

Syria Says It's Ready To Talk To Opposition

BEIRUT (AP) — Syria said Monday it is prepared to hold talks with the armed rebels bent on overthrowing President Bashar Assad, the clearest signal yet that the regime is growing increasingly nervous about its long-term prospects to hold onto power as opposition fighters make slow but persistent headway in the civil war.

The offer, by Syrian Foreign Minister Walid al-Moallem during a visit to Moscow, came hours before residents of Damascus and state-run TV reported a huge explosion and a series of smaller blasts in the capital, followed by heavy gunfire.

State-run news agency SANA said there were multiple casualties from the explosion, which it said was a suicide car bombing.

The proposal marked the first time that a high-ranking regime official has stated publicly that Damascus would be willing to meet with the armed opposition. But al-Moallem did not spell out whether rebels would first have to lay down their weapons before negotiations could begin — a crucial sticking point in the past.

The regime's proposal is unlikely to lead to talks. The rebels battling the Syrian military have vowed to stop at nothing less than Assad's downfall and are unlikely to agree to sit down with a leader they accuse of mass atrocities.

Trial Opens For 2010 Gulf Oil Spill Incident

NEW ORLEANS (AP) — BP bears most of the blame for the disastrous 2010 spill in the Gulf of Mexico because it cut corners and put profits ahead of safety, a U.S. Justice Department attorney charged Monday at the opening of a high-stakes trial that could result in the oil company and its partners being forced to pay billions more in damages.

The London-based oil giant acknowledged it made "errors in judgment" before the deadly blowout, but it also cast blame on the owner of the drilling rig and the contractor involved in cementing the well.

The civil case went to trial after attempts to reach an 11th-hour settlement failed.

Eleven workers were killed when the Deepwater Horizon rig leased by the BP exploded on April 20, 2010. An estimated 172 million gallons of crude spilled into the Gulf over the three months that followed.

Justice Department attorney Mike Underhill said the catastrophe resulted from BP's "culture of corporate recklessness."

Embattled UK Cardinal To Skip Papal Conclave

VATICAN CITY (AP) — In a season of startling change for the Catholic Church, the latest break with tradition was as unexpected as it was a wake-up call to the 115 men who will elect the next pope.

Britain's highest-ranking Catholic leader resigned and removed himself Monday from the upcoming conclave, saying he did not want allegations that he engaged in improper conduct with priests to be a distraction during the solemn process of choosing the next leader of the church's 1.2 billion-member flock.

It was the first time a cardinal has recused himself from a conclave because of personal scandal, according to Vatican historians.

The Vatican insisted that Pope Benedict XVI accepted Cardinal Keith O'Brien's resignation purely because O'Brien was nearing the retirement age of 75 — not because of the accusations.

But O'Brien himself issued a statement Monday saying he would skip the conclave because he wanted to avoid becoming the focus of media attention at such a delicate time.

Pope Changes Rules, Allows Earlier Start

VATICAN CITY (AP) — Pope Benedict XVI has changed the rules of the conclave that will elect his successor, allowing cardinals to move up the start date if all of them arrive in Rome before the usual 15-day transition between pontificates.

Benedict signed a legal document, issued Monday, with some line-by-line changes to the 1996 Vatican law governing the election of a new pope. It is one of his last acts as pope before resigning Thursday.

The date of the conclave's start is important because Holy Week begins March 24, with Easter Sunday March 31. In order to have a new pope in place for the church's most solemn liturgical period, he would need to be installed by Sunday, March 17 — a tight timeframe if a conclave were to start March 15.

2nd Storm Wallops So. Plains

BY BETSY BLANEY
 Associated Press

LUBBOCK, Texas — The nation's midsection again dealt with blizzard conditions Monday, closing highways, knocking out power to thousands in Texas and Oklahoma and even bringing hurricane-force winds to the Texas Panhandle. Two people have died.

Already under a deep snowpack from last week's storm, Kansas was preparing for another round of heavy snow Monday evening and overnight, prompting some to wonder what it could do for the drought.

"Is it a drought-buster? Absolutely not," National Weather Service meteorologist Victor Murphy said. "Will it bring short-term improvement? Yes."

The storm is being blamed for two deaths on Monday. In northwest Kansas, a 21-year-old man's SUV hit an icy patch on Interstate 70 and overturned. And in the northwest town of Woodward, Okla., heavy snow caused a roof to collapse, killing one inside the home.

Earlier on Monday, blizzard warnings extended

from the Oklahoma and Texas panhandles into south-central Kansas. The blizzard warnings were dropped Monday evening for the far western portion of the Texas and Oklahoma panhandles.

Meanwhile to the east, lines of thunderstorms crossed Arkansas, Louisiana and Florida, bringing heavy rain and an occasional tornado warning.

As many as 10,000 people lost power in Oklahoma, as did thousands more in Texas.

"I have a gas cooking stove and got the oven going," said Ann Smith, owner of the Standifer House Bed and Breakfast in Elk City, Okla., late Monday afternoon. Her daughter and grandchildren had come over because they lost power.

"If it gets cold tonight, I guess we'll have to put pallets in the kitchen," Smith said with a laugh.

Colorado and New Mexico were the first to see the system Sunday night, with up to 2 feet falling in the foothills west of Denver.

As it moved into the Texas and Oklahoma panhandles Monday, the storm ground travel to a halt, closing miles of interstates and state highways.

Texas Department of Public Safety Trooper Daniel Hawthorne said about a dozen motorists had to be rescued, but no one was injured. The Na-

tional Weather Service in Lubbock reported at one point that as many as 100 vehicles were at a standstill on Interstate 27.

Extremely strong winds whipped around at least a foot or more of snow in the Texas Panhandle, and a hurricane-force gust of 75 mph was recorded at the Amarillo airport. Amarillo recorded the biggest snowfall total in Texas — 19 inches, just short of the record of 19.3 — while Fritch was second with 16.

The Oklahoma Highway Patrol closed all highways in the Panhandle and much of the state's northwest because of blizzard conditions. Trooper Betsy Randolph said several dozen motorists have reported being stranded or have abandoned their vehicles.

Chris McBee, a storm chaser, got stuck outside Woodward in northwest Oklahoma in the mid-afternoon. By then, the city was leading Oklahoma's snow totals with 15 inches of snow.

"We were planning to go back to Oklahoma City tonight, but the road was just impassable," McBee told The Associated Press. "You couldn't see 50 feet in front of you." A man with a bulldozer dug out McBee's vehicle.

Former Surgeon General Koop Dies At Age 96

BY MARLENE CIMONS
 AND NOAM N. LEVEY
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WASHINGTON — Dr. C. Everett Koop, who as U.S. surgeon general in the 1980s led high-profile campaigns to highlight the dangers of smoking and to mobilize the nation against an emerging AIDS epidemic, has died. He was 96.

Koop died Monday at his home in New Hampshire, Susan Wills, a colleague at Koop's Dartmouth Institute, told the Associated Press. The cause was not given.

Unlike his predecessors and many of his successors, who were largely figureheads, Koop initiated a new era of influence for surgeons general by turning the post into a national bully pulpit. He used his eight years as the nation's top doctor to express his opinions on the country's most urgent public health problems — often to the chagrin and irritation of the man who had appointed him, President Ronald Reagan.

Koop was an imposing figure with his 6-foot-1 height, his stern, no-nonsense demeanor, his booming preacher's voice and the square-cut beard favored by



Koop

his Dutch ancestors.

He surprised and delighted his early critics — and angered those right-wing constituents who initially had supported him — by applying a

scrupulous public health approach to every policy issue that confronted him, regardless of his personal views.

He used his public platform to launch a relentless campaign against smoking, to defend the rights of deformed newborns and

— in a landmark report to the public — to call for early childhood sex education and the use of condoms in the fight against the AIDS epidemic. Moreover, he condemned AIDS-related discrimination, calling for compassion for those suffering from the deadly disease.

He was an avowed opponent of abortion, but frowned upon the radical tactics of many anti-abortion groups. He also opposed reversing Roe vs. Wade — the Supreme Court decision that guaranteed a woman's right to abortion — and instead advocated increased education about contraception to end the need

for abortion.

Conservatives were infuriated with Koop, and attacked him for abandoning his constituency. At the same time, liberals applauded his transformation. Koop, amused at the uproar, scoffed at both groups and insisted that he had undergone no changes during his tenure. He said he simply believed that politics and personal views had no place in making public health policy.

After he left the surgeon general's post in 1989, he maintained a vigorous and demanding schedule of traveling, lecturing and writing.

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