

Mother Pleads For Hostage Son's Release

BY DIAA HADID AND JOHN HEILPRIN
 Associated Press

BEIRUT — The mother of a hostage American journalist pleaded for his release Wednesday in a video directed at the Islamic State group, while new images emerged of mass killings, including masked militants shooting kneeling men after the capture of a strategic air base in Syria.

Shirley Sotloff's plea came as a U.N. commission accused the group, which dominates a broad swath of territory spanning the Syria-Iraq border, of committing crimes against humanity and President Barack Obama weighs options for targeting the extremists' stronghold in Syria.

The Islamic State militants have threatened to kill 31-year-old Steven Sotloff unless the U.S. halts its airstrikes against it.

Sotloff, who free-lanced for *Time* and *Foreign Policy* magazines, had last been seen in Syria in August 2013 until he appeared in a video released online last week by the Islamic State group showing the beheading of fellow American journalist, James Foley. Dressed in an orange jumpsuit against the backdrop of an arid Syrian landscape, Sotloff was threatened with death unless the U.S. stopped airstrikes on the group in Iraq.

Addressing the leader of the Islamic State by name, Shirley Sotloff said her son was "an innocent journalist" who shouldn't pay for U.S. government actions in the Middle East over which he has no control.

Appealing directly to Islamic State leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, who describes himself as a caliph, or Islamic leader intending to lead the Muslim world, she implored him to show mercy and follow the example of the prophet Muhammad.

"You, the caliph, can grant amnesty. I ask you, please, to release my child. I ask you to use your authority to spare his life," Shirley Sotloff said on the video, which was first aired on the Al-Arabiya television network. It was widely retweeted by Islamic State supporters later Wednesday with her face blurred because their ultra-conservative interpretation of Islam prohibits showing a woman's face.

At the White House, spokesman Josh Earnest told reporters he did not know whether Obama had seen Shirley Sotloff's video appeal, but he said the administration was "deeply engaged" in trying to gain release of all Americans held hostage in the Middle East.

"She obviously, as is evident from the video, feels desperate about the safety and well-being of her son, and understandably so, and that is why our thoughts and prayers are with Mr. Sotloff's family at this very difficult and trying time," Earnest said.

Meanwhile, new images emerged of the extremists' bloody takeover of an air base in northeastern Syria.

In one photo posted online, masked gunmen were seen shooting seven men kneeling on the ground, some dressed in what appeared to be Syrian military uniforms, after the seizure of the Tabqa air base in the province of Raqqa earlier this week.

The photos underscored how the group uses violence, and images of violence to terrorize its opponents, as it sweeps further into Syria and Iraq, where it has imposed an Islamic state, or caliphate, governed by its harsh interpretation of Islamic law.

Videos uploaded to social media networks also showed the aftermath of the battle, including footage of the charred bodies of Syrian soldiers. One video

showed about 200 captured soldiers being marched through the desert in their underwear to an unknown fate as militants made the sounds of shepherds herding goats or sheep.

The 36 photos and video images corresponded to reporting by The Associated Press of the Islamic State militants' seizure Sunday of the air base, which had been the last government-held outpost in Raqqa, a province now dominated by the jihadi group. Militants also captured the bases' weaponry, including artillery and mounted machine guns.

The images emerged as a U.N. commission accused the group of committing crimes against humanity in Syria. The U.N. had earlier accused the group of similar crimes in Iraq.

"This is a continuation — and a geographic expansion — of the widespread and systematic attack on the civilian population" by the Islamic State group, said the four-member commission chaired by Brazilian diplomat Paulo Sergio Pinheiro.

Pinheiro told reporters one of the most disturbing findings was the existence of large training camps where boys, some as young as 14, are recruited and trained to fight alongside adult Islamic State fighters.

The report, based on 480 interviews and documentary material, cited dozens of public executions in Aleppo and Raqqa during the bloody Syrian civil war that activists say has killed more than 190,000 people since 2011.

The report cited how the group's fighters have beheaded or shot civilians, mostly adult men, accused of violating their harsh interpretation of religious law, as crowds of people, including children, have looked on. The purpose, according to the commission, is "to instill terror among the population, ensuring submission to its authority."

Gaza War Appears To End In Stalemate

TEL AVIV, Israel (AP) — The third Gaza War in six years appears to have ended in another sort of tie, with both Israel and Hamas claiming the upper hand. Their questionable achievements have come at a big price, especially to long-suffering Palestinians in Gaza.

In a sense, Israel got what it wanted: Hamas stopped firing rockets in exchange for mostly vague promises and future talks. But the cost to Israel was huge: Beyond the 70 people killed — all but six of them soldiers — the economy has been set back, the tourism season destroyed, its people rattled for 50 days and its global standing pummeled by images of devastation in Gaza.

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu faces bristling from people who sense that Hamas controlled events and could not have its grip loosened on the Gaza Strip, which it seized by force from the Palestinian Authority in 2007. Around the corner lie international investigations into war crimes allegations.

Hamas is celebrating its success after surviving Israel's far superior firepower. The Islamic militant group's rocket fire emptied a string of Israeli border communities and disrupted Tel Aviv's international airport. Weak a few months ago, it may emerge as more of a player in Palestinian politics, and the plight of Gazans is again atop the world's concerns.

It also paid dearly: 2,143 Palestinians were killed, including nearly 500 children and hundreds of militants. The U.N. estimates the war destroyed or severely damaged 17,200 homes and left 100,000 Palestinians homeless, with considerable swaths of Gaza in rubble. Hamas' rocket arsenal is much depleted and many — if not all — of its attack tunnels against Israel have been destroyed.

Instructor's Shooting Death Stirs Debate

PHOENIX (AP) — The accidental shooting death of a firing-range instructor by a 9-year-old girl with an Uzi has set off a powerful debate over youngsters and guns, with many people wondering what sort of parents would let a child handle a submachine gun.

Instructor Charles Vacca, 39, was standing next to the girl Monday at the Last Stop range in White Hills, Arizona, about 60 miles south of Las Vegas, when she squeezed the trigger. The recoil wrenched the Uzi upward, and Vacca was shot in the head.

Prosecutors say they will not file charges in the case. Gerry Hills, founder of Arizonans for Gun Safety, a group seeking to reduce gun violence, said that it was reckless to let the girl handle such a powerful weapon and that tighter regulations regarding children and guns are needed.

"We have better safety standards for who gets to ride a roller coaster at an amusement park," Hills said. Referring to the girl's parents, Hills said: "I just don't see any reason in the world why you would allow a 9-year-old to put her hands on a Uzi."

Ukraine Rebels Capture Coastal Town

NOVOAZOVSK, Ukraine (AP) — Pushing west in a new offensive along Ukraine's strategic coastline, heavily armed Russian-backed separatist forces captured new territory Wednesday far from their previous battles with government troops.

The bold offensive along a new southeastern front raised the prospect that the separatists are seeking to create a land link between Russia and Crimea, which also would give them control over the entire Azov Sea.

After a third day of heavy shelling that sent many residents fleeing, rebel fighters with dozens of tanks and armored vehicles entered Novoazovsk, a resort town of 40,000 on the Azov Sea, the mayor told The Associated Press.

Novoazovsk lies along the road linking Russia to the Ukrainian port of Mariupol and onto Crimea, the Black Sea peninsula that Russia annexed in March.

The separatist attack appears to have caught government forces off guard, and they were scrambling Wednesday to build up defenses. The offensive also adds to growing evidence that the rebels receive Russian support.

Federal Deficit Declines, Fiscal Outlook Troubled

BY LISA MASCARO
 Tribune Washington Bureau (MCT)

WASHINGTON — The federal deficit continues to decline thanks to budget cuts, slower growth in Medicare costs and increased tax revenue, but the nation's long-term fiscal outlook remains troubled, according to a report Wednesday from the Congressional Budget Office.

At \$506 billion for fiscal 2014, the federal deficit is much smaller than those of recent years and is now 2.9 percent of gross domestic product — down from a high of 10 percent of GDP in 2009 during the Great Recession.

Though economic growth has lagged at an average annualized rate of less than 1 percent for the first half of the calendar year, the CBO said it expects stronger economic activity in the second half will push growth to 1.5 percent for the year. The

unemployment rate is expected to continue to decline, it said.

Despite improvements in the economic outlook after years of fiscal battles between Congress and the White House, the nonpartisan budget office warned that long-term projections remain dim.

The forecast released Wednesday shows a slightly higher budget deficit for the year than was projected in April, as revenue dropped "mostly because of lower than anticipated receipts from corporate income taxes."

The ability of corporations to dodge taxes has become a heated political issue that President Barack Obama has vowed to address this fall.

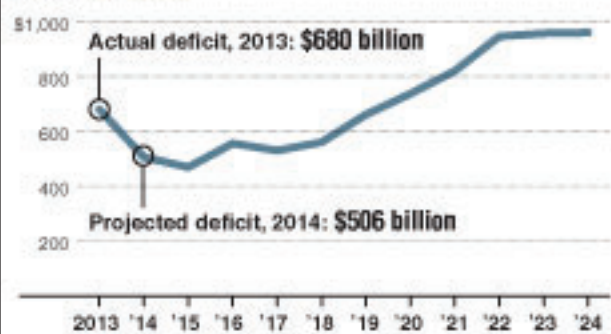
Looking ahead, the budget office said long-term growth will remain below average, 2.2 percent through 2024. Federal spending — largely from a

Deficit set to decline this year

The federal government's budget position will improve this year, but the deficit could grow in the future if there are no substantial changes in spending and taxation, according to a report by the Congressional Budget Office.

Projected federal budget deficit

In billions of dollars



Source: Congressional Budget Office
 Graphic: Tyler Davis

projected 85 percent increase in health care costs — is expected to push deficits back up.

Such a mismatch would

send debt on track to consume 77 percent of GDP in 2024 — more than double the debt load than when President George W. Bush was in office.

U.S. To Consider Spousal Abuse In Immigration Claims

BY ALICIA A. CALDWELL
 Associated Press

WASHINGTON — A government immigration board has determined for the first time that domestic violence victims may be able to qualify for asylum in the United States. The ruling comes in the case of a Guatemalan woman who crossed into the U.S. illegally in 2005 after fleeing her husband.

She said she called local police in Guatemala to report the abuse but was repeatedly told that the authorities would not interfere in her marriage. She argued that the abuse and the lack of police response should make her eligible for asylum.

In the first-of-its-kind ruling Tuesday, the Justice Department's Board of Immigration Appeals agreed, at least in part. In the nine-page decision, the appeals board concluded that the unidentified immigrant met at least one criterion for asylum: as a married Guatemalan woman who couldn't leave her relationship, she was part of a particular social group.

The Homeland Security Department, which prosecutes deportation cases, did not contest the immigrant's argument. The appeals board sent the case back to an immigration judge.

The board sent the case back to an immigration judge for a final ruling.

The ruling by the board that decides appeals from federal immigration courts is significant because it means that the government now recognizes domestic violence victims as a potentially protected class of people seeking refuge in the United States.

The decision establishes a broad and firm foothold for an untold number of women whose asylum claims have been routinely denied in the past.

But proving all the elements of any asylum case can still be difficult. Those seeking protection have to prove they will be

persecuted in their home country because of their race, religion, nationality, political opinion or membership in a particular social group. They also have to prove that their home government is either involved in the persecution or unable or unwilling to stop it.

It wasn't immediately clear how the ruling will impact thousands of pending asylum cases and thousands more that could be filed now that the government has recognized domestic violence victims as a potential class of persecuted people.

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