its famous marathon. More than 2,000 people rose in a standing ovation in the Cathedral of the Holy Cross and sang "America the Beautiful."

Obama's message of resolve in time of tragedy was echoed by Mayor Thomas Menino and Gov. Deval Patrick at a packed interfaith service.

"Nothing will take us down because we take care of one another," Menino said. "Even with the smell of smoke in the air and blood in the streets and tears in our eyes, we triumphed over that hateful act."

Three people were killed and more than 170 others were injured, some of them grievously, in Monday's bombings near the race's finish line.

Obama spoke just hours before the FBI released photographs and video of two suspects and asked for the public's help in identifying them.

In the midst of an emotional and trying stretch for the country and his presidency, Obama vowed to track down those responsible and lauded Boston's "undaunted" spirit.

"Your resolve is the greatest rebuke to whoever committed this heinous act," he told the gathering.

Indeed, Obama's words underscored the stark reality that has left many Americans jittery. Even as authorities narrowed their search to two men captured on video, the suspects remained at

large and their motives were still a mystery.

For Obama, the bombings began a week consumed not only by terror but also disaster and political defeat. Letters sent to Washington officials, including Obama and Sen. Roger Wicker, R-Miss., were found to contain traces of poisonous ricin in tests, evoking eerie parallels to the anthrax attacks that followed the terror of Sept. 11, 2001.

The president also lost a fight for new gun control measures in the Senate, then awoke Thursday to news of a powerful fertilizer plant explosion that devastated a small Texas town.

Speaking from the pulpit in the soaring cathedral, the president didn't explicitly declare the deadly marathon explosions an "act of terror" as he did earlier in the week during remarks at the White House. But he showed little restraint in describing those responsible for the attack, calling them "small, stunted individuals."



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Attorney: Miss. Man Denies Mailing Ricin To Obama

BY ERIC TUCKER
Associated Press

WASHINGTON — A Mississippi man charged with mailing ricin-tainted letters to national leaders wrote in online postings that he had uncovered a conspiracy to sell human body parts on the black market, and on Thursday his attorney said he was surprised by his arrest and maintains he is innocent.

Paul Kevin Curtis, 45, wore shackles and a Johnny Cash T-shirt Thursday in a federal courtroom. His handcuffs were taken off for the brief hearing, and he said little. He faces two charges on accusations of threatening President Barack Obama and others. If convicted, he could face up to 15 years in prison.

He did not enter a plea on the two charges. The judge said a preliminary hearing and a detention hearing are scheduled for 3 p.m. Friday.

Attorney Christi R. McCoy said Curtis "maintains 100 percent that he did not do this."

"I know Kevin, I know his family," she said. "This is a huge shock."

McCoy said she has not yet decided whether to seek a hearing to determine whether Curtis is mentally competent to stand trial.

Curtis, who was arrested Wednesday at his home in Corinth, near the Tennessee state line, was being held in the Lafayette County jail in Oxford, Miss.

An FBI affidavit says Curtis sent three letters with ricin to Obama, U.S. Sen. Roger Wicker and a Mississippi judge. The letters read:

"No one wanted to listen to me before. There are still 'Missing Pieces.' Maybe I have your attention now even if that means someone must die. This must stop. To see a wrong and not expose it, is to become a silent partner to its continu-

ance. I am KC and I approve this message."

The affidavit says Curtis had sent letters to Wicker's office several times before with the message, "this is Kevin Curtis and I approve this message."

In several letters to Wicker and other officials, Curtis said he was writing a novel about black market body parts called "Missing Pieces."

Curtis also had posted language similar to the letters on his Facebook page, the affidavit says. The documents indicate Curtis had been distrustful of the government for years. In 2007, Curtis' ex-wife called police in Booneville, Miss., to report that her husband was extremely delusional, anti-government and felt the government was spying on him with drones.

Curtis was arrested Wednesday at his home in Corinth, near the Tennessee state line. He was being held in the Lafayette County jail in Oxford, Miss.

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