

NATION/WORLD DIGEST

Embattled Taliban Relying On Human Shields

MARJAH, Afghanistan (AP) — Taliban fighters holding out in Marjah are increasingly using civilians as human shields, firing from compounds where U.S. and Afghan forces can clearly see women and children on rooftops or in windows, Afghan and U.S. troops said Wednesday.

The intermingling of fighters and civilians also has been witnessed by Associated Press journalists. It is part of a Taliban effort to exploit strict NATO rules against endangering innocent lives to impede the allied advance through the town in Helmand province, 610 kilometers (360 miles) southwest of Kabul.

Two more NATO service members were killed in the Marjah operation Wednesday, the alliance said in a statement without identifying them by nationality.

Their deaths brought to six NATO service members and one Afghan soldier who have been killed since the attack on Marjah, the hub of the Taliban's southern logistics and drug-smuggling network, began Saturday. About 40 insurgents have been killed, Helmand Gov. Gulab Mangal said.

During Wednesday's fighting, Marines and Afghan troops "saw sustained but less frequent insurgent activity," mostly small-scale attacks, NATO said in a statement.

Airports Set For Stepped-Up Bomb Screening

WASHINGTON (AP) — Air travelers may have their hands swabbed more often as part of a stepped-up effort to screen passengers for explosives, an Obama administration official said Wednesday.

Airports were told Wednesday that more passengers should be randomly screened for explosives before, during and after they go through metal detectors, the official said. The screening could include swabbing travelers' hands or their carry-on luggage to check for traces of explosives, said the official, who requested anonymity to speak about security plans.

Other security measures have been enhanced since the December attack. Heightened screening measures have been tested at five airports over the past month.

Three Killed In Calif. Plane Crash

EAST PALO ALTO, Calif. (AP) — The three people killed on board a small plane that went down in a Northern California neighborhood were all employees of Tesla Motors Inc.

The twin-engine Cessna 310 crashed in a residential area of East Palo Alto on Wednesday morning after hitting some power lines. It had just taken off from Palo Alto Airport in heavy fog.

Tesla CEO Elon Musk confirms that three employees of the electric car manufacturer were aboard the plane, but would not release their identities. Authorities also have not identified the victims.

The plane is registered to Air Unique Inc. of Santa Clara, and state records show that Doug Bourn owns the company. A Tesla spokesman says Bourn is a senior electrical engineer.

Obama: Stimulus Saved U.S. Economy

On Anniversary Of Major Measure, President Praises Progress, Defends His Actions

WASHINGTON (AP) — President Barack Obama hailed Wednesday's one-year-old economic stimulus law as an accomplishment that staved off another Great Depression and kept up to 2 million people on the job.

Still, with millions still out of work and losing patience, Obama acknowledged that to them, "It doesn't yet feel like much of a recovery."

Marking the anniversary of the \$787 billion American Recovery and Reinvestment Act, Obama aimed his message at people skeptical about the expensive relief measure and Republican lawmakers who voted against it and continue to hammer him about it.

To the public, Obama explained, as he has many times before, that the stimulus plan was composed of tax cuts for most Americans along with help for state governments, extended social service benefits and huge investments in energy, education and infrastructure.

"One year later, it is largely thanks to the

recovery act that a second depression is no longer a possibility," Obama said.

To his Republican critics, who say the bill was a costly, debt-financed blunder that has not delivered on the promise of job creation, Obama challenged them to take up the case with people who have stayed employed or have found help solely because he and the Democratic-run Congress acted.

Obama even delighted in recounting a section of his State of the Union address last month in which he talked of the tax cuts from the stimulus plan and watched Republican lawmakers fail to applaud the idea.

"They were all kind of squirming in their seats ... It was interesting to watch," Obama said.

And Obama made sure to commend himself and his own team for taking action.

The United States has lost an astounding 8.4 million jobs since this recession began in December 2007.

Obama said the stimulus plan is on target

to create or save 1.5 million more jobs, bringing up the estimated total to 3.5 million.

But he sought to remind people that the goal of law was never to restore every job. The government can build confidence and demand and rescue people in hard times during a severe economic slide, Obama said, but it will always be businesses of the private sector that ultimately generate jobs and a recovery.

Obama made repeated references to how well, in his view, his government has done with the stimulus.

"There has never been a program of this scale, moved at this speed, that has been enacted as effectively and as transparently as the recovery act," Obama added. Referring to Vice President Joe Biden and the other top aides, Obama said, "This team has done an outstanding job."

Biden, who has led the stimulus implementation, took his own swipe at critics. "They're unwilling to step up," he said. "Well not us."

Jailed American Missionaries Leave Haiti For U.S.

PORT-AU-PRINCE, Haiti (AP) — Eight American missionaries were freed from a Haitian jail and left for Miami Wednesday, nearly three weeks after being charged with kidnapping for trying to take 33 children out of the quake-stricken country.

Reporters watched as the U.S. Air Force C-130 cargo plane carrying the group took off from the tarmac. Officials from the U.S. Embassy and State Department, speaking on condition of anonymity because they were not authorized to talk to the media, confirmed that the Americans were on the plane.

The group's rapid departure

from Haiti began earlier Wednesday when Judge Bernard Saint-Vil said eight of the 10 jailed missionaries were free to leave without bail after parents of the children testified they voluntarily handed their children over to the missionaries.

"The parents of the kids made statements proving that they can be released," he said, adding that he still wanted to question the group's leader and her nanny.

Hours later, just after dusk, the bedraggled and sweaty-looking group walked out of the Haitian jail escorted by U.S. diplomats. They waited until they were safely inside a white van before flashing smiles

and giving a thumbs up to reporters.

The missionaries, most from two Baptist churches in Idaho, are accused of trying to take 33 Haitian children to the Dominican Republic on Jan. 29 without proper documents. Their detentions came just as aid officials were urging a halt to short-cut adoptions in the wake of the devastating Jan. 12 earthquake that killed more than 200,000 people.

The missionaries say they were on a humanitarian mission to rescue child quake victims by taking them to a hastily prepared orphanage in the Dominican Republic and have denied accusa-

tions of trafficking.

Group leader Laura Silsby originally said they were taking only orphaned and abandoned children, but reporters found that several of the children were handed over to the group by their parents, who said they hoped the Baptists would give them a better life.

Saint-Vil said he still wants to question Silsby and nanny Charisa Coulter about their visit to Haiti in December before the earthquake, but he asked for Coulter to be hospitalized because of her diabetes.

Earlier Wednesday, Coulter of Boise, Idaho, briefly received treatment but was then taken back to jail.

U.S. To Investigate Toyota Corolla Issues

WASHINGTON (AP) — The Transportation Department plans to open a formal investigation into the 2009-2010 Toyota Corolla over potential problems with the car's power steering, a department official said Wednesday.

The preliminary investigation is expected to be opened on Thursday and involves an estimated 500,000 vehicles. The official spoke on condition of anonymity because the department had not yet notified Toyota of the probe.

Toyota Motor Corp. said at a news conference in Japan earlier Wednesday that it was looking into complaints of power steering problems with the Corolla and was considering a recall as one option. Toyota said there have been fewer than 100 complaints.

In the U.S., the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration has received about 150 complaints from drivers about the issue. The complaints are small compared to the number of vehicles involved: The department said the investigation involves about 363,000 vehicles from the 2009 model year and about 136,000 vehicles from the 2010 model year.

In the Corolla complaints, drivers have said they felt they were losing control over the car's steering, particularly at highway speeds.

Executives in Japan said it was unclear why drivers were experiencing the problems but it could be related to the braking system or tires. They said the company's internal investigation was still preliminary and no decision had been made but Toyota was prepared to supply fixes — including a recall as one possibility — if it found defects.

Toyota has recalled 8.5 million of its vehicles, including the popular Camry — America's best-selling model — over problems with gas pedals, floor mats and brakes.

The 2009 and 2010 Corollas are already the subject of two separate safety-related recalls, one for potentially sticky accelerator pedals, the other over concerns that gas pedals could get caught on floor mats.

A Toyota spokeswoman in Washington, Cindy Knight, said the company would cooperate with the investigation.

Pot Smokers Using Alts For Marijuana Effects

JEFFERSON CITY, Mo. (AP) — There may be nothing like the real thing, but some industrious marijuana users have seized on an obscure but easily accessible substance that mimics the drug's effects on the brain — creating a popular trade in legal dope that has stymied law enforcement authorities.

The users are buying a product known as K2 — or "Spice," "Genie" and "Zohai" — that is commonly sold in head shops as incense. Produced in China and Korea, the mixture of herbs and spices is sprayed with a synthetic compound chemically similar to THC, the psychoactive ingredient in marijuana. Users roll it up in joints or inhale it from pipes, just like the real thing.

Though banned in most of Europe, K2's key ingredients are not regulated in the United States — a gap that has prompted lawmakers in Missouri and Kansas to consider new legislation.

"This isn't Jerry Garcia's marijuana," said state Rep. Jeff Roorda, a Democrat from the eastern Missouri town of Barnhart. "They've used chemicals to avoid creating something that's already illegal."

Authorities in Johnson County, Kan., discovered ex-convicts on probation smoking K2, and said it is spreading to high school students.

Out On The Town

FEB. 19, 20, 21

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Sunday at 6:30pm
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Saturday, February 27
4:30-7:00PM

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COST: 13 & older \$7.50, 12 & under \$4.00

Tickets can be purchased at the FUMC church office or at the door the day of the supper. For more information call 665-2991 or email firmc@iw.net.

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Marian Auditorium

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