

Ferry Passengers Recount Chaos

BARI, Italy (AP) — There were no fire alarms at first, no knocks on the door from the crew, just thick, acrid smoke filling cabins and waking passengers on the overnight ferry from Greece to Italy.

In the chaos that followed, passengers said, they received virtually no instructions from the crew. The principle of women and children first went out the window, and passengers started pushing and shoving and came to blows over seats in the lifeboats and helicopter baskets.

"Everyone there was trampling on each other to get onto the helicopter," Greek truck driver Christos Perlis told The Associated Press by telephone from one of the rescue vessels summoned after the Italian-flagged ferry caught fire in the Adriatic Sea off Albania early Sunday.

"The jungle law prevailed," said another Greek passenger, Irene Varsioti. "There was no queue or order. No respect was shown for children."

Italian and Greek helicopter rescue crews Monday evacuated the last of the known survivors aboard the crippled, fire-blackened vessel, bringing the number rescued to 427.

NYC Mayor Gets Boos At Graduation

NEW YORK (AP) — New York City Mayor Bill de Blasio received some boos and heckles Monday at a police graduation ceremony, the latest chapter in his tension-filled relationship with the nation's largest police force.

The rift between de Blasio and much of the rank and file has grown considerably in recent weeks, and the leaders of the police union have blamed the mayor for fostering an anti-NYPD atmosphere they believe contributed to the ambush slayings of two officers earlier this month.

Twice in a week — including at the funeral for one of the officers — some officers turned their backs to de Blasio, adding an air of acrimony to the normally celebratory graduation ceremonies, which were held Monday morning at Madison Square Garden.

The 884 new police officers sat stoically in their seats when de Blasio was introduced to speak and many in the audience tepidly cheered. But boos could be heard from some in the crowd in the seats reserved for cadets' family and friends.

About a dozen or so people in the stands stood with their backs turned to de Blasio, emulating the searing pose of disrespect that hundreds of officers struck at Officer Rafael Ramos' funeral on Saturday. Some appeared to be in uniform but it was unclear if they were members of the New York Police Department.

President Warns Republicans Of Veto

HONOLULU (AP) — Bracing to do business with a Congress run solely by Republicans, President Barack Obama is serving notice he has no qualms about vetoing legislation he dislikes.

This would be a significant change in style for Obama, come January when the new Congress will be seated with the GOP not only in command in the House but also the Senate as well.

He's wielded the veto pen through his first nearly six years very sparingly. Since taking office in 2009, Obama has only vetoed legislation twice, both in fairly minor circumstances.

"I haven't used the veto pen very often since I've been in office," Obama said in an NPR interview airing Monday. "Now, I suspect, there are going to be some times where I've got to pull that pen out."

He added: "I'm going to defend gains that we've made in health care. I'm going to defend gains that we've made on environment and clean air and clean water."

Cuba-US Detente Changes The Debate

HAVANA (AP) — President Barack Obama told the world this month that engaging Cuba is the best way to strengthen people pushing for greater freedom on the island.

Less than two weeks after it was announced, the U.S.-Cuba detente is upending the civil society Obama hopes to strengthen. The prospect of engagement between the two Cold War antagonists seems to be undercutting the island's hard-line dissidents while boosting more moderate reformers who want to push President Raul Castro gradually toward granting citizens more liberties.

The traditional dissidents say they feel betrayed by a new U.S. policy of negotiation with a government that Washington and the U.S.-backed opponents worked for decades to undermine. They say they fear that detente serves the Castro administration's aspiration of following China and Vietnam by improving the economy without conceding citizens significantly greater freedoms.

"I think President Obama made a mistake," said Berta Soler, head of the Ladies in White, Cuba's best-known dissident group. "Cuba won't change while the Castros are around. There will be positive changes for the government of Cuba, but not for the Cuban people."

Moderates say the new balance of power inside the small, fractious world of Cuba's opposition will produce political change by offering Castro a type of engagement that's harder to reject: a negotiated, more controlled opening meant to avoid the sort of disorderly transition that scarred the former Soviet Union and, more recently, the countries of the Arab Spring.

Health Law Fines To Be Collected In '15

WASHINGTON (AP) — Being uninsured in America will cost you more in 2015.

It's the first year all taxpayers have to report to the Internal Revenue Service whether they had health insurance for the previous year, as required under President Barack Obama's law. Those who were uninsured face fines, unless they qualify for one of about 30 exemptions, most of which involve financial hardships.

Dayna Dayson of Phoenix estimates that she'll have to pay the taxman \$290 when she files her federal return. Dayson, who's in her early 30s, works in marketing and doesn't have a lot left over each month after housing, transportation and other fixed costs. She'd like health insurance but she couldn't afford it in 2014, as required by the law.

"It's touted as this amazing thing, but right now, for me, it doesn't fit into my budget," she said.

Ryan Moon of Des Moines, Iowa, graduated from college in 2013 with a bachelor's in political science, and is still hunting for a permanent job with benefits. He expects to pay a fine of \$95. A supporter of the health care law, he feels conflicted about its insurance mandate and fines.

Egypt: Journalists' Fate Still Uncertain

CAIRO (AP) — For a year, three Al-Jazeera English journalists have been locked up in Egypt on terrorism-related charges widely viewed as trumped up for political reasons.

Now, a possible thaw in tensions between Egypt, and Qatar—where Al-Jazeera is based and is funded—has raised a glimmer of hope that the three journalists may be able to resume their lives. A retrial, deportation or a pardon are all possibilities, but the lack of certainty prolongs the torment of the defendants, their families and other journalists.

"It is a very tough experience, not only on him but on his family," said Marwa Omara, the fiancée of Mohammed Fahmy, the Canadian-Egyptian journalist who was Al-Jazeera English's acting Cairo bureau chief.

Fahmy and Australian journalist Peter Grete were sentenced to seven years in prison in a trial that ended in June on charges of assisting the Muslim Brotherhood in a plot to destabilize Egypt. The team's Egyptian producer, Baher Mohammed, got 10 years — seven on the same charges and three more because he was found with a spent bullet casing he picked up as a souvenir, considered possession of ammunition.

Egypt's Court of Cassation begins hearing their appeal on Thursday. It takes place as Egypt and Qatar appear to be moving to resolve their bitter rivalry. The tension followed the military's ouster of Islamist President Mohammed Morsi in July 2013, and Qatar's support of the Brotherhood and his Islamist supporters.

Search Area Expanded In Hunt For AirAsia Plane



DONAL HUSNI/NURPHOTO/ZUMA PRESS/TNS
The Indonesian Air Force sent their Hercules Air Plane to find missing Air Asia QZ8501 on Strait Karimata-Sumatera Monday, but so far have found nothing.

BY TRISNADI MARIAN AND MARGIE MASON
Associated Press

SURABAYA, Indonesia — More planes will be in the air and more ships on the sea Tuesday hunting for AirAsia Flight 8501 in a widening search off Indonesia that has dragged into a third day without any solid leads.

At least 30 ships, 15 aircraft and seven helicopters were looking for the jet carrying 162 people, said Indonesia's Search and Rescue Agency chief Henry Bambang Soelistyo. Most of the craft were Indonesian but Singapore, Malaysia and Australia contributed to the effort. Aircraft from Thailand planned to join Tuesday's search.

He said the search area would be expanded to land areas, with four military helicopters dispatched just after sunrise near Pangkalan Bun on the western part of Borneo island and to smaller islands of Bangka and Belitung.

"Until now, we have not yet found any signal or indication of the plane's whereabouts," Soelistyo told The Associated Press, adding fishermen from Belitung island were also helping.

The U.S. Navy is also joining the search. It said in a statement that the USS Sampson, a destroyer, which was already on an independent deployment in the Western Pacific, and will arrive in the area later Tuesday. China announced that a navy frigate already on patrol in the South China Sea and aircraft to help the search.

The longer the search goes without turning up any wreckage or hint of what happened to plane, the more the incident will evoke memories of the still-unexplained disappearance of Malaysia Airlines Flight 370 in March.

The AirAsia pilots had been worried about the weather and had sought permission to climb above threatening clouds. Air traffic control couldn't say yes immediately — there was no room. Six other airliners were crowding the airspace, forcing Flight 8501 to remain at a lower altitude.

Minutes later, the jet was gone from the radar without issuing a distress signal. The plane is believed to have crashed into Indonesia's Java Sea, but broad aerial surveys so far have turned up no firm evidence of the missing Airbus A320-200.

On Monday, searchers spotted two oily patches and floating objects in separate locations, but it was not known any of it was related to the plane that vanished Sunday halfway into what should have been a two-hour hop from Surabaya, Indonesia, to Singapore. The area is a busy shipping lane. Officials saw little reason to believe the flight met anything but a grim fate.

Based on the plane's last known coordinates, the aircraft probably crashed into the water and "is at the bottom of the sea," Bambang Soelistyo said Monday. Still, searchers planned to expand their efforts onto land on Tuesday.

AP: Why The US Will Power The World Economy In 2015

BY CHRISTOPHER S. RUGABER
AP Economics Writer

WASHINGTON — The United States is back, and ready to drive global growth in 2015.

After long struggling to claw its way out of the Great Recession, the world's biggest economy is on an extended win streak that is edging it closer to full health. But the new year doesn't look quite so bright in other major countries.

China is slowing as it transitions from investment to consumption. Japan has slid into a recession. Russia appears headed for one. Europe is barely growing.

And the U.S.?

Six years after its financial system nearly sank and nearly that long since the recession ended, the United States is expected to grow in 2015 at its fastest pace in a decade. Its expansion from July through September — a 5 percent annual rate — was the swiftest for any quarter since 2003.

That pace will likely ease a bit. Still, the economy is expected to expand 3.1 percent next year, according to a survey by the National Association for Business Economics. It would be the first year of 3 percent growth since 2005.

The acceleration of U.S. growth is a key reason the global economy is also expected to grow faster, at about 3 percent, up from 2.5 percent in 2014, according to economists at JPMorgan Chase and IHS Global Insight.

CHEERING CHEAPER OIL

Plunging oil prices are a big reason for the optimism. Prices have been cut roughly in half since summer. In some areas of the country, gasoline prices have slipped below \$2 a gallon. The drop, along with more fuel-efficient cars, will save the average U.S. household \$550 on gas next year, according to the U.S. Energy Information Administration. That means consumers have more to spend on items like cars, furniture and appliances.

What's more, Americans' finances are in firmer shape. Job growth is accelerating. Businesses are investing in buildings and software, and home building is expected to pick up.

Lower oil prices will also help Europe and Japan, and the global economy should expand faster than it did this year, economists say. But the divergence between the United States and most of the rest of the world is striking and carries some risks. Big exporters, from China to Germany to Japan, will depend heavily on a recovering U.S. to boost their economies.

A pickup in global growth "is highly dependent on the assumption that the U.S. economy continues to improve," said Douglas Porter, chief economist at BMO Capital Markets. "If that doesn't play out, there's not much left for the global economy to fall back on."

SWIRLING GLOBAL HEADWINDS

Even if the U.S. economy does strengthen further, the rest of the world could struggle. For one thing, faster growth will likely lead the Federal Reserve to raise interest rates in 2015, which could draw more investment from overseas. The inflow of capital would raise the dollar's value and potentially cause destabilizing drops in other currencies. Governments and businesses overseas that borrowed in dollars would find it harder to repay those debts.

The hot economies of the last decade — the emerging markets of Brazil, Russia, India and China collectively known as the "BRICs" — will likely grow in 2015 at their slowest pace in six years, according to Oxford Economics, a forecasting firm. Falling oil and commodity prices have smacked Brazil and Russia particularly hard.

China may expand 6.5 percent or more. Yet that's a far cry from the nearly double-digit growth it enjoyed for decades. Europe and Japan will be lucky to expand even 1 percent.

The gap between the U.S. and the rest of the world reflects a fundamental trait of the U.S. economy: It's more insulated from the rest of the world's ups and downs than other major economies are. Exports account for just 14 percent of U.S. output, the smallest share among the 34 mostly rich members of the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development.

One U.S. company largely protected from overseas trends is Globe Specialty Metals, a Miami-based producer of silicon metals that draws 90 percent of its revenue from North America. Its silicon is added to aluminum and rubber parts used in cars, and robust auto sales have boosted the company's revenue.

CEO Jeff Bradley says he's optimistic about 2015. As gas prices have sunk, Americans have been buying more SUVs and pickups, which use more aluminum. Demand for solar power panels is also lifting sales.

"Things are lining up for next year to be one of the best years in the history of our company," Bradley said.

POWERING US CONSUMERS

In the United States, consumers are the main drivers of growth. And fortunes are looking up for more households. Employers are on track to add the most jobs in 15 years in 2014. As a percentage of income, Americans' debt has dropped to 2002 levels.

In some ways, the U.S. economy actually benefits from slower growth abroad. Investors in search of safety have plowed money into Treasuries, thereby helping hold down inflation and U.S. loan rates, including for mortgages. Lower rates, in turn, could fuel more home sales and construction next year.

Stan Humphries, chief economist at Zillow, thinks Americans ages 25 to 34, stung by higher rents, will buy homes in greater numbers by the end of 2015. Mortgage giants Freddie Mac and Fannie Mae have relaxed their down payment requirements, which were a strain for younger would-be buyers. Humphries also thinks developers will build more lower-priced homes that millennials can afford.

Some signs of hope overseas have emerged. Falling oil prices should benefit people in Europe, Japan and China, all of which import oil. And analysts expect the European Central Bank to ramp up its stimulus efforts, possibly by buying government bonds. That step would inject more cash into the economy to boost lending and keep rates low.

DOUBTING JAPAN

The global economy's biggest wild card next year might be Japan. It slid into recession last quarter after a sales tax hike hammered consumer spending. Prime Minister Shinzo Abe has delayed a second increase to 2017.

Japan's central bank is buying government bonds and other financial assets in a bid to boost inflation and stimulate growth. Yet so far, wages haven't risen in line with prices, thereby threatening consumer spending.

Masaaki Ogawa, a third-generation vegetable shop owner on Tokyo's downtown Sugamo shopping street, is among many who feel frustrated.

"The older people have money, but they don't want to spend it," Ogawa said. "The younger people want to spend, but they don't have any money."

AP Business Writers Elaine Kurtenbach in Tokyo, David McHugh in Frankfurt and Joe McDonald in Beijing contributed to this report.

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