

VA Says No Proof Delays Caused Deaths

WASHINGTON (AP) — The Department of Veterans Affairs says investigators have found no proof that delays in care caused any deaths at a Veterans Affairs hospital in Phoenix.

Revelations that as many as 40 veterans died while awaiting care from the Phoenix VA rocked the agency last spring, exposing a system in which veterans waited months for care while VA employees falsified records to cover up the delays.

The VA's Office of Inspector General has been investigating the delays for months. Deputy VA Secretary Sloan Gibson said a draft of the inspector general's report says investigators could not "conclusively assert" that delays in care caused veterans to die at the Phoenix VA.

The final report has not yet been released. Gibson spoke in an interview with The Associated Press.

Convoys Seen Rolling In Eastern Ukraine

KRASNODON, Ukraine (AP) — For several evenings this month, convoys of military weaponry passed with clockwork-like regularity through Krasnodon, a rebel-held town in eastern Ukraine near the porous border with Russia.

The convoys were seen three times last week by Associated Press reporters, and one of them carried about 30 units of weaponry and supplies. All were coming from the direction of Russia and heading west to where pro-Moscow separatists were fighting Ukrainian troops.

One rebel fighter described how easy it was to cross into Ukraine through a Russian-controlled frontier post in a convoy that included a tank, adding that the border officer appeared unfazed at the deadly cargo.

NATO and Ukraine have accused Moscow of covertly shuttling heavy artillery and other weapons to the separatists — allegations that Russia routinely denies. NATO says since mid-August, those weapons have been fired from both inside Ukraine and from Russian territory.

Syrians Warns Against US Airstrikes

BEIRUT (AP) — Syria said Monday it was ready to help confront the rising threat from the Islamic State group, but warned the United States against carrying out airstrikes without Damascus' consent, saying any such attack would be considered an aggression.

In seeking to portray itself as a partner for the international community, Syria seemed intent on capitalizing on the growing clamor among some U.S. officials, including military leaders, to expand the current American air campaign against the Islamic extremists in Iraq and to hit them in Syria as well.

President Barack Obama has long been wary of getting dragged into the bloody and complex Syrian civil war that the United Nations says has killed more than 190,000 people. He has resisted intervening militarily in the conflict, even after a deadly chemical weapons attack a year ago that Washington blamed on President Bashar Assad's government.

But the extremist group's rampage across wide swaths of Iraq, declaration of a state governed by their harsh interpretation of Islamic law in territory spanning the Iraq-Syria border, and grisly beheading of an American journalist, have injected a new dynamic into those calculations. Now, Obama faces pressure from his own military leaders to go after the extremists inside Syria.

Speaking in Damascus, Syrian Foreign Minister Walid al-Moallem appeared acutely aware of how much has changed since last August, when the U.S. was threatening to carry out punitive airstrikes against Assad's government in the wake of the chemical attack. Since then, global disapproval has shifted away from Assad and toward the Islamic extremists who are fighting him and spreading destruction across Syria and Iraq.

American Freelance Journalist Released

WASHINGTON (AP) — As the U.S. mourned an American journalist beheaded by Islamic militants, the nation found something of a reprieve with the release of another freelance reporter who had been held hostage for nearly two years by an al-Qaida-linked group in Syria.

Peter Theo Curtis, who wrote under the byline Theo Padnos, was freed Sunday, offering consolation to U.S. officials, a journalism community and family members deeply unnerved by the grisly video of James Foley's beheading in a desolate desert landscape.

Curtis' father, Michael Padnos, said his wife spoke to their son briefly by telephone Monday morning and that he seemed to be in good physical health.

Padnos said his son was apparently in Tel Aviv but would be flown back to Boston soon. He praised the work of the U.S. and other governments in getting his son freed.

"We are very thrilled, and we hope the same thing is going to be true for all the others (journalists held)," said Padnos, speaking in a telephone interview from a boat outside Paris.

Israelis Near Gaza Face Mortar Attacks

JERUSALEM (AP) — Hundreds of Israelis left their homes along the border with the Gaza Strip on Monday, reflecting growing frustration over the war with Hamas and the Palestinian mortar fire raining down on their communities. Tens of thousands of Israelis have fled the area in nearly two months of fighting, which has turned the communities into virtual ghost towns.

With the school year fast approaching, the government began offering assistance to residents Monday in the first large-scale voluntary evacuation in nearly eight weeks of fighting.

Officials estimate that 70 percent of the 40,000 inhabitants of the farming communities along the Gaza border have left over the course of the fighting, including hundreds on Monday. Some went to stay with relatives and friends, while others are staying at hostels or were taken in by strangers who want to help fellow Israelis.

Fields that once yielded vegetables and flowers are barren and pockmarked by Palestinian mortar shells. Streets are empty and most homes eerily silent.

The fighting has killed more than 2,100 Palestinians, according to Gaza officials, leveled thousands of buildings and left tens of thousands of people homeless.



Structural engineers Andy Thompson and Ibbi Almufti do a general assessment of the Vintner's Collective building on Monday morning, one day after the South Napa, Calif. earthquake struck the Bay Area.

California Begins To Clean Up From Quake

BY ELLEN KNICKMEYER AND LISA LEFF
Associated Press

NAPA, Calif. — Businesses in California's wine capital on Monday mopped up thousands of dollars in high-end vintages, swept glass from ghostly downtown streets ordinarily bustling with tourists and rushed to reopen in advance of the summer's last holiday weekend, following a severe earthquake that damaged wineries, historic buildings and hotels.

With the dust still settling from Sunday's magnitude-6.0 temblor centered near the city of Napa, government and tourism officials assessing its economic and structural impact encouraged visitors to keep flocking to the charming towns, tasting rooms, restaurants and spas that drive the Napa Valley economy.

While cleanup will take time and broken water mains remained a problem, they said, the worst damage and disruption was confined to the city's downtown, where a post office, library and a 141-room hotel were among 150 homes and buildings deemed unsafe to occupy.

The strongest earthquake to hit the San Francisco Bay Area in a quarter-century also caused several injuries, triggered fires that destroyed or damaged six mobile homes, and ruptured gas lines.

"Clearly, we are concerned that people are going to see that it was a catastrophe, and it certainly wasn't good, but it wasn't a catastrophe by any means," Clay Gregory, president of tourism organization Visit Napa Valley, said as workers at a shuttered downtown



Liam Rooney and Kyle Williams board up the red-tagged Goodman Building on Monday. The iconic building in downtown Napa, Calif., had been scheduled for earthquake retrofitting.

visitor's center updated lists of open wineries and surveyed hotels about cancellations. "The real story is that it has impacted a very small part of the valley."

In Napa Valley, two hotels and 12 wineries were still closed Monday, as well as many of the businesses downtown, he said.

Local officials have an early working estimate that Napa Valley suffered \$1 billion in property damage, but they hope the long-term economic impact of the quake to businesses will be modest, Napa County Supervisor Bill Dodd said. He said 80 percent of the valley's 500 or

so wineries were unaffected.

If people "think Napa is devastated, it's anything but devastated. We're only 24 hours out from an earthquake, and we're on our way back," Dodd said.

CoreLogic Eqecat, which models economic losses from disasters, estimates that insured losses from the earthquake could range from \$500 million to \$1 billion. Vineyards have already started to harvest their grapes, crush them and store the juice. If the earthquake had happened before the harvest, Eqecat notes, the losses would have been lower.

President Returns To DC Amid Crises

BY JIM KUHNHENN
Associated Press

WASHINGTON — While in office, former President George H. W. Bush once plaintively asked, "What is it about August?"

Indeed, this sultry month usually associated with the doldrums of summer has burdened modern presidents with personal, domestic or international crises. And for President Barack Obama, who returned to Washington Sunday from a two-week Martha's Vineyard vacation, what remains of the August calendar looks perhaps more daunting than when he left.

Islamic militants personalized their fight in Iraq and Syria by beheading American journalist James Foley. Russia escalated tensions in Europe by moving artillery and troops on the Ukrainian border and pushing a convoy into the former Soviet republic without Kiev's approval. And a Chinese fighter jet provocatively buzzed a Navy plane in international air space.

His arrival back in the nation's capital came with one positive note — Sunday's release of an American freelance journalist who had been held hostage by al-Qaida af-



Obama

filates in Syria. Still, Obama faces his own self-imposed end-of-summer deadline for how to sidestep Congress on changes to U.S. immigration policies. And while racial tensions in Ferguson, Missouri, over the police killing of an unarmed young black man have subsided, the St. Louis suburb remains under the White House's wary gaze. Amid all that, he'll give a speech to the American Legion in Charlotte, North Carolina, on Tuesday and raise money for Democrats in New York and Rhode Island on Friday.

He certainly is not the first commander in chief to find August so vexing.

President George H.W. Bush had to respond to Saddam Hussein's August 1990 invasion of Kuwait. Bill Clinton admitted to an inappropriate relationship with Monica Lewinski in August of 1998 and days later ordered air strikes against terrorist bases in Afghanistan in retaliation for the bombings of U.S. embassies in Kenya and Tanzania earlier in the month.

For Obama, it's the overseas trouble spots in Iraq and Syria and along Ukraine's eastern border that present the president with his most immediate challenge — pushing U.S. allies beyond their comfort level to confront Russia and the Islamic State militants.

Obama, who has already ordered limited air strikes against Islamic State militants in Iraq, now must decide whether to expand that fight into Syria — a step he has previously been reluctant to take. "The president has not made a decision to pursue any military action in Syria," White House spokesman Josh Earnest said Monday.

The U.S. has been in talks with Britain, France, Australia and Canada on how they can become more involved in confronting Islamic State by sharing intelligence, providing military assistance to Kurdish forces in Iraq and to moderate opposition forces in Syria, and if necessary, participating in military action. But direct use of force could be a tough request to make from countries that were part of NATO forces in the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Funeral

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service, which at times seemed like a cross between a gospel revival and a rock concert. It began with upbeat music punctuated by clapping. Some people danced in place.

The crowd included the parents of Trayvon Martin, the unarmed 17-year-old African-American fatally shot by a neighborhood watch volunteer in Florida, along with a cousin of Emmett Till, a 14-year-old murdered by several white men while visiting Mississippi in 1955. Till's killing galvanized the civil rights movement.

Also in attendance were several White House aides, the Rev. Jesse Jackson, moviemaker Spike Lee, entertainer Sean Combs and some children of the Rev. Martin Luther King. The Rev. Charles Ewing, the uncle

who delivered the eulogy, said Brown "prophetically spoke his demise." And now his blood is "crying from the ground. Crying for vengeance. Crying for justice."

Poster-size photos of Brown, wearing headphones, were on each side of the casket, which had a St. Louis Cardinals ball cap atop it. Large projection screens showed a photo of him clutching his high school diploma while wearing a cap and gown. Two days after his death, he had been scheduled to start training to become a heating and air-conditioning technician.

Brown, who was to be buried in a St. Louis cemetery, was unarmed when he was killed. A grand jury is considering evidence in the case, and a federal investigation is also underway.

Police have said a scuffle broke out Aug. 9 after officer Darren Wilson told Brown and a friend to move out of the street and onto a sidewalk in the St. Louis suburb of Ferguson. Po-

lice said Wilson was pushed into his squad car and physically assaulted. Some witnesses have reported seeing Brown's arms in the air in an act of surrender. An autopsy found he was shot at least six times.

Relatives denounced a video released by police, who say it shows Brown snatching cigars from a convenience store just before he was killed. In the video, the person said to be Brown grabs a clerk by the shirt and forcefully pushes him into a display rack.

Sharpton also took the black community to task, saying it should be as upset about black-on-black crime as it is about police violence: "We have to be outraged by our disrespect for each other."

"Blackness," he added, "has never been about being a gangster or a thug."

Money and possessions mean little, he said, "if we can't protect a child walking down the street in Ferguson" and bring justice.

Brown's death fueled nearly two weeks of sometimes-violent street protests in Ferguson. His father, Michael Brown Sr., asked protesters to observe a "day of silence" Monday to let the family grieve.

The request appeared to be honored. At the Ferguson Police Department, where a small but steady group of protesters have stood vigil, a handmade sign announced a "break for funeral." On Monday afternoon, the West Florissant Avenue commercial corridor was also devoid of protesters, whose ranks have typically swelled as days turned to nights.

After the service, Corey Thomas, a 34-year-old St. Louis man, said the large crowd at the church reflected "that people are tired of being treated like dogs. They're tired of being taken advantage of."

The mourners came to show their support because "it could be any one of us," Thomas said.

Angela Pierre, a machine operator who once lived in Ferguson, said she hopes the funeral helps turn a page and eases tensions. Most important, she hopes it provides healing for Brown's family.

"I really wanted to just be here today to pray for the family and pray for peace," said Pierre, 48, who is black. "When all of this dies down, there's still a mother, father and a family who's lost someone. Sometimes a lot of the unrest takes away from that."

Monday also marked the first day back at school for students in the Ferguson-Florissant School District. Classes had been scheduled to begin Aug. 14 but were postponed because of safety concerns.

"We're ready to move forward," said Marcus Baker, a junior at McCluer South-Berkeley High School. "But we're still going to remember him."