

NATION/WORLD DIGEST

Chinese Shut Down Hacker Training Business

BEIJING, China (AP) — Police in central China have shut down a hacker training operation that openly recruited thousands of members online and provided them with cyberattack lessons and malicious software, state media said Monday.

The crackdown comes amid growing concern that China is a center for a global explosion of Internet crimes. Search giant Google said last month its e-mail accounts were hacked from China in an assault that also hit at least 20 other companies. Police in Hubei province arrested three people suspected of running the hacker site known as the Black Hawk Safety Net that disseminated Web site hacking techniques and Trojan software, the China Daily newspaper said.

LA-area Homes Swamped With Mud

LA CANADA FLINTRIDGE, Calif. (AP) — Residents evacuated from foothill communities deluged by weekend mudslides north of Los Angeles were allowed to return home Sunday as crews moved debris and cleared catch basins in anticipation of more rain later in the week.

The final evacuation order was lifted for about 70 homes in the Paradise Valley area of La Canada Flintridge, L.A. County Sheriff's Dep. Guillermina Saldana said. Only residents with valid identification were allowed back into the neighborhood that was choked with a thick layer of mud and debris during a pummeling rain early Saturday.

Forty-three homes in the La Canada Flintridge area were damaged and 500 more evacuated Saturday after mud and water overflowed basins and surged into streets, taking furniture, cars and concrete barriers with it. Nine houses were declared unsafe to enter. About 25 vehicles were damaged.

"In my 20 years of fire service, this is the first time I've seen this much devastation caused by a weather system," Los Angeles County Fire Battalion Chief Mike Brown said while walking past suburban homes with thigh-deep mud in their yards.

Los Angeles County public works crews used bulldozers and other heavy machinery to move boulders, scoop out catch basins and clear roads.

Hundreds Flee Town Before NATO Offensive

KANDAHAR, Afghanistan (AP) — Minivans piled high with mattresses and clothing lined up at checkpoints Sunday as hundreds of civilians fled a Taliban-controlled area ahead of a planned NATO offensive in southern Afghanistan.

The militants, meanwhile, dug in for a fight, reinforcing their positions with rocket-propelled grenades and heavy weapons, according to witnesses.

The U.S. military has not given a start date for the operation to clear insurgents from the Helmand province town of Marjah, the biggest community in the south under insurgent control. But the military has said fighting will start soon and many residents weren't taking any chances.

American aircraft dropped leaflets over Marjah on Sunday warning people of the coming offensive, officers said, and the U.S. fired illumination rounds after sundown, apparently to help spot Taliban positions.

Villagers said the leaflets were aimed primarily at the militants, listing several of their commanders by name and warning fighters to leave the area or be killed.

Yanukovich Declares Victory In Ukraine Vote

KIEV, Ukraine (AP) — Pro-Russian candidate Viktor Yanukovich has declared victory in Ukraine's presidential contest even though exit polls show a very tight race.

His opponent, Prime Minister Yulia Tymoshenko, says it's too early to concede Sunday's vote.

Yanukovich called on the country's politicians Sunday night to unite to fight corruption, poverty and irresponsibility and said he would strive to earn the trust of all Ukrainians.

All of the major exit polls predict Yanukovich will win but only by a few percentage points.

Man Survives 17 Hours Under Avalanche

EVOLENE, Switzerland (AP) — A young skier was buried beneath an avalanche for 17 hours before being pulled from the snow with only mild hypothermia, Swiss police said Sunday.

The 21-year-old man appeared to have survived because he was trapped next to a pocket of air that allowed him to breathe even though he was unable to free himself from the crushing weight of the snow, police in the southern canton of Valais said.

"I've never heard of such a case before," said police spokesman Jean-Marie Bornet. "It's already very difficult to survive more than 45 minutes beneath an avalanche."

The man, who had been skiing alone on an unmarked slope in the Evolene region about 80 kilometers (50 miles) east of Geneva, was reported missing by his family at 4.30 p.m. Saturday, police said.

Rescuers with sniffer dogs found ski tracks leading to where a large avalanche had come down but had to break off their search overnight for safety reasons.

On Sunday morning a helicopter crew spotted movement on the surface and rescuers were able to pull the man out from beneath 20 inches (half a meter) of snow, said Bornet.

The unidentified Swiss skier has been hospitalized but appears to have suffered no serious injuries, Bornet said.

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White House Says Anti-Terror Efforts Shouldn't Be Criticized By GOP

BY MATTHEW LEE
Associated Press Writer

WASHINGTON — An exasperated White House newly committed to preaching partisan peace slammed Republicans for playing politics on national security and making ignorant allegations about the investigation into the Christmas airliner plot.

Deputy national security adviser John Brennan complained Sunday that politicians, many of them Republicans, were unfairly criticizing the administration for partisan purposes and second-guessing the case with a "500-mile screwdriver" that reaches from Washington to the scene of the abortive attack in Detroit.

"Quite frankly, I'm tiring of politicians using national security issues such as terrorism as a political football," Brennan said. "They are going out there. They're unknowing of the facts. And they're making charges and allegations that are not anchored in reality."

Brennan's comments on "NBC's Meet the Press" came a day after President Barack Obama urged Democrats to work with Republicans, telling those attending the Democratic Party's winter meeting that "we can't solve all of our problems alone." The president offered a similar message to a recent gathering of

House Republicans.

Republicans have been particularly vocal in criticizing the Obama administration's decision to charge accused bomber Umar Farouk Abdulmutallab in criminal rather than military court and allowing him to be advised of his rights, the so-called Miranda warning. In contrast to claims that Abdulmutallab stopped talking to authorities after receiving the warning, administration officials have contended that the suspect provided useful information before the Miranda warning and again some weeks later during further questioning.

Obama himself reiterated his support for the handling of the case, telling CBS News in a pre-Super Bowl interview Sunday that Abdulmutallab "clammed up" after authorities had obtained actionable intelligence from him. Obama likened the Abdulmutallab case to that of convicted shoe bomber Richard Reid, whom Obama said was read his rights within minutes of his arrest in December 2001.

"Under the previous administration, some of the same critics of our approach have been employing this policy for years," Obama said. However, the president added that the policy of reading terror suspects their rights should be reviewed and suggested that the best interrogators should be placed in teams to manage the process to ensure

authorities get all the information they need.

Brennan said he had personally briefed top GOP lawmakers on Christmas night about Abdulmutallab's arrest and that none of them raised objections. Those officials, in response to Brennan, said they were not given any information beyond the fact of the arrest.

Brennan said, "There's been quite a bit of an outcry after the fact, where again, I'm just very concerned on behalf of counterterrorism professionals throughout our government, that politicians continue to make this a political football and are using it for whatever political or partisan purposes."

Among those briefed were Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell, R-Ky.; House Minority Leader John Boehner, R-Ohio; and the top Republicans on the congressional intelligence committees, Sen. Kit Bond of Missouri and Rep. Pete Hoekstra of Michigan.

The Republican lawmakers contended that the calls they received were short on details, and they remained critical of the administration's actions.

"Brennan never told me any of plans to Mirandize the Christmas Day bomber," Bond said in a statement. "If he had, I would have told him the administration was making a mistake."

McConnell spokesman Don

Stewart said in a statement that Brennan was trying to shift attention from "bad decisions" that allowed terrorists in Yemen, where Abdulmutallab reportedly received al-Qaida training, to gain a head start in the wake of the attack.

"Rather than having highly trained terror investigators spend time with this terrorist, the administration decided to treat him as a common criminal who had a right to a government-funded lawyer and advised of his right to remain silent," Stewart said.

Brennan said that Abdulmutallab was treated no differently than any other terror suspect arrested on U.S. soil and that the FBI and others involved in his arrest acted appropriately.

"I think those counterterrorism professionals deserve the support of our Congress," he said. "And rather than second-guessing what they are doing on the ground with a 500-mile screwdriver from Washington to Detroit, I think they have to have confidence in the knowledge and the experience of these counterterrorism professionals."

Brennan said he was confident that the accused mastermind of the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks, Khalid Sheikh Mohammed, would face the "full weight of American justice" when he is tried no matter what the venue.

Gas Blast At Conn. Power Plant Kills At Least 5

BY PAT EATON-ROBB AND JOHN CHRISTOFFERSEN
Associated Press Writers

MIDDLETOWN, Conn. — An explosion that sounded like a sonic boom blew out walls of an unfinished power plant and set off a fire during a test of natural gas lines Sunday, killing at least five workers and injuring a dozen or more.

The explosion at the Kleen Energy Systems plant in Middletown, about 20 miles south of Hartford, could be heard and felt for miles.

Deputy Fire Marshal Al Santostefano told The Associated Press on Sunday night that no one was known to be missing amid the rubble from the damaged plant. Still, crews planned

to spend all night going through debris in case there were any more victims. The cause of the gas explosion was unknown, and the investigation was to begin Monday morning, he said.

The explosion left huge pieces of metal that once encased the plant peeling off its sides. A large swath of the structure was blackened and surrounded by debris, but the building, its roof and its two smokestacks were still standing. Rescue crews had set up several tents alongside the site, which is a few miles from Wesleyan University on a wooded and hilly 137-acre parcel of land overlooking the Connecticut River.

The explosion happened around 11:15 a.m., Santostefano said. Mayor Sebastian Giuliano heard the blast.

"It felt almost like a sonic boom," Giuliano said at an evening news conference.

Santostefano said 50 to 60 people were in the area at the time of the explosion, and multiple contractors were working on the project, making it difficult to quickly account for everyone.

One of those killed was Raymond Dobratz, a 58-year-old plumber from Old Saybrook, said his son, Erik Dobratz, who called the elder man "a great dad."

The 620-megawatt plant, which was almost complete, is being built to produce energy primarily using natural gas. Santostefano said workers for the construction company, O&G Industries, were purging the gas line when the explosion occurred.

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