

A Year Of Strife Hardens Syrian Rebel Brigade

MAARET MISREEN, Syria (AP) — A year ago, a soft-spoken sweet shop owner from this poor Syrian town got together with his little brother and eight friends to declare war on President Bashar Assad. They didn't have enough guns to go around. Their leader, 35-year-old Mustafa Filfileh, had no real military experience and little idea how to face one of the Mideast's strongest armies. He didn't even know how to drive.

They learned fast. On Nov. 17, the brigade called "The Beloved of Allah" braced for its biggest challenge yet, making it clear how far its members had come and how far the war had brought them from their former lives.

Men who once sold real estate, laid bricks, wore suits and treated sick farm animals armed themselves with vests laden with ammunition, hand grenades and pocket-sized copies of the Quran. After a two-month siege, they planned to storm a major military base in one of the larger coordinated attacks of the uprising.

It was late 2012, the year that Syria's uprising outpaced the other Arab Spring revolts to become the longest, deadliest and most brutal, killing more than 40,000 people and chasing more than 1 million from their homes.

China Passes US As Top World Trade Partner

SEOUL, South Korea (AP) — Shin Cheol-soo no longer sees his future in the United States.

The South Korean businessman supplied components to American automakers for a decade. But this year, he uprooted his family from Detroit and moved home to focus on selling to the new economic superpower: China.

In just five years, China has surpassed the United States as a trading partner for much of the world, including U.S. allies such as South Korea and Australia, according to an Associated Press analysis of trade data. As recently as 2006, the U.S. was the larger trading partner for 127 countries, versus just 70 for China. By last year the two had clearly traded places: 124 countries for China, 76 for the U.S.

Bersani Wins Italy Primary To Advance

ROME (AP) — Pier Luigi Bersani, the head of Italy's main center-left Democratic Party, won a runoff primary Sunday to be the main center-left candidate for Italy's 2013 general elections — a vote that polls indicate could well be won by the Democratic Party given the utter disarray of the opposing center-right.

Preliminary results gave Bersani 60.8 percent of the vote compared to Florence Mayor Matteo Renzi's 39.1 percent, with two-thirds of the votes counted.

Even before the results were released, Renzi conceded the victory to Bersani in a Twitter message, writing: "It was the right thing to try, it was beautiful to do it together. Thank you all from the heart."

The primary had been closely watched since the Democratic Party has a significant lead in the polls over former Premier Silvio Berlusconi's center-right People of Freedom party, which has been in chaos following the media mogul's 2011 downfall, a series of corruption scandals within party ranks and Berlusconi's indecision over whether to run for a fourth term.

The 2013 general election — expected in March or April — will decide if Italy continues on the same path to financial health charted by Premier Mario Monti, appointed last year to save Italy from a Greek-style debt crisis. The former European commissioner was named to head a technical government after international markets lost confidence in then-premier Berlusconi's ability to reign in Italy's public debt and push through structural reforms.

Syrian War Planes Hit Damascus Suburbs

BEIRUT (AP) — Syrian warplanes and artillery blasted parts of the capital Damascus and its rebellious suburbs on Sunday, part of what activists described as intense fighting as rebels try to push their way into the center of President Bashar Assad's power base.

In central Syria, a car bomb killed at least 15 people, the official news agency reported.

The fighting over the past few weeks in Damascus is the most serious in the capital since July, when rebels captured several neighborhoods before a swift government counteroffensive swept them out.

The Britain-based activist group Syrian Observatory for Human Rights said fighter jets struck twice in the suburb of Daraya as regime artillery pounded other districts just south of Damascus.

The Syrian air force also launched airstrikes on the northern city of Aleppo, some cities in the northern province of Idlib and the Mediterranean city of Latakia, the Observatory said. The group relies on reports from activists on the ground.

Palestinian Chief Returns Home Triumphantly

RAMALLAH, West Bank (AP) — The Palestinian president returned triumphantly to the West Bank on Sunday, receiving a boisterous welcome from thousands of cheering supporters at a rally celebrating his people's new acceptance to the United Nations.

An Israeli decision to cut off a cash transfer to the financially troubled Palestinian Authority, following an earlier decision to build thousands of new homes in Jewish settlements, failed to put a damper on the celebrations.

But Palestinian officials acknowledged they were undecided on what to do with their newfound status, and were waiting for upcoming Israeli elections and new ideas from President Barack Obama before deciding how to proceed.

Outside the headquarters of President Mahmoud Abbas in the West Bank city of Ramallah, some 5,000 people thronged a square, hoisted Palestinian flags and cheered their leader's return from New York. Large posters of the Palestinian leader, whose popularity had plummeted in recent months, adorned nearby buildings.

"We now have a state," Abbas said to wild applause. "The world has said loudly, 'Yes to the state of Palestine.'"

Carbon Dioxide Emissions Worldwide Up Again

WASHINGTON (AP) — The amount of heat-trapping pollution the world spewed rose again last year by 3 percent. So scientists say it's now unlikely that global warming can be limited to a couple of degrees, which is an international goal.

The overwhelming majority of the increase was from China, the world's biggest carbon dioxide polluter. Of the planet's top 10 polluters, the United States and Germany were the only countries that reduced their carbon dioxide emissions.

Last year, all the world's nations combined pumped nearly 38.2 billion tons of carbon dioxide into the air from the burning of fossil fuels such as coal and oil, according to new international calculations on global emissions published Sunday in the journal Nature Climate Change. That's about a billion tons more than the previous year.

The total amounts to more than 2.4 million pounds (1.1 million kilograms) of carbon dioxide released into the air every second.

Because emissions of the key greenhouse gas have been rising steadily and most carbon stays in the air for a century, it is not just unlikely but "rather optimistic" to think that the world can limit future temperature increases to 2 degrees Celsius (3.6 degrees Fahrenheit), said the study's lead author, Glen Peters at the Center for International Climate and Environmental Research in Oslo, Norway.

Letterman, Hoffman, Zeppelin Honored In D.C.

WASHINGTON (AP) — David Letterman's "stupid human tricks" and Top 10 lists are being vaulted into the ranks of cultural acclaim as the late-night comedian receives this year's Kennedy Center Honors with rock band Led Zeppelin and three other artists.

Stars from New York, Hollywood and the music world joined President Barack Obama at the White House on Sunday night to salute the comedian, the band, and their fellow recipients: Actor Dustin Hoffman, Chicago bluesman Buddy Guy and ballerina Natalia Makarova.

The honors are the nation's highest award for those who influenced American culture through the arts. The recipients will be saluted by fellow performers in a show to be broadcast Dec. 26 on CBS.

Obama elicited laughs from his guests when he described the honorees as "some extraordinary people who have no business being on the same stage together."

Noting that Guy made his first guitar strings using the wire from a window screen, he quipped, "That worked until his parents started wondering how all the mosquitoes were getting in."

The president thanked the members of Led Zeppelin for behaving themselves at the White House given their history of "hotel rooms trashed and mayhem all around."

"It's fitting that we're doing this in a room with windows that are about three inches thick and Secret Service all around," he said to laughter from the diverse group of artists.

Fiscal Cliff

White House Waits On GOP

BY ANNE FLAHERTY
Associated Press

WASHINGTON — Republicans have to stop using "political math" and say how much they are willing to raise tax rates on the wealthiest 2 percent of Americans and then specify the spending cuts they want, Treasury Secretary Tim Geithner said Sunday.

Just four weeks from the proverbial "fiscal cliff," House Speaker John Boehner countered that Republicans have a plan for providing as much as \$800 billion in new government revenue over the next decade and would consider the elimination of tax deductions on high-income earners. But when pressed on "Fox News Sunday" for precise details, the Ohio Republican declined to say.

There are "a lot of options in terms of how to get there," Boehner said.

Both Boehner's and Geithner's latest remarks indicate it could be some time before serious negotiations begin between the White House and Republicans on how to avert economic calamity expected in less than a month when President George W. Bush-era tax cuts expire and automatic, across-the-



Geithner

board spending cuts kick in.

Last week, the White House delivered to Capitol Hill its opening plan: \$1.6 trillion in higher taxes over a decade, hundreds of billions of dollars in new spending, a possible extension of the temporary Social Security payroll tax cut and enhancing the president's power to raise the national debt limit.

In exchange, the president would back \$600 billion in spending cuts, including \$350 billion from Medicare and other health programs. But he also wants \$200 billion in new spending for jobless benefits, public works projects and aid for struggling homeowners. His proposal for raising the ceiling on government borrowing would make it virtually impossible for Congress to block him.

Republicans said they responded in closed-door meetings with laughter and disbelief.

"I was just flabbergasted," Boehner said. "I looked at him (Geithner) and I said, 'You can't be serious.'" The speaker, noting the

short time between the Nov. 6 election and the new year, said time is being lost "with this nonsense."

Boehner described negotiations as going "nowhere, period," and said "there's clearly a chance" the nation will go over the cliff.

Geithner, the administration's point man for negotiations, was slightly more optimistic while saying the ball was in Boehner's court. But the treasury secretary also said he didn't expect a counteroffer right away, as Republicans work to sort out tensions within the party in the wake of bruising national elections that left Democrats in charge of the White House and the Senate.

Boehner acknowledged in his interview, aired Sunday, that he wasn't happy with public remarks by Republican Rep. Tom Cole of Oklahoma, who said he was ready to go along with Obama's plan to renew expiring income tax cuts for the majority of Americans and negotiate the rates on top earners later.

"They're trying to figure out where they go next," Geithner said of Republicans, "and we might need to give them a little time to figure out where they go next."

FATAL ENCOUNTER



ROBERTO KOLTUN/EL NUEVO HERALD/MCT

A bus crashed into an overpass in Miami on Saturday, killing 2 people, and injuring 30 others — some critically. Police said that one man, Serafin Castillo, 86, of Miami, died at the scene. A second man, Francisco Urana, 56, also of Miami, died later at a hospital. The large, white bus was too tall for the 8-foot-6-inch entrance to the arrivals area, said airport spokesman Greg Chin. Buses are supposed to go through the departures area, which has a higher clearance, he said.

A New School Day? Five States To Increase Class Time In Some Schools

BY JOSH LEDERMAN
Associated Press

WASHINGTON — Open your notebooks and sharpen your pencils. School for thousands of public school students is about to get quite a bit longer.

Five states were to announce Monday that they will add at least 300 hours of learning time to the calendar in some schools starting in 2013. Colorado, Connecticut, Massachusetts, New York and Tennessee will take part in the initiative, which is intended to boost student achievement and make U.S. schools more competitive on a global level.

The three-year pilot program will affect almost 20,000 students in 40 schools, with long-term hopes of expanding the program to include additional schools — especially those that serve low-income communities. Schools, working in concert with districts, parents and teachers, will decide whether to make the school day longer, add more days to the school year or both.

A mix of federal, state and district funds will cover the costs of expanded learning time, with the Ford Foundation and the National Center on Time & Learning also chipping in resources. In Massachusetts, the program builds on the state's existing expanded-learning program. In Connecticut, Gov. Dannel Malloy is hailing it as a natural outgrowth of an education reform law the state passed in May that included about \$100 million in new funding, much of it to help the neediest schools.

Spending more time in the classroom, education officials said, will give students access to a more well-rounded curriculum that includes arts and music, individualized help for students who fall behind and opportunities to reinforce critical math and science skills.

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ARNE DUNCAN

struction or students have more time to learn how to play an instrument and write computer code, adding meaningful in-school hours is a critical investment that better prepares children to be successful in the 21st century," Education Secretary Arne Duncan said in a statement.

The project comes as educators across the U.S. struggle to identify the best ways to strengthen a public education system that many fear has fallen behind other nations. Student testing, teacher evaluations, charter schools and voucher programs join longer school days on the list of reforms that have been put forward with varying degrees of success.

The report from the center, which advocates for extending instruction time, cites research suggesting students who spend more hours learning perform better. One such study, from Harvard economist Roland Fryer, argues that of all the factors affecting educational outcomes, two are the best predictors of success: intensive tutoring and adding at least 300 hours to the standard school calendar.

Scams

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to pick up when transactions are higher."

Young stressed that Wells Fargo will never send fraud alerts via email. If the bank were to contact a customer about information such as with suspicious activity concerning an account, it would phone that customer and ask for a specific password. The bank will also never request Social Security numbers or date of birth through electronic communication.

If Wells Fargo customers are asked for such information, Young said they can call the 800 number on the back of their debit/credit cards, report the concern by forwarding the email to reportphish@wellsfargo.com, or by contacting their bank directly.

"Nothing is better than going in to your local branch and working with your local banker," he said.

In addition to email, Schmidt said text messages have recently become a popular form of communication for phishing scammers.

"It's the same thing — 'You have been selected' or 'You have been identified as' — that you would get in your email," she said.

Schmidt said one of the more recent phishing texts that has targeted consumers is a message stating that the person has won a \$1,000 Target gift card — a ploy that has also been used by email scammers in the past.

"If you click on it, it could load something onto your phone," she said. "You might do your banking on your phone. You may have your Social Security information or your credit card information stored on your phone. And it just seeks out all that sort of information."

Schmidt said what makes such scams hard to identify is that not only will the messages use familiar logos and other proprietary information, but also many of them will also seem very timely.

"There's always just enough truth to them that makes you think, 'Oh my gosh, this is true, cause I just bought something here, or I was just at this website, or I was just at my bank,'" she said. "They have just enough elements of truth to make you think it might be true. It's terribly frustrating."

To spot a fake email or text message, the BBB recommends hovering over the links to

check whether the URL leads to the actual business' website or, with a scam, a third-party site. Messages should also be read carefully for signs it might be fake, such as misspellings, poor grammar or generic greetings.

If the message is in fact a phishing scam, the BBB advises people to not click on any link or attachment and to delete the message completely (also deleting them from trash bins or folders). If a link was clicked, an antivirus software's full system scan should be used.

Schmidt added that one of the most important aspects of safeguarding against phishing scams is to always be on the lookout for suspicious activity.

"Almost any unsolicited message that you get from an organization you should consider to be spam," she said. "It's a chronic problem, and people have to always be on their guard."

For more information on phishing and other scams, visit the BBB's regional website at <http://nebraska.bbb.org/scam-source/>.

You can follow Derek Bartos on Twitter at twitter.com/d_bartos