

How is The Gulf After The Oil Spill?

Five years after the BP well explosion, there is no single, conclusive answer to how the Gulf of Mexico is doing, but there are many questions. Here are some of them:

To assess the health of the Gulf of Mexico, The Associated Press surveyed 26 marine scientists about two dozen aspects of the fragile ecosystem to see how this vital waterway has changed since before the April 2010 spill. On average, the researchers graded an 11 percent drop in the overall health of the Gulf.

The surveyed scientists on average said that before the spill, the Gulf was a 73 on a 0 to 100 scale. Now it's a 65. In the survey, scientists report the biggest drops in rating the current health of oysters, dolphins, sea turtles, marshes, and the seafloor.

Saddam's Top Deputy Has Been Killed

BAGHDAD (AP) — He was the last member of Saddam Hussein's inner circle still on the run, depicted with his distinctive red moustache as the "king of clubs" on the U.S. military's deck of cards of most-wanted Iraqi regime fugitives.

Now, officials say they believe government forces killed Izzat Ibrahim al-Douri near Tikrit, where the former deputy to Saddam was working alongside Islamic State militants.

Reports of al-Douri's death came Friday as Iraqi forces tried to push back Islamic State group fighters in Salahuddin province, where Tikrit is located. Government troops took back several towns near Iraq's largest oil refinery at Beiji, officials said.

Farther north, a car bomb exploded next to the U.S. Consulate in the city of Irbil, a rare attack in the capital of the Kurdish autonomous zone that killed three people and wounded five, police said. U.S. officials said no Americans were hurt and no casualties among consulate personnel or guards.

An Associated Press reporter at the scene said the blast went off outside a cafe next to the building in the Ankawa neighborhood, setting several nearby cars on fire. Shortly afterward, the Islamic State group claimed responsibility, according to the SITE Intelligence Group, which tracks militant websites.

Students Opt Out Of Standardized Tests

ATLANTA (AP) — Thousands of students are opting out of new standardized tests aligned to the Common Core standards, defying the latest attempt by states to improve academic performance.

This "opt-out" movement remains scattered but is growing fast in some parts of the country. Some superintendents in New York are reporting that 60 percent or even 70 percent of their students are refusing to sit for the exams. Some lawmakers, sensing a tipping point, are backing the parents and teachers who complain about standardized testing.

Resistance could be costly: If fewer than 95 percent of a district's students participate in tests aligned with Common Core standards, federal money could be withheld, although the U.S. Department of Education said that hasn't happened.

"It is a theoretical club administrators have used to coerce participation, but a club that is increasingly seen as a hollow threat," said Bob Schaeffer with the National Center for Fair & Open Testing, which seeks to limit standardized testing.

And so the movement grows: This week in New York, tens of thousands of students sat out the first day of tests, with some districts reporting more than half of students opting out of the English test. Preliminary reports suggest an overall increase in opt-outs compared to last year, when about 49,000 students did not take English tests and about 67,000 skipped math tests, compared to about 1.1 million students who did take the tests in New York.

Obama Open To 'Creative Negotiations'

WASHINGTON (AP) — President Barack Obama on Friday left open the door to "creative negotiations" in response to Iran's demand that punishing sanctions be immediately lifted as part of a nuclear deal, even though the initial agreement calls for the penalties to be removed over time.

Asked at a White House news conference whether he would definitively rule out lifting sanctions at once as part of a final deal aimed at keeping Iran from developing a nuclear weapon, Obama said he didn't want to get ahead of negotiators in how to work through the potential sticking point. He said his main concern is making sure that if Iran violates an agreement, sanctions can quickly be reinstated — the so-called "snap back" provision.

"How sanctions are lessened, how we snap back sanctions if there's a violation, there are a lot of different mechanisms and ways to do that," Obama said. He said part of the job for Secretary of State John Kerry and the representatives of five other nations working to reach a final deal with Iran by June 30 "is to sometimes find formulas that get to our main concerns while allowing the other side to make a presentation to their body politic that is more acceptable."

Iran's Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei and President Hassan Rouhani insisted last week that they would not sign a deal unless it lifts all sanctions on its first day. Obama initially portrayed their comments as a reflection of internal political pressure, while pointing out that the initial framework agreement reached earlier this month allows for sanctions to be phased out once international monitors verify that Tehran is abiding by the limitations.

Obama, speaking Friday at a news conference with Italian Prime Minister Matteo Renzi, said the sanctions issue "will require some creative negotiations by John Kerry and others."

Cardinal Francis George Passes Away

CHICAGO (AP) — Cardinal Francis George, a vigorous defender of Roman Catholic orthodoxy who played a key role in the church's response to the clergy sex abuse scandal and led the U.S. bishops' fight against Obamacare, has died after a long fight with cancer. He was 78.

George, who retired as Chicago archbishop in the fall of 2014, a few months before announcing his treatment for kidney cancer had failed, died late Friday morning, according to the Archdiocese of Chicago.

"Let us heed his example and be a little more brave, a little more steadfast and a lot more loving," Chicago Archbishop Blase Cupich said during a news conference, describing his predecessor as "a man of great courage."

Appointed to Chicago in 1997 by Pope John Paul II, the Chicago native became a leading figure of his era in many of the most important events in the American church.

At the height of the abuse crisis in 2002, George led a group of U.S. bishops who persuaded resistant Vatican officials to more quickly oust guilty priests — a policy at the core of reforms meant to restore trust in church leaders. He also oversaw the contentious new English-language translation of the Roman Missal, one of the biggest changes in Catholic worship in generations.

Bombing Is 1st Attack On US In Iraq Since Islamic State Took Mosul

BY MITCHELL PROTHERO
McClatchy Foreign Staff

IRBIL, Iraq — A suicide bomber struck the U.S. consulate building in the northern Iraqi city of Irbil on Friday afternoon.

Kurdish authorities said that at least three people were killed, a Kurdish security official at the scene said the dead were the three attackers and five wounded. Among the wounded were two Westerners who were in a restaurant across the street, witnesses said.

Brett McGurk, the deputy assistant secretary of state for Iraq and Iran, said in a post on Twitter that all consulate personnel had been accounted for and that there were no reports of injuries among them. He included the hashtag VBIED, short for vehicle-born improvised explosive device.

The Islamic State, which is also pressing offensives in the cities of Ramadi and Baiji, claimed responsibility for the explosion in an Internet post.

The attack was the first direct assault on U.S. facilities in Iraq since the Islamic State took control of much of the northern and central areas of the country last summer, and only the second bombing in Irbil, the capital of the Kurdistan Regional Government, a city considered so safe that the United States moved many of its diplomats here from Baghdad when the Islamic State captured the city of Mosul and threatened Baghdad last year.

The Kurdish official at the scene told McClatchy that three attackers had approached a checkpoint near the consulate in an SUV, apparently intending to attack on foot to make room for a suicide bomber, who was either also on foot or in



MITCHELL PROTHERO/MCCLATCHY/TNS

Kurdish security forces respond to a large explosion thought to be a suicide bomb or improvised explosive device at the pedestrian entrance to the U.S. Consulate complex in Irbil, Iraq on Friday. At least one person was killed and five others wounded, Kurdish authorities said.

the car. They were spotted by peshmerga security forces stationed outside the consulate, who opened fire. The security official said the three attackers were killed, though whether they were killed by gunshots or detonated explosives was unclear. The official spoke only on the condition of anonymity, as he wasn't authorized to talk to journalists.

Gunfire was heard in the neighborhood for several minutes after an initial explosion.

The heavily guarded facility, which houses diplomats and a military command center used to coordinate the air campaign led by the United States against the Islamic State, is in a quiet residential and predominantly Christian section of the Kurdish capital. It's accessible only through a heavily guarded pedestrian entrance.

The facility is one of three key command centers that coordinate operations among the Iraqi and Kurdish governments which operate independent security forces in the fight against the Islamic State and the U.S.-led coalition, which provides air support.

It was unknown whether the attack in Irbil was intended to disrupt the coalition response to the significant Islamic State offensives unfolding elsewhere. One of them is in the western province of Anbar, where the provincial capital of Ramadi is in danger of being overrun, and the other is in Baiji, where the Islamic State is trying to take control of Iraq's largest oil refinery.

The Iraqi government described the explosion in Irbil as due to an improvised explosive device on the road outside the consulate, a

description that might mean a car bomb or one carried by a person.

The explosion was followed by heavy gunfire from security forces, who claimed to have been engaging other gunmen. Kurdish peshmerga, along with Kurdish internal security forces, quickly closed off the area as fires raged through a strip mall of coffee shops and restaurants popular with Irbil's expatriate community across from the consulate.

A U.S. military helicopter circled the area as at least three ambulances evacuated wounded. One peshmerga guard could be seen being loaded into a pickup by his comrades as security forces attempted to disperse bystanders and journalists from the area by frequently firing automatic weapons into the air.

Amid Migrant Crisis, 20 Burn Victims Rescued

BY COLLEEN BARRY
Associated Press

MILAN — The unabated flow of migrants fleeing instability in Libya brought a new horror on Friday: The discovery of 20 migrants adrift at sea who had suffered grave burn injuries in a cooking gas explosion before departing Libya, and then were forced onto a smuggler's boat without treatment.

Italian ships have picked up 10,000 people, many of them refugees of war and persecution, over the past week, an unprecedented number in such a short period. The influx is putting

pressure on Italy's shelter system and raising calls for a better response to the emergency.

Friday's rescue comes after the feared drowning of more than 400 migrants in two shipwrecks in the last week, bringing to more than 900 the number of people who have died or gone missing so far this year making the perilous crossing — 10 times higher than over the same period last year.

In Washington, President Barack Obama pledged more intense cooperation with Italy on threats coming from the instability in Libya, which has contributed to the influx of migrants across the

Mediterranean. Libya, the closest point in north Africa to Italy, is a transit point for migrants hoping to reach Europe by sea.

Speaking after a meeting with the visiting Italian prime minister, Obama promised to "work together even more intensively to encourage cooperation on threats coming from Libya, including the growing ISIL presence there, as well as additional coordination with other partners in how we can stabilize what has become a very deadly and difficult situation."

Italian Premier Matteo Renzi said he expected to see results of the commitment in the coming weeks.

"It has to do with the justice and the dignity of mankind," he said.

Among the burn victims rescued Friday after two days adrift on a half-deflated dinghy was a 6-month-old baby. They were among 70 migrants who were rescued and transported to the Italian island of Lampedusa. One of the burn victims, a woman, died en route.

The U.N. refugee agency said the cooking gas explosion occurred at a holding center run by smugglers who demand thousands of euros (dollars) for a place on unseaworthy boats making the journey across the Mediterranean.

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