

Afghan Troops Rushed Under Attack

KABUL, Afghanistan (AP) — The Afghan military has rushed reinforcements to a southern district threatened for days with takeover by the Taliban, the country's defense minister said Wednesday as he appealed for stepped-up NATO assistance and military support.

In a besieged army base in the embattled district of Sangin, an Afghan soldier described a dire situation, saying a handful of Afghan troops inside were fighting to the last, trying to keep the Taliban out.

Meanwhile, at an air base outside of Kabul, U.S. troops saluted fallen comrades during a memorial ceremony Wednesday for six American soldiers killed in a Taliban attack this week.

The six died when a suicide bomber drove his explosives-laden motorcycle into a joint NATO-Afghan patrol near the Bagram Air Field on Monday. Two U.S. troops and an Afghan were also wounded in that attack — the deadliest day for American troops in Afghanistan since May 2013.

As fighting in the Sangin district of southern Helmand province continued Wednesday, Afghan army and police arrived to help security forces pinned down for days in the besieged area, said the minister, Masoom Stanekzai.

Carson Suggests Shake-Up Is Coming

UPPERCO, Md. (AP) — Republican presidential candidate Ben Carson said Wednesday morning he is moving toward a major shake-up of his struggling campaign, with less than six weeks to go until early voting begins to select party nominees.

Yet by Wednesday evening, he tried to steer away from that message, announcing that all is well in the Carson camp.

In a Wednesday morning interview with the Associated Press at his Maryland home — conducted without the knowledge of his own campaign manager — Carson said "personnel changes" could be coming, suggesting he would consider sidelining his top aides.

"Everything. Everything is on the table," he said of potential changes. "Every single thing is on the table. I'm looking carefully."

Carson's longtime business adviser Armstrong Williams put it more bluntly: "Dr. Carson is back in charge, and I'm so happy to see that," he said. Williams himself has publicly feuded with the paid political professionals brought in to run Carson's campaign.

Military Gets Less Scrutiny By Congress

WASHINGTON (AP) — Putting the U.S. military in charge of drone strikes in Iraq and Syria has effectively reduced congressional scrutiny of those sensitive operations, leaving some activists, lawmakers and U.S. intelligence officials fearful of increased civilian casualties.

For the last decade, the CIA ran the American effort to find and kill al-Qaida members with drones, mostly in Pakistan and Yemen, outside of declared war zones. But the frequency of those strikes has plummeted to about one a month. The main counterterrorism focus now is the war against the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria, where military special operations forces are flying drones that hunt and kill a senior militant every two days.

The shift reflects both legal and philosophical considerations. When he announced a framework for targeted killing two years ago, President Barack Obama argued that the military, not a secret intelligence agency, should be the primary instrument of lethal force against terrorists.

But one byproduct of the change, American officials say, is that congressional staffers no longer examine the details of each individual drone strike.

Some CIA officials, lawmakers and outside activists worry that the new arrangement creates a greater risk of mistakes, given that drone strikes regularly target key militants who don't wear uniforms and embed themselves in civilian populations. Congress, they say, should independently review each drone strike to monitor targeting decisions and compliance with the rules of engagement.

Attacks Kill At Least 15 Iraqi Civilians

BAGHDAD (AP) — A wave of attacks across Iraq killed at least 15 civilians on Wednesday as government forces pressed on with their offensive to dislodge Islamic State militants from a major city west of Baghdad, officials said.

No one immediately claimed responsibility for the attacks, though they bore the hallmarks of the IS, a Sunni militant group that has targeted Iraqi forces, civilians and especially Shiites.

In the Shiite-majority town of Khalis, about 80 kilometers (50 miles) north of the Iraqi capital, two explosives-laden cars were detonated. The first car was parked inside a bus station and that explosion killed three and wounded 10, a police officer said.

The second car bomb exploded at the town's outdoor grocery market, killing four civilians and wounding eight.

In and around Baghdad, five bombs went off in commercial areas, killing eight civilians and wounding 35, two police officers said. Three medical officials confirmed the casualty figures. All officials spoke on condition of anonymity as they were not authorized to release information.

US Blocks Family From Boarding Plane

LONDON (AP) — British Prime Minister David Cameron will look into claims that U.S. officials prevented a British Muslim family of 11 from flying to Disneyland for a planned holiday.

The issue is sensitive because U.S. Republican presidential contender Donald Trump has called for a temporary ban on Muslims visiting the U.S. due to concerns about extremist attacks.

Stella Creasy, a member of the opposition Labour Party, said Wednesday that U.S. officials gave no explanation for refusing to allow her constituents to board a flight from Gatwick Airport on Dec. 15, so she wrote Cameron seeking his intervention. She said there is "growing fear" among British Muslims that aspects of Trump's plans are coming into practice even though they have been widely condemned.

A top Muslim group said cases like this appear to be related to religion and are worrying for British Muslims.

Mohammed Zahid Mahmood said he and his family — two brothers and their nine children — were told nothing except that they were not allowed to travel to the U.S. despite having previously obtained clearance.

Republicans Spar On Visa Travel For Iran

WASHINGTON (AP) — Top GOP lawmakers accused the Obama administration Wednesday of ignoring congressional intent and the spirit of the law in offering reassurances to Iran about new visa rules.

"There is no ambiguity," said House Majority Leader Kevin McCarthy of California. "The administration should follow the law as written and agreed to."

At issue is a new law tightening visa-free travel to the U.S., enacted as part of a sprawling spending bill passed overwhelmingly by Congress last week and signed by President Barack Obama.

The legislation, a response to the Paris terror attacks, deals with the "visa waiver" program that allows the citizens of 38 countries to travel to the U.S. without obtaining a visa. It makes a series of changes, including requiring a visa for anyone who's visited Iraq, Syria, Iran or Sudan in the previous five years, as well as dual nationals with citizenship in any of those countries.

This could make travel back and forth to the U.S. more difficult for Iranian-Americans or for Europeans with business dealings in Iran.

Winter Tornadoes Touch Down In Mississippi, Indiana

BY JEFF MARTIN
Associated Press

ATLANTA — Forecasters warned of a "particularly dangerous situation" as a storm system swept across the country on Wednesday, and officials said they feared Christmas yard decorations would become projectiles.

Tornadoes touched down in Mississippi and Indiana, the National Weather Service said. The spring-like storms damaged buildings and knocked down trees, and thousands of people were without power in Indiana and Arkansas.

A tree blew over onto a house in Arkansas, killing an 18-year-old woman and trapping a 1-year-old child inside, authorities said. Rescuers pulled the toddler safely from the home.

In northwest Mississippi, a tornado damaged or destroyed at least 20 homes. Clarksdale Mayor Bill Luckett said the only confirmed casualty was a dog killed by storm debris. Planes at a small airport overturned and an unknown number of people were injured.

"I'm looking at some horrific damage right now," the mayor said. "Sheet metal is wrapped around trees; there are overturned airplanes; a building is just destroyed."

Television images showed the tornado appeared to be on the ground for more than 10 minutes. Interstate 55 was closed in both directions as the tornado approached, the Mississippi Highway Patrol said.

After an EF-1 tornado struck the south Indianapolis suburb of Greenwood, television stations showed pictures of damage including a portion of a roof blown off a veterinary office.

The biggest threat for tornadoes was in a region of 3.7 million people in Mississippi, Tennessee and Arkansas and parts of Missouri, Illinois and Kentucky, according to the national Storm Prediction Center in Oklahoma. The center issued a "particu-

larly dangerous situation" alert for the first time since June 2014, when two massive EF4 twisters devastated a rural Nebraska town, killing two people.

The greatest risk for a few "intense, long-tracked tornadoes" will be through Wednesday night.

About 120 miles east of the tornado, Brandi Holland, a convenience store clerk in Tupelo, Mississippi, said people were reminded of a tornado that damaged or destroyed more than 2,000 homes and businesses in April 2014.

"They're opening all our tornado shelters because they say there's an 80 percent chance of a tornado today," Holland said.

Elsewhere, skiers on the slopes out West got a fresh taste of powder and most people in the Northeast enjoyed spring-like temperatures as they finished up last-minute Christmas shopping.

"It's too warm for me. I don't like it. I prefer the cold in the winter, in December. Gives you more of that Christmas feel," said Daniel Flores, a concierge from the Bronx, his light jacket zipped open as he shopped in Manhattan with his three children.

Only about half of the nation, mostly in the West, should expect the possibility of a white Christmas.

In the small coastal town of Loxley, Alabama, Mandy Wilson watched the angry gray sky and told drivers to be careful as she worked a cash register at Love's Travel Stop.

"It's very ugly; it's very scary," Wilson said. "There's an 18-wheeler turned over on I-10. There's water standing really bad. It's a really interesting way to spend Christmas Eve eve."

In parts of Georgia, including Atlanta, a flood watch was posted through Friday evening as more than 4 inches was expected, the National Weather Service said.

The threat of severe weather just before Christmas is unusual, but not unprecedented, said Greg Carbin, a meteorologist at the national Storm Prediction Center.

Twisters hit southeast Mississippi exactly a year ago, killing five people and injuring dozens of others. On Christmas Day in 2012, a storm system spawned several tornadoes, damaging homes from Texas to Alabama.

Emergency officials in Tennessee worried that powerful winds could turn holiday yard decorations into projectiles, the same way gusts can fling patio furniture in springtime storms, said Marty Clements, director of the Madison County Emergency Management Agency in Jackson, the state's largest city between Memphis and Nashville.

"If you go through these neighborhoods, there are a lot of people very proud of what they've put out and they've got stuff everywhere — all these ornaments and deer and everything else," Clements said. "They're not manufactured to withstand that kind of wind speed, so they become almost like little missiles."

Two tornadoes hit central Louisiana on Monday, injuring a man whose travel trailer flipped over. The Lake Charles office of the National Weather service said both were EF-1 twisters with peak winds of 95 mph. The tornadoes uprooted trees, damaged homes and cars.

In Arkansas, Pope County Sheriff Shane Jones said the 18-year-old woman was killed when a tree crashed into her bedroom. The woman and her 1 1/2-year-old sister were sleeping in a bedroom of the house near Atkins about 65 miles northwest of Little Rock, when winds uprooted the tree that crashed through the roof.

"It's terrible that this happened, especially at Christmas," Jones said.

Forecasters said by Wednesday night, the severe weather threat could shift east into the southern Appalachian Mountain region.

Once the strong storms clear out, warm temperatures were expected. Highs in Atlanta and Charlotte, North Carolina, on Christmas Eve were forecast to be in the mid-70s.

Sister Of California Governor On Board Of Firm In Gas Leak

BY ELLEN KNICKMEYER
Associated Press Writer

SAN FRANCISCO — Gov. Jerry Brown's sister is a paid board member of the company that owns a natural-gas well whose leak is forcing thousands from their Southern California homes, and a watchdog group and the governor's aides disagree over whether that makes a conflict of interest for the governor.

Southern California Gas Co., a subsidiary of San Diego-based Sempra Energy, owns a gas well that has been spewing an estimated 1,200 tons of methane, along with other gases, daily since at least late October. On Friday, the governor wrote Southern California Gas to note that the utility's efforts to stop the leak had been insufficient, to defend the state's handling of the problem, and to say that he had directed state agencies to work with the California attorney general in investigating the causes of the leak, according to a copy of the letter released by the governor's office.

The massive leak amounts to about a quarter of the state's total output of climate-changing methane. The site is believed to be the largest underground natural-gas storage facility in the West and can hold enough natural gas to fuel Southern California for a month.

While public-health officials say the leak is not an immediate health threat, residents complain of nosebleeds, headaches and nausea.

The utility is paying to relocate nearly 3,000 households. Los Angeles County and the Los Angeles school board have declared the crisis a state of emergency, with the school board deciding Thursday to move students out of two schools at the affected Porter Ranch neighborhood.



AL SEIB/LOS ANGELES TIMES/TNS

Mother of two Jennifer Lee reacts while talking to other parents protesting with their children in Los Angeles Porter Ranch on December 11, calling for the Los Angeles Unified School District to move the schools to protect the health of their kids amid an ongoing, massive gas leak.

Brown's sister, Kathleen L. Brown, a lawyer and a former California state treasurer in the 1990s, has served as a director of Sempra Energy since 2013, receiving \$188,380 in salary last year. Federal filings show she also holds stock in the company currently worth about \$400,000.

A New York-based citizens' oversight group, Public Accountability Initiative, raised the issue this week, faulting the governor for not publicly addressing his sister's role with the company in the gas leak.

"It is a conflict of interest and it's a conflict of interest that needs to be managed transparently and openly," said Kevin Connor, the group's director.

In Los Angeles, some local officials and residents this week urged Jerry Brown to speak out on the crisis himself,

and to declare it an emergency for the state. State emergency-services officials say there's no current need for a state declaration.

Brown spokesman Evan Westrup said there was "absolutely not" any conflict of interest that could potentially affect the state's management of the crisis.

"The state is exercising its full regulatory and oversight authority," Westrup said. "The focus is the health and safety of residents, period."

Sempra spokesman Art Larson also said the company saw no conflict. Larson declined to say whether Kathleen Brown's role on the board, and on the board's environmental committee, involved her directly in decision-making or interacting with the state in managing the leak. Brown's sister did not immediately respond to a mes-

sage seeking comment left at her San Diego law firm.

In 2010, Kathleen Brown left a West Coast position with Goldman Sachs in part to avoid any perception of conflict of interest after her brother was elected governor, the securities firm said then.

Mark Toney, the head of The Utility Reform Network, a San Francisco-based citizens' group monitoring state regulation of utilities called the Porter Ranch gas leak "a major environmental disaster" that should be getting more attention all around.

Toney said the focus should be stopping the leak — something that authorities say will likely take months — and then investigating to fully determine responsibility. "This is the kind of accident that should never happen," he said.

Several Arrests As Protest Blocks Minneapolis Airport Access

BY KYLE POTTER
Associated Press

MINNEAPOLIS — Protesters blocked access to a terminal and caused significant holiday traffic delays at Minneapolis-St. Paul International Airport on Wednesday during a Black Lives Matter rally that also briefly shut down part of the nation's largest mall.

Access to one of two terminals was closed after more than 100 protesters gathered inside and blocked roads leading to the airport, prompting two security checkpoints

to shut down for about 45 minutes, airport spokesman Patrick Hogan said. He said the protest caused some flight delays but no cancellations.

Hoping to draw attention to a recent police shooting of a black man in Minneapolis, protesters took a light-rail train to the airport from the Mall of America, where hundreds of demonstrators initially gathered on one of the year's busiest shopping days.

"The mall was a decoy," said Black Lives Matter organizer Miski Noor, who protested at the airport. "I think it was

really effective."

Police said a total of 15 people were arrested at both sites, mostly for trespassing or obstruction of justice. No injuries or property damage were reported.

Gov. Mark Dayton said Wednesday afternoon that the moving protest created a "very, very dangerous situation."

Dayton questioned the need for such a demonstration, noting that federal and state investigations were ongoing into the death of Jamar Clark, who was fatally shot by

Minneapolis police responding to an assault complaint. The governor said releasing video of officers' altercation with Clark, as demanded by protesters, could jeopardize the investigations.

About 500 protesters briefly gathered at the Mall of America early Wednesday afternoon before abruptly walking out while chanting, "What do we want? Justice! When do we want it? Now!" Some protesters went to a nearby light-rail train station that allowed quick access to the airport a few miles away.

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