

Afghan's Karzai Accepts Invitation For Talks

KABUL (AP) — President Hamid Karzai said Thursday he will meet President Barack Obama in Washington next month to discuss a postwar U.S. role in his country, whose fragile security was highlighted hours earlier by a suicide bombing that killed one U.S. troop and two Afghan civilians.

At a news conference with visiting Defense Secretary Leon Panetta, Karzai said he and Obama will discuss how many U.S. troops will remain after the Western combat mission ends in December 2014. He said he understands that immunity from Afghan laws for those remaining Americans is of "immense importance" to Washington, but he added that he has his own priorities in negotiating a postwar U.S. role.

"Give us a good army, a good air force and a capability to project Afghan interests in the region," Karzai said, and he would be ready to argue "with ease and with reason" that his country should grant immunity to U.S. troops.

Obama has said the U.S. will not abandon Afghanistan and risk that it might revert to the al-Qaida haven it became in the 1990s after the Taliban came to power. Nor has he indicated what size and scope of post-2014 military mission he thinks is necessary and affordable.

The Taliban are a small but resilient force, even after 11 years of fighting a vastly larger U.S.-led international force. They managed to send a dramatic reminder Thursday, claiming credit for the suicide bombing that killed three and wounded 17 near an entrance to Kandahar Air Field, the largest Western base in southern Afghanistan. Panetta and his traveling party had left the air field about two hours before the attack.

Experts: N. Korea Years From Reliable Missiles

SEOUL, South Korea (AP) — After 14 years of painstaking labor, North Korea finally has a rocket that can put a satellite in orbit. But that doesn't mean the reclusive country is close to having an intercontinental ballistic missile.

Experts say Pyongyang is years from even having a shot at developing reliable missiles that could bombard the American mainland and other distant targets, though it did gain attention and the outrage of world leaders Wednesday with its first successful launch of a three-stage, long-range rocket.

A missile program is built on decades of systematic, intricate testing, something extremely difficult for economically struggling Pyongyang, which faces guaranteed sanctions and world disapproval each time it stages an expensive launch. North Korea will need larger and more dependable missiles, and more advanced nuclear weapons, to threaten U.S. shores, though it already poses a threat to its neighbors.

"One success indicates progress, but not victory, and there is a huge gap between being able to make a system work once and having a system that is reliable enough to be militarily useful," said Brian Weeden, a former U.S. Air Force Space Command officer and a technical adviser to the Secure World Foundation, a think tank on space policy.

Applications For U.S. Unemployment Aid Drop

WASHINGTON (AP) — The number of Americans seeking unemployment benefits fell sharply for a fourth straight week, a sign that the job market may be improving.

The Labor Department said Thursday that weekly applications for unemployment benefits fell 29,000 last week to a seasonally adjusted 343,000, the lowest in two months. It is the second-lowest total this year.

Applications are a proxy for layoffs, so the drop indicates that companies are cutting fewer jobs. But employers also need to step up hiring to rapidly push down the unemployment rate.

Applications spiked five weeks ago because of Superstorm Sandy. The storm's impact has now faded. The four-week average, a less volatile measure, fell 27,000 to 381,500. Before the storm, applications had fluctuated between 360,000 and 390,000 this year.

Russia Prepares For Fall Of Syrian Regime

BY ELIZABETH A. KENNEDY
Associated Press

BEIRUT — Syria's most powerful ally and protector, Russia, began positioning itself Thursday for the fall of President Bashar Assad, saying for the first time that rebels might overthrow him and preparing to evacuate thousands of Russian citizens from the country.

The head of NATO echoed the Russian assessment, saying the Syrian government is near collapse following a nearly two-year conflict that has killed more than 40,000 people and threatened to ignite the Middle East. Assad appears to be running out of options, with insurgents at the gates of the capital and the country fracturing under the weight of a devastating civil war.

"An opposition victory can't be excluded, unfortunately, but it's necessary to look at the facts: There is a trend for the government to progressively lose control over an increasing part of the territory," Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Mikhail Bogdanov, Moscow's Middle East envoy, said during hearings at a Kremlin advisory body.

Fleeing war

Syrian refugees registered or awaiting registration with the U.N. totaled more than 513,000 as of Dec. 11; where refugees are:

Lebanon	155,873
Jordan	144,226
Turkey	136,810
Iraq	65,104
Northern Africa	11,740

NOTE: The Syrian Red Crescent says approximately 2.5 million Syrians are internally displaced.

Source: United Nations High Commission on Refugees, Al Arabiya
Graphic: Judy Treible © 2012 MCT

Still, Bogdanov gave no immediate signal that Russia would change its pro-Syria stance at the U.N. Security Council, where Moscow has shielded Damascus from world sanctions.

Russia's acknowledgment that Assad could lose the fight is an embarrassing blow to the regime, which describes the rebels as terrorists sent from abroad with no popular support.

But the rebels have made significant gains in recent weeks, seizing large swaths of territory in the north and expanding their control on the outskirts of the capital, pushing the fight closer to Assad's seat of power.

The opposition still faces enormous obstacles, however, including the fact that some of its greatest battlefield successes are by extremist groups the West does not want to see running Syria — something that could hamper international support.

On Wednesday, the U.S., Europe and their allies recognized the newly reorganized opposition leadership, giving it a stamp of credibility even though it remains to be seen if the new bloc

holds much sway with the fighters on the ground.

At the same time, the regime has come under fresh condemnation as Western officials raise concerns that Assad might use chemical weapons against rebels in an act of desperation. The U.S. and NATO also say Assad's forces have fired Scud missiles at rebel areas.

"We can't confirm details of the missiles, but some of the information indicates they were Scud-type missiles," NATO Secretary-General Anders Fogh Rasmussen said Thursday in Brussels. "In general, I think the regime in Damascus is approaching collapse. I think now it's only a question of time."

Syria denied the Scud allegations. The government also has been careful not to confirm it has chemical weapons, while insisting it would never use such weapons against its own people. Syria is believed to have a formidable arsenal of chemical weapons, including sarin and mustard gas, although the exact dimensions are not known.

Egypt Vote Means Fateful Choice For Nation

BY HAMZA HENDAWI
Associated Press

CAIRO — Two days before a constitutional referendum it considered boycotting, Egypt's secular opposition finally launched its "no" campaign Thursday with newspaper and TV ads detailing the argument against the charter drafted by Islamist supporters of President Mohammed Morsi.

The Morsi camp has a simpler message: A "Yes" to the constitution is a yes to Islam.

The deadly violence and harsh divisions of recent weeks — combined with the inability of most Egyptians to even comprehend the densely written 63-page document — have turned the vote into a stark choice on whether the largest Arab nation takes a serious step toward theocratic rule.

"This constitution is supposed to protect the rights of the minorities, but it is written by the majority for the majority," said Haitham Sherdi, a young opposition supporter from Cairo.

"This constitution is supposed to protect the rights of the minorities, but it is written by the majority for the majority. If it passes, it will be used to crush the minority until they vanish."

HAITHAM SHERDI

"If it passes, it will be used to crush the minority until they vanish," he added, referring to Egypt's Christian community.

Morsi's Muslim Brotherhood and other Islamists have been plastering posters across much of the country urging Egyptians to vote "yes to protecting (Islamic) Sharia (laws)."

The opposition's campaign on TV, in newspapers and in flyers is focused on the slogan "A constitution to divide Egypt." Activists also took to the streets with loudspeakers atop pickup trucks touring Cairo and other cities.

The opposition campaign began a day after the National Salvation Front — an umbrella group of opposition parties — announced it was calling on supporters to vote "no" rather than boycott the referendum. The delay reflected divisions within the alliance.

Reform leader and Nobel Peace Prize laureate Mohamed ElBaradei, who was among those initially favoring a boycott, made an emotional appeal to Morsi on Thursday to postpone the vote, warning of "the specter of civil war." He called on his supporters to vote "no" if the referendum goes ahead as scheduled.

Jehad el-Haddad, a spokesman for the Brotherhood's Freedom and Justice party, said it will accept the referendum result regardless of the outcome, but added: "We want to have a constitution in

place because it's a pillar of a functioning state. The fact that it is lacking encourages a lot of people to resort to undemocratic means."

In many ways, the pros and cons of the draft constitution have been overshadowed by the worst crisis to hit Egypt since the overthrow nearly two years ago of Hosni Mubarak's authoritarian regime.

With killings and mass street protests defining the past three weeks, newspaper and TV commentators have warned of a country moving toward civil strife and a schism that may not be bridged.

There are also fears that Egypt's already ailing economy could hit new lows after the Morsi government delayed a \$4.8 billion standby loan from the International Monetary Fund. While the money is nowhere near enough to tackle the country's woes, the agreement with the IMF on restructuring and reforming the economy was desperately needed to convince other donors and investors to return to Egypt.



All I Want For Christmas...

What would you like from Santa? Here's what some of our local youngsters have in mind...

Dear Santa,
Where were you born at? I hope you bring me a bright blue iPad for Christmas. Blue is my favorite color! I will need a charger to charge it in the night and a soft cover around it in case I drop it. If you come, I will leave you cookies and milk.
Thank you for the toys,
Hunter H.

Dear Santa,
How many elves do you have? I typed in elf books on my iPad. I am wishing for a remote control helicopter. You can put it under the tree upstairs or downstairs. I am drawing a picture of you. I will leave it under the tree downstairs.
Bye Santa,
Kael G.

Hi Santa,
Are the elves making toys now? I have been good this year for my mom and dad. I hope you bring me a Skylanders game. You can come down the fireplace. I will put cookies and milk on the counter for you.
Thank you,
Tommy H.

Hi Santa,
Are your elves busy making toys? I would like a puppy that can walk by itself for Christmas. Can you bring it a food and water dish? You can put it in my stocking. Have a safe trip!
Your friend,
Ava J.

Dear Santa,
What are your elves doing? I hope they are making me an iPad. You can come down the fireplace if my brother doesn't turn it on. I will leave you milk and cookies and carrots for the reindeer.

Thank you,
Olivia K.

Hi Santa,
Are your elves okay? I have been good this year. Can you bring me a little people set of the whole North Pole? If you come, I will leave you a picture with your milk and cookies.
Thank you,
Isabella K.

Dear Santa,
How are you? I am good. Can you bring me bubble gum, Moon Dough, Play Dough and Willy? You can leave them under the Christmas tree. I hope you come! I will leave you cookies and milk.
Bye Santa,
Patrick K.

Dear Santa,
What is it like living at the North Pole? I hope you bring me a new trampoline. You can put it right by the couch. I will put out milk and cookies for you. Do you like M&M and chocolate?
Happy Christmas,
Rylee R.

Hi Santa,
I love you! I am wishing for a bracelet set, high heel boots and an outfit with tights. My brother needs boots and a tractor set. My other brother needs a pickup set. Will you go down the chimney? I will look under the tree.
Goodbye,
Hailey S.

Hi Santa,
How have you been? I have been very good. I hope you can bring me a Leap Pad. You can put it under the Christmas tree. I will leave you a note on the table.
Goodbye,
Cooper S.

Hello Santa,
How old are you? I hope I get a piggy bank that I can paint. Can you bring me some Santa books and crayons too? If you come, my mom and I will make you M&M cookies.
I love you,
Taylor T.

Hi Santa,
How many kids visit you? Can you bring me a Dora house for Christmas? You can put it downstairs by the Christmas tree while I am sleeping. I will leave you cookies on the table.
I love you Santa and Mrs. Claus,
Alyssa U.

Hi Santa,
How many reindeer do you have? My brother and sister and I put ornaments on the tree. I hope you bring me a Batman 2 game for the Wii. You can come down the chimney. I will write you a note and put it in my mailbox.
Your friend,
Jackson W.

Hi Santa,
How is Mrs. Claus? I hope you bring me a colorful monkey stuffed animal. I like yellow, pink and orange. I will leave you sugar cookies on the table by the Christmas tree.
I love you Santa,
Jett Y.

Dear Santa,
How have your reindeer been? I am excited for Christmas. Can you bring me an easy bake oven, a Barbie and a book? Is it cold in the North Pole?
Love,
Jazlyn H.

Dear Santa,
I want a Nintendo DS, a remote control 4-wheel drive tractor and toy animals.
Santa I love you! I also love your Rudolph.
Love,
Justin S.

Dear Santa,
I want a DS, Madagascar movie and a game with a Vikings football field. I hope you lost some weight Santa. I hope you fly safe to houses.
Love,
Trey S.

Dear Santa,
I want Squishy Baff and some jets. How do you get to my house? How are the reindeer doing? Ho, Ho, Ho!
Love,
Ryker F

Dear Santa,
How do you make your reindeer fly? How long does it take to get to the North Pole? I want an easy bake oven and a monster truck. I have been a good boy.
Love,
Nathan B.

Dear Santa,
I want a cross with Jesus on it, toy tools and a stuffed animal turkey. How did you become a saint? How do the reindeer fly?
Love,
Connor P

Dear Santa,
I like you cause you give me toys. I like toys. Toys are fun. I would like Doc McStuffins tools, a Kindle and an easy bake oven. Bye, Bye! I hope you have a wonderful Christmas!
Love,
Paisley H.

Dear Santa,
I want a Legion Vulcan ship, a jet I star fighter and a Yoda. How are the reindeer? How are the elves? How do the elves make toys?

Ho, Ho, Ho!
Love,
Cedric E.

Dear Santa,
I want a Wii and a light saver. How do reindeer fly? How did you get to be Santa? I hope you have a wonderful Christmas. Bye, Bye!
Love,
Mark K.

Dear Santa,
I want a Doctor Dreadful Zombie lab, a transformer and a Captain America shield. How is Rudolph's shiny nose? How are you doing? Have a safe trip.
Love,
Micah M.

Dear Santa,
How do you make your reindeer fly? Can you give me a toy horse and a toy bunny that can hop all by itself? Does Mrs. Claus ever get to ride in your sleigh? Drive safe!
Love,
Rain L.

Dear Santa,
Did you lose weight? Can you bring me Sponge Bob Legos and an easy bake oven? I will leave you milk and cookies.
Love,
Madison G.

Dear Santa,
How is Mrs. Claus doing? What I really want for Christmas is a Mermaid Barbie and an I-pod. How do your reindeer fly?
Love,
Eleanor J.

Dear Santa,
I want a remote control helicopter, a Lego airplane and a Lego fire truck. I love you Santa because you bring us lots of stuff.
Love,
Trayton O.

Dear Santa,
What I want for Christmas is a cake pop maker, an Orbeez soothing spa and an Orbeez

ladybug. Santa, how do you make all the presents? How do your reindeer fly?
Love,
Emma H.

Dear Santa,
I want an Rabies bug and an easy bake oven. Santa I am going to be nice. I always love God. Stay warm.
Love,
Gina N.

Dear Santa,
How do you make your deer fly? What does Mrs. Claus do when it is Christmas? I want a remote control car, a real Vikings football and a remote control monster truck. I am going to leave you cookies and milk.
Love,
David D.

Hi there Santa,
I was wondering if I could get some coloring books and colors because I love to color. And some drawing paper, I love to do that too.

Thank you,
Love
Taylor R

Hi Santa,
I would like some push toys and also some toys with buttons. Also, maybe some that makes noise or has music. I really love to dance.
Thank you,
Love,
Jayden V.

I would like alot of toys that are either Dora and Boots, or else Hello Kitty, I really like them. And could you bring something nice for my mom and dad? They deserve it.
Thank you,
Love,
Laura Z.