

Obama Vows To Hit IS Harder, Says Commandos Now In Syria

BY ROBERT BURNS
Associated Press

WASHINGTON — President Barack Obama on Monday vowed to accelerate the U.S.-led military campaign against the Islamic State in both Syria and Iraq, implicitly acknowledging that progress has been too slow as the extremist group expands its reach with deadly attacks beyond the Middle East.

Speaking at the Pentagon after meeting with his National Security Council, Obama revealed that a group of American special operations commandos has begun working with local fighters in Syria to "tighten the squeeze" on Raqqa, the extremists' nominal capital. He cited this as an example of aggressive new action, in addition to an intensified bombing of the oil infrastructure in Syria that provides much of the Islamic State's revenue.

The administration announced in late October that Obama had approved sending up to 50 special operations troops to Syria on the first open-ended mission by U.S. ground forces in Syria. Until now, U.S. officials had refused to say whether the American commandos had begun their mission.

Obama said his strategy is moving ahead with "a great sense of urgency," an assertion that critics say belies the slow pace of progress in Iraq and Syria. Drawing an implied contrast with military prescriptions offered by Republican presidential candidates, including Ted Cruz's call to "carpet bomb them into oblivion," Obama said, "We have to be smart, targeting ISIL surgically, with precision" airstrikes while local forces do the ground combat.

As national security takes center stage in the presidential race, Obama also is hoping to counter Donald Trump and his inflammatory remarks about Muslims, which Obama believes endangers U.S. national security.

On a conference call Monday with religious leaders, top White House officials



OLIVIER DOULLIERY/ABACA PRESS/TNS
President Barack Obama delivers a statement on the counter-ISIL campaign in the Pentagon briefing room in Arlington, Va. President Obama met previously with a National Security Council on the counter-ISIL campaign.

pledged vigilance by the Justice Department in pursuing hate crimes and other civil rights violations, calling an attack on any faith an attack on all faiths. Obama's aides were also holding separate meetings at the White House with Muslim leaders and with Sikh leaders.

The president's appearance at the Pentagon was part of a weeklong push to explain his strategy for stopping the Islamic State group abroad and its sympathizers at home. Obama is scheduled to attend a briefing at the National Counterterrorism Center on Thursday. He noted that his defense secretary, Ash Carter, departed Monday for Turkey and the Middle East to seek more coalition military contributions to the counter-IS campaign.

He also sent Secretary of State John Kerry to Moscow to try to narrow gaps with Russia over a political transition to end Syria's civil war.

The president's string of terror-related appearances this week, shortly before Christmas, comes amid public jitters about the specter of extremism after deadly attacks in California and Paris. Seven in 10 Americans rate the risk of an attack in the U.S. as at least

somewhat high, according to an Associated Press-GfK poll — a sharp increase from the five in 10 who said that in January. Just 28 percent in the survey said Obama had clearly explained the United States' goals in fighting the Islamic State, while 68 percent said he had not.

Only a little over a week ago Obama sought to allay concerns in an Oval Office address, but critics said his words failed to reassure.

"The American people are smart enough to know when something is working or not, and it's obvious that the president's current strategy isn't working," House Majority Leader Kevin McCarthy, R-Calif., said in response to Obama's appearance at the Pentagon.

Speaking with top military leaders at his side, including Gen. Lloyd Austin, the Central Command chief who is spearheading the counter-IS campaign, Obama cited a range of evidence that IS is weakening, including what he called instances of its fighters defecting and its territory shrinking. But he also acknowledged that recent terrorist attacks, including those in Paris and San Bernardino, illustrate the need to hit IS harder.

"We recognize that pro-

gress needs to keep coming faster," Obama said.

Notably, the military leaders appearing with Obama at the Pentagon included Gen. Joseph Votel, commander of U.S. Special Operations Command, whose forces are playing a bigger role in both Iraq and Syria. Earlier this month Carter announced that Obama had approved sending to Iraq a "specialized expeditionary targeting force" to clandestinely conduct raids against Islamic State leaders in Iraq and Syria and conduct other sensitive missions.

That deployment and numerous other adjustments announced in recent weeks are aimed at bolstering a military strategy under heavy fire from critics.

After a series of setbacks, the U.S. and its coalition partners have claimed progress recently in wresting back territory from IS and eliminating some of its key leaders in Syria and Iraq. The military has said hundreds of U.S. airstrikes in recent weeks dealt a major blow to IS ranks in the western Iraqi city of Ramadi, which IS seized in May and which Iraqi soldiers have encircled as a step toward trying to recapture the provincial capital.

Cruz In Spotlight At GOP Debate

WASHINGTON (AP) — Donald Trump will be standing at center stage, but Ted Cruz will be in the spotlight at Tuesday night's Republican presidential debate.

The Texas senator is challenging Trump's lead in the kick-off Iowa caucuses, and he has the money, campaign infrastructure and conservative appeal to compete deep into the GOP primary season. Those assets now make him a target for his rivals, most notably Trump and Florida Sen. Marco Rubio.

Trump and Cruz have been getting along for months, and that has protected the senator from the harsh criticism the businessman has flung against other opponents. But signs of a split have emerged in recent days, with Cruz appearing to question Trump's judgment at a private fundraiser, according to audio obtained by *The New York Times*, and Trump calling Cruz "a little bit of a maniac."

"Looks like @tedcruz is getting ready to attack," Trump wrote on Twitter last week. "I am leading by so much he must. I hope so, he will fall like all others. Will be easy!"

Another intriguing dynamic in Tuesday's prime-time debate in Las Vegas involves Cruz and Rubio. Both are first-term senators and Cuban Americans who see themselves as alternatives to Trump, who has baffled Republican leaders with his political durability.

Bergdahl To Face Desertion Charge

WASHINGTON (AP) — Army Sgt. Bowe Bergdahl, who was held captive by the Taliban for five years and freed in exchange for five detainees in Guantanamo Bay, will face charges of desertion and misbehavior before the enemy in a general court-martial, the Army announced on Monday.

If convicted, Bergdahl could get life in prison on the misbehavior charge and up to five years for desertion. He also could be dishonorably discharged, reduced in rank and made to forfeit all pay.

Bergdahl, 29, of Hailey, Idaho, walked off his post in eastern Afghanistan's Paktika province on June 30, 2009. He was released in the prisoner swap in late May 2014 that touched off a firestorm of criticism, with some in Congress accusing President Barack Obama of jeopardizing the safety of a nation for a deserter.

A date for an arraignment hearing at Fort Bragg, North Carolina, will be announced later.

Bergdahl's attorney, Eugene Fidell, said the convening authority — a high-ranking officer charged with deciding whether evidence warrants a court-martial — did not follow the advice of a preliminary hearing officer.

Police Shooting In LA Suburb Different

LYNWOOD, Calif. (AP) — When deputies confronted a man carrying a handgun in a Los Angeles suburb, the fatal shooting that unfolded was notably different from other recent flash-points in the debate over police use of force: The suspect was armed and in an area crowded with people.

Friends and relatives of Nicholas Robertson quickly questioned the police tactics that led to his death, particularly why officers fired at a person who was apparently moving away from them and why they kept firing even after he crumpled to the ground.

But law-enforcement professionals said Monday that the shooting did not immediately appear to share much, if anything, in common with other police shootings that have resulted in criminal charges against officers.

Robertson was killed by officers Saturday after witnesses reported seeing a man firing a handgun into the air six or seven times and briefly going inside a car wash and a pizza parlor.

Video of the shooting, released by the sheriff's department the next day, showed deputies firing at Robertson more than 30 times. In a close-up image, he can be seen stretched out on the pavement holding a gun.

Egypt's Finding On Russian Jet Crash

CAIRO (AP) — Egypt said Monday it has not yet found any sign of terrorism in the deadly Oct. 31 crash of a Russian passenger jet in the Sinai desert, a preliminary finding that conflicts with Russian, U.S. and British statements that they believed a bomb on the aircraft probably was to blame.

The vaguely worded Egyptian statement reflected the deep reluctance among government authorities to point to the possibility of a bomb, and the implication of lax security at the Sharm el-Sheikh airport, where the Metrojet plane took off.

The Airbus A321-200 broke apart 23 minutes after departing the Red Sea resort for St. Petersburg, killing all 224 people aboard. The crash led Russia to halt all flights to and from Egypt, while Britain suspended flights to and from the resort. The actions inflicted a heavy blow to Egypt's vital tourism industry.

Several officials involved in Egypt's investigation told The Associated Press that security gaps at the Sharm el-Sheikh airport were making finding a culprit more difficult, including poor video surveillance and the number of people who could enter the facility with only limited searches.

Soon after the crash, the U.S. and Britain said the plane probably was brought down by a bomb, in part citing chatter among militants in Sinai. On Nov. 17, Moscow also announced a bomb was to blame, saying its tests had found the equivalent of 1 kilogram (2.2 pounds) of TNT went off aboard the Airbus, causing it to break apart in the air. In response, Egyptian Prime Minister Sherif Ismail said only that his country would "bear in mind" the Russian conclusion.

Camps For Refugees Get Police Patrols

ZAATARI REFUGEE CAMP, Jordan (AP) — Community police have begun patrolling the alleys of Jordan's two main camps for Syrian refugees, hearing grievances and trying to spot problems.

The new police assistants are retired Jordanian officers trained in a British Embassy program.

Wearing neon-yellow vests, they toured the Zaatar camp of 80,000 refugees Monday on foot. A van doubles as their mobile office.

Deployment also began in Azraq camp. It's the first time security officers regularly patrol in camp neighborhoods.

Syrian Troops Seize Air Base In Rebel-Held Suburb

BY ZEINA KARAM
Associated Press

BEIRUT — Syrian troops and allied militiamen seized control of a sprawling military air base near Damascus on Monday, bolstering the government's presence in a key area overwhelmingly controlled by opposition forces.

The Marj al-Sultan air base lies in the eastern suburb of Damascus known as Eastern Ghouta, and had been held by rebels for the past three years.

The capture is a rare victory for the government in an area considered an opposition stronghold. It bolsters the government's hold over Damascus International Airport and splits rebel-held areas.

The capture was reported by Al-Manar TV, the channel of Lebanon's Shiite Hezbollah group, whose fighters are battling alongside Syrian troops under Russian air cover.

Pro-government websites and the Britain-based Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, which relies on activists inside Syria, also reported the capture of Marj al-Sultan on Monday.

Fighting on the ground in Syria has

intensified even as the international community makes its most serious push yet to restart peace talks between President Bashar Assad's government and the rebels.

U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry is heading to Russia for talks aimed at narrowing gaps with Russian leaders over a political transition to end the country's nearly five-year civil war.

Before departing, Kerry attended a French-hosted foreign ministers' meeting in Paris to compare notes on a conference of Syrian opposition figures held last week in Saudi Arabia.

As he headed into the meeting, German Foreign Minister Frank-Walter Steinmeier said last week's meeting in Riyadh was encouraging.

"There was some progress, even unexpected for most of us, and when I saw the agreement on some principles by the opposition it was encouraging," he said.

Washington and Moscow are deeply divided over the political process they both agree is needed to end the war in Syria.

In Sunday's government attacks, at least 45 people were killed in the

Douma, Saqba and Arbeen suburbs — all part of the Eastern Ghouta region — according to the Local Coordination Committees and the Observatory.

The attacks followed volleys of mortar shells fired into Damascus by rebels in the area that had killed three people, including a child, just hours earlier.

On Monday, a visiting U.N. official said the humanitarian situation in the war-ravaged country is "a blot on our collective conscience."

Speaking to reporters in Damascus at the end of a three-day visit during which he travelled to the central Syrian city of Homs and met with officials in the Syrian capital, humanitarian chief Stephen O'Brien said he was "deeply saddened" by the uptick in violence.

"This is a tragic reminder of the urgency of finding a political solution and security, a nationwide cease-fire," he said. "Such indiscriminate attacks are unacceptable and we must do our utmost to protect innocent civilians."

Around 6.5 million Syrians are internally displaced, O'Brien said. Two million children are out of school, and 72 percent of the population has no access to drinking water, he added.

Turkey Takes New Step On EU Membership Path

BRUSSELS (AP) — Turkey has taken a step forward in its long-delayed membership talks with the European Union.

EU officials agreed on Monday to open negotiations with Ankara on economic and monetary policy.

It's one of 35 policy chapters every aspiring EU member must negotiate to join. Turkey has now opened talks on 15 chapters.

The move comes two weeks after the EU offered billions in refugee aid, an easing of visa rules and faster membership talks if Turkey would do more to stop migrants reaching Europe.

Turkey started talks a decade ago, but progress has been held up because some countries, notably Germany, would prefer a "privileged partnership" to full EU membership.

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