

Obama Consoles Texas Town After Explosion

WACO, Texas (AP) — President Barack Obama on Thursday consoled a rural Texas community rocked by a deadly fertilizer plant explosion, telling mourners they are not alone in their grief and they will have the nation's support to rebuild from the devastation.

"This small town's family is bigger now," Obama said during a memorial service at Baylor University for victims of last week's explosion in nearby West, Texas, that killed 14 and injured 200. Nearly 10,000 gathered to remember the first responders killed in the blast, a crowd more than triple the size of West's entire population of 2,700.

"To the families, the neighbors grappling with unbearable loss, we are here to say you are not alone. You are not forgotten," Obama said to applause. "We may not all live here in Texas, but we're neighbors too. We're Americans too, and we stand with you."

The April 17 explosion left a crater more than 90 feet wide and damaged dozens of buildings, displacing many residents from their homes. The Insurance Council of Texas estimates it caused more than \$100 million in damage, and crews were sifting the rubble to search for clues to what caused the explosion or whether foul play was involved.

The blast came about 20 minutes after a fire was reported at the West Fertilizer. Ten of those killed were first responders who sped out to the nighttime blaze.

Israel Shoots Down Drone Off Its Coast

JERUSALEM (AP) — Israel shot down a drone Thursday as it approached its northern coast from neighboring Lebanon, raising suspicions that the Hezbollah militant group was behind the infiltration attempt.

Hezbollah denied involvement, but the incident was likely to heighten Israeli concerns that the Shiite militant group is trying to take advantage of the unrest in neighboring Syria to strengthen its capabilities.

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, who was in a helicopter in northern Israel at the time of the incident, said he viewed it with "utmost gravity."

Israeli military spokesman Lt. Col. Peter Lerner said the unmanned aircraft was detected as it was flying over Lebanon and tracked as it approached Israeli airspace.

He said the military waited for the aircraft to enter Israeli airspace, confirmed it was "enemy," and then an F-16 warplane shot it down, smashing its wreckage into the sea about five miles (eight kilometers) off the northern port of Haifa. Lerner said Israeli naval forces were searching for the remains of the aircraft.

Clashes Break Out In Iraqi City Of Mosul

BAGHDAD (AP) — Clashes spread to a key northern city and gunmen took over a town elsewhere in Iraq on Thursday, raising the death toll from three days of violence to more than 150 people as a wave of Sunni unrest intensified.

The turmoil is aggravating an already sour political situation between the Shiite-led government and Sunnis, who accuse Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki's government of neglect and trying to disenfranchise their Muslim sect.

Al-Maliki appeared on national television appealing for calm amid fears the country is facing a return to full-scale sectarian fighting more than a year after U.S. troops withdrew.

The spreading violence came as Iraqi electoral officials announced preliminary results in local elections held Saturday — Iraq's first since U.S. troops left in December 2011.

With 87 percent of the ballots counted, al-Maliki's State of Law bloc was on track to win the most votes in eight of the 12 provinces participating in the vote, including Baghdad and the southern oil hub of Basra.

More Cautious Banking Sector Cutting Jobs

NEW YORK (AP) — Banks aren't the big jobs machines they used to be.

One after another, major financial firms are trimming their payrolls. In first-quarter earnings announcements this month, Bank of America, Citigroup, JPMorgan Chase, Goldman Sachs and Morgan Stanley revealed that they have slashed more than 31,000 jobs, or 3.5 percent of their combined workforce, in the past year. For three of those banks, it was the second straight year of cutbacks. And the pattern is being repeated at banks around the world.

Layoffs in the depths of the financial crisis were to be expected. But four years later, and at a time when many banks are reporting higher or even record earnings, the cuts are unsettling to an entire industry.

The losses are an unwelcome reminder of the meltdown and its lingering effects. A slow, halting recovery has kept loan demand in check. Low interest rates are crimping profits from lending. New regulations have extinguished old sources of revenue, and compliance is expensive. The cuts also reflect advances in technology that have made bank tellers more expendable.

Steven Mann, chairman of the finance department at the University of South Carolina's Moore School of Business, says many of his students have given up on banking jobs.

Boston Suspects' Father Returning To U.S.

MAKHACHKALA, Russia (AP) — The father of the two Boston bombing suspects said Thursday that he is soon leaving Russia for the United States, to visit one son and lay the other to rest. Their mother said she was still thinking over whether to make the journey.

"I am going there to see my son and bury my older one," Anzor Tsarnaev said in an emotional meeting with journalists. "I have no bad thoughts, I'm not planning any bombings, I don't want to do anything. I'm not offended by anyone. I want to know the truth, what happened. I want to work it out."

Tamerlan Tsarnaev, 26, was killed in a gun battle with police, while his 19-year-old brother, Dzhokhar Tsarnaev, remains hospitalized with gunshot wounds.

Their parents returned last year to Dagestan, one of several predominantly Muslim provinces in southern Russia, where the family lived briefly before moving to the U.S. a decade ago.

The elder suspect spent the first half of 2012 in Russia's Caucasus, which has been ravaged for years by an insurgency led by religious extremists. Anzor Tsarnaev said his son stayed with him for at least three months in Makhachkala, the capital of Dagestan, and spent one month with relatives, but he was unclear on where his son was for the remaining time.

Police:

Boston Suspects Planned To Attack New York

BY COLLEEN LONG AND JENNIFER PELTZ
Associated Press

NEW YORK — The Boston Marathon bombers were headed for New York's Times Square to blow up the rest of their explosives, authorities said Thursday, in what they portrayed as a chilling, spur-of-the-moment scheme that fell apart when the brothers realized the car they had hijacked was low on gas.

"New York City was next on their list of targets," Mayor Michael Bloomberg said.

New York Police Commissioner Raymond Kelly said Dzhokhar Tsarnaev told interrogators from his hospital bed that he and his older brother decided on the spot last Thursday night to drive to New York and launch an attack. In their stolen SUV they had five pipe bombs and a pressure-cooker explosive like the ones that blew up at the marathon, Kelly said.

But when the Tsarnaev brothers stopped at a gas station on the outskirts of Boston, the carjacking victim they were holding hostage escaped and called police, Kelly said. Later that night, police intercepted the brothers in a blazing gunbattle that left 26-year-old Tamerlan Tsarnaev dead.

"We don't know if we would have been able to stop the terrorists had they arrived here from Boston," the mayor said. "We're just thankful that we didn't have to find out that answer."

The news caused New Yorkers to shudder with the thought that the city may have narrowly escaped another terrorist attack, though whether the brothers could have made it to the city is an open question. They were two of the most-wanted men in the world, their faces

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MICHAEL BLOOMBERG

splashed all over the Internet and TV in surveillance-camera images released by the FBI hours earlier.

Dzhokhar, 19, is charged with carrying out the Boston Marathon bombing April 15 that killed three people and wounded more than 260, and he could get the death penalty. Christina Dilorio-Sterling, a spokeswoman for U.S. Attorney Carmen Ortiz in Boston, would not comment on whether authorities plan to add charges based on the alleged plot to attack New York.

Investigators and lawmakers briefed by the FBI have said the Tsarnaev brothers — ethnic Chechens from Russia who had lived in the U.S. for about a decade — were motivated by anger over the U.S. wars in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Based on the younger man's interrogation and other evidence, authorities have said it appears so far that the brothers were radicalized via Islamic jihadi material on the Internet instead of any direct contact with terrorist organizations, but they warned that it is still not certain.

Dzhokhar was interrogated in his hospital

room Sunday and Monday over a period of 16 hours without being read his rights to remain silent and have an attorney present. He immediately stopped talking after a magistrate judge and a representative from the U.S. Attorney's office entered the room and gave him his Miranda warning, according to a U.S. law enforcement official and others briefed on the interrogation.

Kelly and the mayor said they were briefed on the New York plot on Wednesday night by the task force investigating the Boston bombing.

Rep. Peter King, R-N.Y., said in a CNN interview that the city should have been told earlier.

"Even though this may or may not have been spontaneous, for all we know there could be other conspirators out there, and the city should have been alerted so it could go into its defensive mode," he said.

Asked about the delay, Bloomberg said: "There's no reason to think the FBI hides anything. The FBI does what they think is appropriate at the time, and you'll have to ask them what they found and what the actual details of the interrogation were. We were not there."

Kelly, citing the interrogations, said that four days after the Boston bombing, the Tsarnaev brothers "planned to travel to Manhattan to detonate their remaining explosives in Times Square."

"They discussed this while driving around in a Mercedes SUV that they hijacked after they shot and killed the officer at MIT," the police commissioner said. "That plan, however, fell apart when they realized that the vehicle they hijacked was low on gas and ordered the driver to stop at a nearby gas station."

U.S. Says Syria Used Poison

WASHINGTON (AP) — The White House declared Thursday that U.S. intelligence indicates Syrian President Bashar Assad has twice used deadly chemical weapons in his country's fierce civil war, a provocative action that would cross President Barack Obama's "red line" for a significant military response. But the administration said the revelation won't immediately change its stance on intervening.

The information, which has been known to the administration and some members of Congress for weeks, isn't solid enough to warrant quick U.S. involvement in the 2-year-old conflict, the White House said. Officials said the assessments were made with "varying degrees of confidence" given the difficulty of information gathering in Syria, though there appeared to be little question within the intelligence community.

As recently as Tuesday, when an Israeli general added to the growing chorus that Assad had used chemical weapons, White House spokesman Jay Carney said the administration was continuing to monitor and investigate but had "not come to the conclusion that there has been that use."

The Syrian civil war has persisted, with an estimated 70,000 dead. Obama has so far resisted pressure, both from Congress and from within his own administration, to arm the Syrian rebels or get involved militarily. He has, however, declared the use of chemical weapons a "game changer" that would have "enormous consequences."



SONYA HEBERT-SCHWARTZ/DALLAS MORNING NEWS/MCT
Former presidents George W. Bush and Bill Clinton greet each other during dedication ceremonies for the new George W. Bush Presidential Center Thursday in Dallas, Texas.

Library Dedication Puts Politics On Hold

BY JOSH LEDERMAN
AND JAMIE STENGLE

Associated Press

DALLAS — George W. Bush shed a sentimental tear. Barack Obama mused about the burdens of the office. Bill Clinton dished out wisecracks. Jimmy Carter and George H.W. Bush chimed in, too, on a rare day of harmony at the dedication of the younger Bush's presidential library that glossed over the hard edges and partisan divides of five presidencies spanning more than three tumultuous decades.

"To know the man is to like the man," Obama declared of his Republican predecessor, speaking before a crowd of 10,000 at an event that had the feel of a class reunion for the partisans who had powered the Bush administration from 2001 to 2009.

Dick Cheney was there in a white cowboy hat. Condoleezza Rice gave shout-outs to visiting dignitaries. Colin Powell and Karl Rove were prominent faces in the crowd.

On this day, there was no mention of Iraq or Afghanistan, the wars that dominated Bush's presidency and so divided the nation. There were only gentle references to the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina. And praise aplenty for the resolve that Bush showed in responding to the 9/11 terror attacks.

Clinton joked that the dedication of the George W. Bush Presidential Center was "the latest, grandest example of the eternal struggle of former presidents to rewrite history."

But he also praised Bush for including interactive exhibits at the center that invite visitors to make their own choices on major decisions that he faced.

Bush, 66, made indirect reference to the polarizing decision points of his presidency, drawing a knowing laugh as he told the crowd: "One of the benefits of freedom is that people can disagree. It's fair to say I created plenty of opportunities to exercise that right."

He said he was guided throughout his presidency by a

determination "to expand the reach of freedom."

"It wasn't always easy, and it certainly wasn't always popular."

It was a day for family and sentimentality, Bush choking up with emotion at the conclusion of his remarks.

The 43rd president singled out his 88-year-old father, another ex-president, to tell him: "41, it is awesome that you are here today."

The elder Bush, wearing jaunty pink socks, spoke for less than a minute from his wheelchair, then turned to his son and quipped, "Too long?" He has a form of Parkinson's disease and has been hospitalized recently for bronchitis.

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