

NATION/WORLD DIGEST

U.S. Marines Seize Taliban Headquarters

MARJAH, Afghanistan (AP) — After a fierce gunfight, U.S. Marines seized a strongly defended compound Friday that appears to have been a Taliban headquarters — complete with photos of fighters posing with their weapons, dozens of Taliban-issued ID cards and graduation diplomas from a training camp in Pakistan.

Insurgents who had been using the field office just south of Marjah's town center abandoned it by the end of the day's fighting, as Marines converged on them from all sides, escalating operations to break resistance in this Taliban stronghold in southern Helmand province.

Marines from Lima Company, 3rd Battalion, 6th Marines fought their way south from the town center Friday after residents told them that several dozen insurgent fighters had regrouped in the area.

Throughout the day, small groups of Taliban marksmen tried to slow the advance with rifle fire as they slowly fell back in face of the Marine assault.

As the Marines advanced, they found rows of abandoned bunkers dug alongside an irrigation canal that the Taliban had used to fire on them the day before.

FBI Closes Deadly 2001 Anthrax-Letters Case

WASHINGTON (AP) — The FBI sought to close the book on its long, frustrating hunt for the killer behind the 2001 anthrax letters Friday, formally ending its investigation and concluding a mentally unbalanced scientist was responsible for killing five people and unnerving Americans nationwide.

After years of false leads, no arrests and public criticism, the FBI and Justice Department said Dr. Bruce Ivins, a government researcher, acted alone.

Ivins killed himself in 2008 as prosecutors prepared to indict him for the attacks. He had denied involvement, and his family and some friends have continued to insist he was innocent.

Investigators had tried earlier to build a case against biowarefare expert Steven Hatfill, who had worked for a time in the same military lab as Ivins, but ultimately turned away from that theory and had to pay him a multimillion-dollar settlement.

Many details of the case have already been disclosed, but newly released FBI documents paint a fuller portrait of Ivins as a troubled doctor whose life's work was teetering toward failure at the time the letters laced with anthrax were sent. As the U.S. responded to the mailings, that work was given new importance by the government, and he was even honored for his efforts on anthrax.

N.J. Sen. Lautenberg Has Stomach Lymphoma

PATERSON, N.J. (AP) — Sen. Frank Lautenberg, at 86 the nation's second oldest U.S. senator, has curable lymphoma of the stomach, his office said Friday.

Doctors for the Democrat found B-cell lymphoma that will require treatment over the next few months, spokesman Caley Gray said in a news release. He will not be resigning, Gray said.

Independent doctors agree that Lautenberg's type of lymphoma is usually treatable.

Lautenberg will undergo six to eight chemotherapy treatments and should make a "full and complete recovery," said Dr. James Holland of New York City's Mount Sinai Medical Center.

Lautenberg was taken to the hospital Monday after his office said he fell. The office said Tuesday the senator was treated for a bleeding ulcer, and Gray said Friday the lymphoma was found in the ulcer.

A resignation could hurt the Democratic Party. Under New Jersey law, Gov. Chris Christie, a Republican, would be able to appoint a replacement if a senator left office.

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Fewer Falling Behind On Home Loans

WASHINGTON (AP) — The end of the foreclosure crisis is finally in sight. For the first time in almost three years, the number of homeowners falling behind on their loans is declining.

The drop means the number of people losing their homes will start to fall. But some pain from the crisis is sure to persist. Because millions of people are already in foreclosure, deeply discounted houses will put pressure on home prices for years.

"Housing is on a path to recovery," said Mike Larson, a real estate analyst with Weiss Research. "It's going to be a very long, gradual process."

In high-foreclosure cities like Las Vegas, Phoenix and Miami, homes have lost roughly half their values from their peaks. But a report Friday from the Mortgage Bankers Association showed Nevada, Arizona and Florida had some of the biggest declines in new delinquencies.

The figures probably mark "the beginning of the end" of the crisis, said Jay Brinkmann, the trade group's chief economist.

However, more than 15 percent of homeowners with a mortgage have missed at least one payment or are in foreclosure, a record. Worse, nearly half of all delinquent borrowers were at least three months behind on their payments, up from a typical level of less than 20 percent.

"The bad news is that we still have a big problem," Brinkmann said. "The good news is it looks like it may not get much bigger."

That's because the percentage of borrowers who missed just one payment on their home loans fell to 3.6 percent in the October-to-December quarter from 3.8 percent in the third quarter, according to the Mortgage

Bankers Association. That decline was even more surprising because delinquencies usually rise at that time of year due to higher heating bills and holiday spending.

In another encouraging sign, the number of borrowers who had missed at least one payment but were not yet in foreclosure also fell for the first time since the beginning of 2007.

Banks are delaying the foreclosure process, traditionally between four and six months, as they evaluate borrowers for help

under the Obama administration's \$75 billion mortgage-relief effort. It lowers borrowers payments to as low as 2 percent for five years and extends loan terms to as long as 40 years.

But experts warn that hundreds of thousands of borrowers will not be eligible or will not complete the process. So far, only 116,300 borrowers out of 1 million who enrolled have had the terms of their mortgages changed permanently.

Despite the government's efforts, there may be 6 million

foreclosed homes that are put on the market over the next three years, according to Barclays Capital.

Timing is key. If banks unload them suddenly, "it will be much more detrimental to the housing recovery than if it's a slow, gradual bleed," said Michelle Meyer, a Barclays economist.

On Friday, Obama announced that housing agencies in the five hardest-hit states of Arizona, California, Florida, Michigan and Nevada will receive \$1.5 billion in financial rescue money.

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Government, Tobacco Both Take Fight To High Court

WASHINGTON (AP) — The Obama administration asked the Supreme Court Friday to allow the government to seek nearly \$300 billion from the tobacco industry for a half-century of deception that "has cost the lives and damaged the health of untold millions of Americans."

Both sides in a landmark, decade-long legal fight over smoking took their case to the high court Friday.

The administration, joined by public health groups, wants the court to throw out rulings that bar the government from collecting \$280 billion of past tobacco profits or \$14 billion for a national campaign to curb smoking.

Leading tobacco companies want the justices to wipe away court holdings that the industry illegally concealed the dangers of cigarette smoking. If they succeed, the attack on their profits also would be halted.

Friday's filings with the Supreme Court mark the latest phase in a lawsuit that began during Bill Clinton's presidency.

Philip Morris USA, the nation's largest tobacco maker, its parent company Altria Group Inc. and R.J. Reynolds Tobacco Co. filed separate but related appeals that take issue with a federal judge's 1,600-page opinion and an appeals court ruling that found the industry engaged in racketeering and fraud over several decades. Appeals from other tobacco companies also were expected.

In 2006, U.S. District Judge Gladys Kessler ruled that the companies engaged in a scheme to defraud the public by falsely denying the adverse health effects of smoking, concealing evidence nicotine is addictive and lying about their manipulation of nicotine in cigarettes to create addiction. A federal appeals court in Washington upheld the findings.

At the same time, however, the courts have said the government is not entitled to collect \$280 billion in past profits or \$14 billion for a national campaign to curb smoking.

The companies argue that the government improperly used the Racketeer Influenced and Corrupt Organizations, or RICO law, against them. The racketeering law often is employed against the Mafia and other criminal organizations.

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