

Dempsey Pushes Back On Reports Of Nuke Cuts

WASHINGTON (AP) — Congressional Republicans on Wednesday vowed to block the Obama administration from sharply cutting the U.S. nuclear force, calling potential reductions of as much as 80 percent in the number of deployed weapons "reckless lunacy."

Pointing to the growing number of trouble spots, from Iran to Syria to Egypt, members of the House Armed Services Committee said any significant cuts would undermine the U.S. ability to deter aggression. The Associated Press reported on Tuesday that the administration is weighing several options for new reductions from the current treaty limit of 1,550 deployed strategic warheads.

Defense Secretary Leon Panetta and Army Gen. Martin Dempsey, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, told the committee that no decision has been made and maintaining the current level is one of the options. But that did little to assuage GOP lawmakers.

"I just want to go on record as saying that there are many of us that are going to do everything we possibly can to make sure that this preposterous notion does not gain any real traction," said Rep. Trent Franks, R-Ariz.

The most modest option under discussion would return the United States to a level not seen in more than half a century, when the Soviet Union and the U.S. pushed ahead in a Cold War nuclear arms race. The administration is weighing at least three options for lower total numbers, cutting to around 1,000 to 1,100, 700 to 800, or 300 to 400.

Iran Claims Advances In Nuclear Fuel

TEHRAN, Iran (AP) — In defiant swipes at its foes, Iran said Wednesday it is dramatically closer to mastering the production of nuclear fuel even as the U.S. weighs tougher pressures and Tehran's suspected shadow war with Israel brings probes far beyond the Middle East.

Iran further struck back at the West by indicating it was on the verge of imposing a midwinter fuel squeeze to Europe in retaliation for a looming boycott of Iranian oil, but denied reports earlier in the day that six nations had already been cut off.

The uncompromising messages from Iran, however, came with a counterpoint. The official IRNA news agency said Iran's top nuclear negotiator, Saeed Jalili, told European Union foreign policy chief Catherine Ashton that Iran is ready to return to talks with the U.S. and other world powers.

The dual strategy — taking nuclear steps while proposing more talks — has become a hallmark of Iran's dealings for years and some critics have dismissed it as a time-buying tactic. The advances claimed Wednesday could likely feed these views.

In a live TV broadcast, President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad was shown overseeing what was described as the first Iranian-made fuel rod inserted into a research reactor in northern Tehran. Separately, the semiofficial Fars agency reported that a "new generation" of Iranian centrifuges — used to enrich uranium toward nuclear fuel — had gone into operation at the country's main enrichment facility at Natanz in central Iran.

Romney Tries To Hold Off Santorum In Michigan

GRAND RAPIDS, Mich. (AP) — Republican presidential candidate Mitt Romney is wooing tea partiers in his home state of Michigan with a potentially risky strategy: blasting the auto industry bailout that many people credit with saving the state's most vital industry.

The tactic seems designed to undermine Rick Santorum's popularity with conservatives who dislike government intervention in business, even when the results appear defensible. It also reinforces Romney's image as an experienced capitalist who understands the pain sometimes involved in making companies work.

Santorum's fast rise in national polls has forced Romney to sharpen his criticisms of the former Pennsylvania senator. Santorum says his team will "plant our flag" in Michigan while also campaigning in other states.

A Romney loss in Michigan's Feb. 28 primary would be hugely embarrassing, or worse, to his campaign. His team has promoted an aura of inevitability for months, but Romney has failed to persuade the party's most conservative segments to embrace him.

Authorities Fear Counterfeit Drugs Are In U.S.

WASHINGTON (AP) — The discovery that a fake version of the widely used cancer medicine Avastin is circulating in the United States is raising new fears that the multibillion-dollar drug-counterfeiting trade is increasingly making inroads in the U.S.

The practice has largely been relegated to poor countries with lax regulations. But with more medicines and drug ingredients for sale in the U.S. being manufactured overseas, American authorities are afraid more counterfeits will find their way into this country, putting patients' lives at risk.

The Avastin discovery follows other recent instances in the U.S. of counterfeiting, involving such drugs as Viagra, the cholesterol medicine Lipitor and the weight-loss pill Alli.

"We do know there are counterfeits continuing to try and make their way onto the U.S. supply chain," said Connie Jung, an associate director in the Food and Drug Administration's office of drug security.

The FDA announced Tuesday it is investigating fake vials of Avastin that were sold to at least 19 doctors or clinics, including 16 sites in California, two in Texas and one in Chicago. Tests showed the vials did not contain the active ingredient in Avastin, which is given intravenously in hospitals, clinics and doctors' offices to treat several types of cancer.

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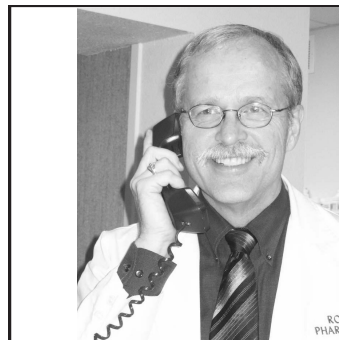
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Official: 358 Killed In Honduras Prison Fire

BY MARCOS ALEMAN AND FREDDY CUEVAS

Associated Press

COMAYAGUA, Honduras — Honduran officials confirmed Wednesday that 358 people died when a fire tore through an overcrowded prison, making it the world's deadliest prison fire in a century.

With 856 prisoners packed into barracks, the farm prison in the Comayagua province north of the capital was at double capacity, said Supreme Court Justice Richard Ordóñez, who is leading the investigation.

Ordóñez told The Associated Press the fire started in a barracks where 105 prisoners were bunked, and only four of them survived. Some 115 bodies have been sent to the morgue in the capital of Tegucigalpa.

The fire started by an inmate tore through the prison, burning and suffocating screaming men in their crowded barracks as rescuers desperately searched for keys to unlock the doors.

The local governor, who was once a prison employee, told reporters that an inmate called her moments before the blaze broke out and screamed: "I will set this place on fire and we are all going to die!"

Comayagua Gov. Paola Castro said she called the Red Cross and fire brigade immediately. But firefighters said they were kept outside for half an hour by guards who fired their guns in the air, thinking they had a riot or a break-out on their hands.

Officials have long had little control over conditions inside many Honduran prisons, where inmates have largely unfettered access to cell phones and other contraband.

Survivors also told investigators that the unidentified inmate yelled "We will all die here!" as he lit fire to his bedding late Tuesday night in the prison in Comayagua, 53 miles (86 kilometers) north of Tegucigalpa. The lockup housed people convicted of serious crimes such as homicide and armed robbery, but also people awaiting trial.

"We couldn't get them out because we didn't have the keys and



GUSTAVO AMADOR/EFE/ZUMA PRESS

La Granja penitentiary inmates are treated for injuries in Comayagua, Honduras. Authorities said Wednesday a fire at the prison in central Honduras killed 358, in scenes one official described as "horrific."

couldn't find the guards who had them," Comayagua fire department spokesman Josue Garcia said.

Other prisoners were set free by guards but died from the flames or smoke as they tried to flee into the fields surrounding the facility, where prisoners grew corn and beans on a state-run farm.

Rescuers carried shirtless, semiconscious prisoners from the prison by their arms and legs. One hauled a victim away by piggyback.

Comayagua was built in the 1940s for 400 inmates.

Unlike U.S. prisons, where locks can be released automatically in an emergency, Honduran prisons are infamous for being old, overcrowded hotbeds of conflict and crime.

Once inside, rescue workers found piles of bodies so badly burned they looked like piles of charred mannequins. Some bodies fused together, and officials said it could take weeks to identify them.

Outside the prison family members gathered late into the afternoon, some crying and some demanding justice.

"We want to see the body," shouted Juan Martinez, whose son was reported dead. "We'll be here until we get to do that."

Survivor Ever Lopez, 24, who was serving time for homicide,

seemed like an eternity, a guard appeared with keys and let us out," he said.

He said there were 60 prisoners packed into his cell.

National prison system director Danilo Orellana defended the guards' decision to keep firefighters out as flames lit up the night sky.

"The guards first thought they had a prison break, so they followed the law saying no one could enter to prevent unnecessary deaths," he said.

Honduran President Porfirio Lobo said on national television that he had suspended the country's top penal officials, including Orellana, and would request international assistance in carrying out a thorough investigation.

"This is a day of profound sadness," Lobo said.

Orellana said the convicts were allowed to work outdoors, unlike those held in a maximum-security facility for the country's most dangerous prisoners in the capital, Tegucigalpa.

Located in the middle of irrigated fields and several large ponds, the prison was comprised of 12 buildings set close together, with an open, dirt prison yard within a central compound. A single dirt road led into the facility, which has a soccer field on the property.

Honduras has one of the world's highest rates of violent crime, and its overcrowded and dilapidated prisons have been hit by a string of deadly riots and fires in recent years. Officials have repeatedly pledged to improve conditions, only to say they don't have sufficient funds.

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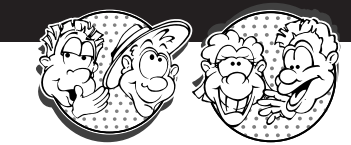
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