

Fighting, Deaths Surge As Syrian Rebels Push

BEIRUT (AP) — Syria's civil war is closing in on President Bashar Assad's seat of power in Damascus with clashes between government forces and rebels flaring around the city Tuesday, raising fears the capital will become the next major battlefield in the 20-month-old conflict. Numerous reports emerged of at least a dozen people killed near the ancient city and elsewhere, and the regime said nine students and a teacher died from rebel mortar fire on a school. The state news agency originally said 30 people had been killed in the attack.

While many of the mostly poor, Sunni Muslim suburbs ringing Damascus have long been opposition hotbeds, fighting has intensified in the area in recent weeks as rebels press a battle they hope will finish Assad's regime.

"The push to take Damascus is a real one, and intense pressure to take control of the city is part of a major strategic shift by rebel commanders," said Mustafa Alani of the Geneva-based Gulf Research Center. "They have realized that without bringing the fight to Damascus, the regime will not collapse."

The increased pressure has raised worries that he or his forces will resort to desperate measures, perhaps striking neighbors Turkey or Israel, or using chemical weapons.

Girl With Leukemia Missing From Hospital

PHOENIX (AP) — Authorities in Arizona are looking for an 11-year-old girl with leukemia who is at risk of a deadly infection after her parents inexplicably took her out of a Phoenix hospital last week.

The girl, Emily, had been receiving chemotherapy at Phoenix Children's Hospital for about a month, Phoenix police Sgt. Steve Martos said Monday.

An infection forced doctors to amputate her right arm. The girl's mother removed a tube that delivered medication to the girl's heart, changed her clothes, and walked her out of the hospital Wednesday night.

"If she contracts an infection, it really could just be a matter of days that could result in the young girl's death," Martos said. "It's pretty serious."

Authorities had been stymied by health privacy laws that kept them from releasing the parents' names, but police said Monday that U.S. Border Patrol stopped the girl's father, Luis Bracamontes, 46, as he crossed into Arizona from Mexico over the weekend.

Palestinian War Crimes Case Faces Obstacles

JERUSALEM (AP) — Days after winning upgraded status at the United Nations, the Palestinians are threatening to join the world's first permanent war crimes court and pursue charges against the Israelis.

Although the Palestinians say that any decision is still a long ways off, the mere threat has unnerved Israel. But pressing a case may not be so simple and could potentially leave the Palestinians themselves vulnerable to prosecution.

Since winning recognition as a nonmember observer state in the United Nations General Assembly last week, the Palestinians believe they now qualify for membership in the International Criminal Court.

In opposing the Palestinian bid at the U.N., Israel repeatedly cited Palestinian threats to turn to the ICC to prosecute Israeli officials for a variety of alleged crimes, ranging from actions by the Israeli military to Israel's construction of Jewish settlements on occupied land.

While Israel does not recognize the court's jurisdiction and believes its actions do not violate international law, officials are concerned legal action that could embarrass Israel, make it difficult for Israeli officials to travel overseas or portray the country as a pariah state. A war crimes conviction can include fines and maximum penalties of life in prison.

Senate Passes \$631 Billion Defense Bill

WASHINGTON (AP) — The Senate has voted for a sweeping, \$631 billion defense bill that calls for accelerating the withdrawal of U.S. forces from Afghanistan and tightens sanctions on Iran.

The vote was 98-0. The legislation would authorize money for weapons, aircraft and ships and provide a 1.7 percent pay raise for military personnel.

After a decade of increasing Pentagon budgets, the vote came against the backdrop of significant reductions in projected military spending and the threat of deeper cuts from the so-called fiscal cliff of automatic reductions.

The Obama administration has threatened to veto the measure, citing limits on the president's authority to handle terror suspects.

The Senate must reconcile its version with the legislation the House passed in May. Lawmakers have just a few weeks to produce a final bill.

New Judge Set For Fort Hood Shooting Case

FORT HOOD, Texas (AP) — The Army's highest legal branch appointed a new judge to preside over the case of the Fort Hood shooting suspect, indicating the court-martial is on track to move forward after lengthy delays.

U.S. Army Col. Tara Osborn was named Tuesday to head the case of Maj. Nidal Hasan, who faces the death penalty if convicted in the 2009 shootings that killed 13 and wounded more than two dozen on the Texas Army post.

The U.S. Court of Appeals for the Armed Forces on Monday ousted the previous judge, Col. Gregory Gross, saying he appeared biased against Hasan. The court also tossed out Gross' order to have Hasan's beard forcibly shaved before his court-martial, though it didn't rule on whether the order violated his religious rights as he claimed.

While in custody this spring, Hasan started growing a beard that he says is an expression of his Islamic faith. Gross had sided with prosecutors who say the beard violates Army grooming standards and could confuse witnesses.

The ruling Monday by the military's highest court said the command, not a judge, is responsible for enforcing grooming standards, which means another judge isn't likely to order Hasan to shave, some military law experts said.

Suspect Questioned In NYC Subway Death

NEW YORK (AP) — New York City police are questioning a suspect in the death of a subway rider who was shoved onto the tracks.

New York Police Department spokesman Paul Browne says investigators recovered security video showing a man fitting the description of the assailant working with street vendors near Rockefeller Center.

Police went there Tuesday and took him into custody. Ki-Suck Han of Queens died shortly after being hit by a train Monday at the Times Square subway station.

Police say he tried to climb a few feet to safety, but got trapped between the train and the platform's edge.

Netflix Wins Rights To Show Disney Movies

SAN FRANCISCO (AP) — Netflix's video subscription service has trumped pay-TV channels and grabbed the rights to show Disney movies shortly after they finish their runs in theaters.

The multiyear licensing agreement announced Tuesday represents a breakthrough for Netflix as it tries to add more recent movies to a popular service that streams video over high-speed Internet connections.

Netflix will have exclusive U.S. rights to offer the first-run movies through its streaming service during the period normally reserved for premium TV network such as HBO, Starz and Showtime. That period starts about seven months after movies leave theaters. The exclusivity does not extend to DVDs, a service Netflix is trying to phase out.

Investors applauded Netflix's coup, lifting the company's stock by \$8.86, or nearly 12 percent, to \$84.86 in afternoon trading.

It's the first time that one of Hollywood's major studios has sold the coveted rights to Netflix Inc. instead of a premium TV network. DreamWorks Animation SKG Inc. licensed the pay-TV rights to its movies to Netflix last year under a deal that begins in 2013, but those movies don't yield the same box-office appeal as Disney, whose stable includes Pixar Animation and Marvel.

'World's Oldest Person' Dies In Georgia

MONROE, Ga. (AP) — The woman who was listed as the world's oldest person has died in a Georgia nursing home at age 116.

Besse Cooper died peacefully Tuesday afternoon in Monroe, according to her son Sidney Cooper. Monroe is about 45 miles east of Atlanta.

Cooper said his mother had been ill over the weekend with a stomach virus, then felt better on Monday. On Tuesday he said she had her hair set and watched a Christmas video, but later had trouble breathing. He said she was put on oxygen in her room and died there about 2 p.m.

She was declared the world's oldest person in January. In May, Guinness World Records learned that Maria Gomes Valentin of Brazil was 48 days older. Valentin died June 21.



President Barack Obama meets with a bipartisan delegation of governors in Washington on Tuesday to discuss the actions needed to keep our economy growing and find a balanced approach to reduce our deficit. Jack Markell (D-Dele.) (left), and Mary Fallin (R-Okla.) (right) attended the meeting.

Behind Hot Rhetoric, Is A Deal Brewing?

BY JIM KUHNHENN AND ANDREW TAYLOR
 Associated Press

WASHINGTON — Bluster and hot rhetoric aside, the White House and House Republicans have identified areas of significant overlap that could form the basis for a final agreement after "fiscal cliff" posturing gives way to hard bargaining.

Both sides now concede that tax revenue and reductions in entitlement spending are essential elements of any deal. If the talks succeed, it probably will be because House Speaker John Boehner yields on raising tax rates for top earners and the White House bends on how to reduce spending on Medicare and accepts some changes in Social Security.

The White House and Boehner kept up the ridicule of each other's negotiating stances on Tuesday. But beneath the tough words were the possible makings of a deal that could borrow heavily from a near-bargain last year during debt-limit negotiations.

Then, Obama was willing to reduce cost-of-living increases for Social Security beneficiaries and increase the eligibility age for Medicare, as Boehner and other top Republicans have demanded. On Tuesday, Obama did not shut the door on Republican ideas on such entitlement programs.

"I'm prepared to make some tough decisions on some of these issues," Obama said, "but I can't ask folks who are, you know, middle class seniors who are on Medicare, young people who are trying to get student loans to go to college, I can't ask them to sacrifice and not ask anything of higher income folks."

"I'm happy to entertain other ideas that the Republicans may present," he added in an interview with Bloomberg Television.

At the core, the negotiations center on three key points: whether tax rates for upper income taxpayers should go up, how deeply to cut spending on entitlements such as Medicare and how to deal with raising the government's borrowing limit early next year.



Boehner

White House spokesman Jay Carney dismissed Boehner's proposals as "magic beans and fairy dust."

Boehner countered: "If the president really wants to avoid sending the economy over the fiscal cliff, he has done nothing to demonstrate it."

Tax rates have emerged as one of the most intractable issues, with Obama insisting the rates on the top 2 percent of earners must go up and Boehner standing steadfast that they must not.

Boehner, instead, has proposed raising \$800 billion through unspecified loophole closings and limits on tax deductions.

On Tuesday, the president said he would consider lowering rates for the top 2 percent of earners — next year, not now — as part of a broader tax overhaul effort that would close loopholes, limit deductions and find other sources of government revenue. "It's possible that we may be able to lower rates by broadening the base at that point," Obama said.

On Medicare and Social Security, the Republican proposals would do relatively little to curb the deficit over the next decade, but the impact would grow over the longer term.

Raising the Medicare retirement age from 65 to 67, for instance, would wring \$148 billion from the program over 10 years, according to a Congressional Budget Office estimate last year, about one-fourth of the savings House Republicans hope to claim from federal health programs.

Another idea that gained currency during the Obama-Boehner talks last year would change the annual inflation measure used for Social Security cost-of-living increases and the indexation of tax brackets for inflation.

Many economists and government budget specialists believe the system is a more accurate measure of inflation because it takes into account changes in purchasing behavior

GOP Removes Four From Plum House Committees

WASHINGTON (AP) — House Speaker John Boehner's decision to take plum committee assignments away from four conservative Republican lawmakers after they bucked party leaders on key votes isn't going over well with advocacy groups that viewed them as role models.

Reps. Tim Huelskamp of Kansas and Justin Amash of Michigan will lose their seats on the House Budget Committee chaired by Rep. Paul Ryan next year. And Reps. Walter Jones of North Carolina and David Schweikert of Arizona are losing their seats on the House Financial Services Committee.

The move is underscoring a divide in the Republican Party between tea party-supported conservatives and the House GOP leadership.

"This is a clear attempt on the part of Republican leadership to punish those in Washington who vote the way they promised their constituents they would — on principle — instead of mindlessly rubber-stamping trillion dollar deficits and the bankrupting of America," said Matt Kibbe, president of the tea party group FreedomWorks.

Michael Steel, a spokesman for Boehner, would only say Tuesday that the party's steering committee chaired by the speaker made the decision "based on a range of factors."

Egypt

100,000 Protest At Presidential Palace

CAIRO (AP) — More than 100,000 Egyptians protested outside the presidential palace in Cairo on Tuesday, fueling tensions over Islamist leader Mohammed Morsi's seizure of nearly unrestricted powers and the adoption by his allies of a controversial draft constitution.

The outpouring of anger across the Egyptian capital, the Mediterranean port of Alexandria and a string of other cities pointed to a prolonged standoff between the president and a newly united opposition.

Morsi's opponents, long fractured by bickering and competing

egos, have been re-energized since he announced decrees last month that place him above oversight of any kind, including by the courts, and provide immunity to two key bodies dominated by his allies: The 100-member panel drafting the constitution and parliament's upper chamber.

The decrees have led to charges that Morsi's powers turned him into a "new pharaoh."

The large turnout in Tuesday's protests — dubbed "The Last Warning" by organizers — signaled sustained momentum for the opposition, which brought out at

least 200,000 protesters to Cairo's Tahrir Square a week ago and a comparable number on Friday to demand that Morsi rescind the decrees.

The huge scale of the protests have dealt a blow to the legitimacy of the new constitution, which Morsi's opponents contend allows religious authorities too much influence over legislation, threatens to restrict freedom of expression and opens the door to Islamist control over day-to-day life.

What the revived opposition has yet to make clear is what it will do next: campaign for a "no" vote on the

draft constitution in a nationwide referendum set for Dec. 15, or call on Egyptians to boycott the vote.

Already, the country's powerful judges have said they will not take on their customary role of overseeing the vote, thus robbing it of much of its legitimacy.

Morsi was in the presidential palace conducting business as usual as the protesters gathered outside.

He left for home through a back door as the crowds continued to swell, according to a presidential official who spoke on condition of anonymity because he was not authorized to speak to the media.

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