

## Gun Violence Cited As Factor In Shorter Lives

WASHINGTON (AP) — The United States suffers far more violent deaths than any other wealthy nation, due in part to the widespread possession of firearms and the practice of storing them at home in a place that is often unlocked, according to a report released Wednesday by two of the nation's leading health research institutions.

Gun violence is just one of many factors contributing to lower U.S. life expectancy, but the finding took on urgency because the report comes less than a month after the shooting deaths of 26 people at an elementary school in Newtown, Conn.

The United States has about six violent deaths per 100,000 residents. None of the 16 other countries included in the review came anywhere close to that ratio. Finland was closest to the U.S. ranking with slightly more than two violent deaths per 100,000 residents.

For many years, Americans have been dying at younger ages than people in almost all other wealthy countries. In addition to the impact of gun violence, Americans consume the most calories among peer countries and get involved in more accidents that involve alcohol. The U.S. also suffers higher rates of drug-related deaths, infant mortality and AIDS.

The result is that the life expectancy for men in the United States ranked the lowest among the 17 countries reviewed, at 75.6 years, while the life expectancy for U.S. women ranked second lowest at 80.7 years. The countries reviewed included Canada, Japan, Australia and much of Western Europe.

## Deal In Boston Lawsuit On Breast Cancer Drug

BOSTON (AP) — Four sisters who claimed their breast cancer was caused by a drug their mother took during pregnancy in the 1950s reached a settlement Wednesday with Eli Lilly and Co. in the first of scores of similar claims around the country to go to trial.

Neither Eli Lilly nor lawyers for the women would disclose the financial terms of the settlement, which was announced on the second day of testimony during a federal trial in Boston.

Eli Lilly said it continues to believe its medication "did not cause the conditions alleged in this lawsuit" but the settlement was in its "best interest."

"Settling this trial helps us get back to what we want to focus on as a company; developing important new medications through research and partnerships with doctors and patients," it said in a statement.

A total of 51 women, including the Melnick sisters, filed lawsuits in Boston against more than a dozen companies that made or marketed a synthetic estrogen known as DES.

## Syrian Rebels Agree To Prisoner Swap

DAMASCUS, Syria (AP) — Rebels freed 48 Iranians on Wednesday in exchange for more than 2,000 prisoners, including women and children, held by Syrian authorities — a deal struck after rare negotiations involving regional powers Turkey, Qatar and Iran.

It was the first major prisoner swap since the uprising began against President Bashar Assad nearly 22 months ago.

Iran is one of Assad's main allies, and the Iranians, who were seized outside Damascus in August, were a major bargaining chip for factions trying to bring down his regime in the civil war that has killed more than 60,000 people.

The exchange also highlighted the plight of tens of thousands of detainees languishing in Syrian prisons, many of whom were picked up at street protests and have not been heard of since.

The group of 48 Iranians arrived Wednesday at the Sheraton hotel in several vans escorted by Syrian security forces. Looking disheveled but healthy, they were greeted by Iran's ambassador in Damascus, Mohammad Riza Shibani, and several Iranian clerics who distributed a white flower to each of the men, some of whom broke down in tears.

# Obama Cabinet Shuffle Taking Shape

BY KEN THOMAS AND SAM HANANEL  
 Associated Press

WASHINGTON — The composition of President Barack Obama's second term Cabinet became clearer Wednesday, with Labor Secretary Hilda Solis resigning and three other members of the president's team deciding to stay on amid concerns about diversity in Obama's inner circle.

Solis, a former California congresswoman and one of the highest-ranking Hispanics in the Cabinet, said she was departing after leading the department during the economic storms of the first term. She was the nation's first Hispanic labor secretary.

A White House official said three Cabinet members — Attorney General Eric Holder, Health and Human Services Secretary Kathleen Sebelius and Veterans Affairs Secretary Eric Shinseki — would stay on as the second term begins. It would ensure diversity among the president's leadership team — Holder is black, Sebelius is a woman and Shinseki is of Japanese-American descent.

The official, who spoke on condition of anonymity to discuss personnel changes, said the three remaining officials were not an exhaustive list of which Cabinet members intended to stay.

Some Democratic women have raised concerns that the "big three" jobs in the Cabinet — State, Defense and Treasury — will be taken by white men. Democratic Sen. John Kerry of Massachusetts has been tapped as the next secretary of state; former Nebraska Sen. Chuck Hagel, a Republican, was picked to run the Pentagon and White House chief of staff Jack Lew is expected to be named treasury secretary later this week.

The White House is expected to announce more members of Obama's Cabinet in the coming weeks, giving the president a chance to present a team that reflects the diverse coalition of women, Hispanics and minorities that helped give him a second term.

Susan Rice, the U.S. ambassador to the United Nations and a close friend of the president, removed her name from consideration for the State Department last month following criticism from Republicans over her initial comments about the attacks on Americans in Libya. Several female House Democrats said the criticism of Rice, who is black, was indicative of sexism and racism.

EPA Administrator Lisa Jackson said last month she is stepping down after nearly four years as the administration's chief environmental watchdog. No replacement has been named, although several names are reportedly under consideration, including Washington Gov. Chris Gregoire and Jackson's deputy, Bob Perciasepe.

Gregoire is a longtime Obama ally who is leaving office next week after two terms, while Perciasepe is slated to take over as acting EPA administrator after Jackson leaves, expected in the next few weeks.

Energy Secretary Steven Chu, meanwhile, is expected to leave sometime after the inauguration, while Interior Secretary Ken Salazar's plans are unknown. Contenders to replace Chu include former North Dakota Sen. Byron Dorgan, former Michigan Gov. Jennifer Granholm and Gregoire.

The only current Republican in the Cabinet, Transportation Secretary Ray LaHood, has not indicated whether he will leave the administration.

Solis is expected to return home to California to run for a seat on the Los Angeles County Board of Supervisors.

Sebelius, a former Kansas governor and insurance commissioner, had been widely expected to stay on to shepherd Obama's health care overhaul to its fulfillment. The big push to cover some 30 million uninsured Americans starts next year.

Holder, who served in the Justice Department during the Clinton administration, has faced a rocky tenure as attorney general, dealing with civil rights and terrorism cases along with a botched gun smuggling probe along the Southwest border.

He ordered a review of CIA interrogations during the Bush era amid disclosures that agency interrogators once threatened to kill a Sept. 11 suspect's children and suggested another would be forced to watch his mother be sexually assaulted. The outcome of the exhaustive inquiry — it lasted three years and resulted in no criminal charges — prompted more criticism, this time from human rights groups.

Shinseki has sought to manage a large agency closely watched by returning troops as the war in Iraq ends and another one winds down in Afghanistan. He has dealt with problems ranging from homeless veterans, rising troop suicides and veteran unemployment and growing mental health care needs.

# Biden Vows Urgent Action On Gun Control

BY ERICA WERNER  
 Associated Press

WASHINGTON — Vice President Joe Biden vowed urgent action against gun violence in America Wednesday, pledging steps by the Obama administration that he said could "take thousands of people out of harm's way" and improve the safety of millions more.

But a day ahead of a meeting with the National Rifle Association, which has sunk past gun control efforts and is opposing any new ones, Biden signaled that the administration is mindful of political realities that could imperil sweeping gun control legislation, and is willing to settle for something less. He said the administration is considering its own executive action as well as measures by Congress, but he didn't offer specifics.

"I want to make it clear that we are not going to get caught up in the notion that unless we can do everything, we're going to do nothing," Biden told an array of gun control advocates, crime victims and others at the White House. "It's critically important we act."

Shortly after last month's slaughter of schoolchildren at Newtown, Conn., President Barack Obama tasked Biden with heading a commission to come up with recommendations on gun policy by the end of this month. Obama supports steps including reinstating a ban on assault weapons and high-capacity ammunition magazines and closing loopholes that allow many gun buyers to avoid background checks.

The Brady Campaign to



Biden

children and six adults were gunned down by a man with a military-style semiautomatic rifle, has prodded the administration to act. Obama had remained largely silent on gun control after the 2011 shootings in Tucson, Ariz., that killed six people and wounded 12 others including then-Rep. Gabrielle Giffords, and the Colorado movie theater killing of a dozen people and wounding of many more last July.

Connecticut is moving cautiously on gun control, but Gov. Andrew Cuomo in neighboring New York proposed a wide-ranging package of restrictions on Wednesday. He called for loopholes to be closed in a New York ban on assault weapons and ammunition magazines that carry more than 10 bullets. The Democrat also wants to require holders of handgun licenses to undergo follow-ups to make sure they are still qualified to possess a weapon, and he is calling for increased sentences for certain gun crimes.

Biden, referring to the Newtown shootings, said at the White House: "Every once in a while, there's something that awakens the conscience of the country, and that tragic event did it in a way like nothing I've seen in my career."

"The president and I are determined to take action. ... We can affect the wellbeing of millions of Americans and take thousands of people out of harm's way if we act responsibly."

Biden said that the administration is weighing executive action in addition to recommending legislation by Congress. Recommendations to the Biden group include making gun-trafficking a felony, getting the Justice Department to prosecute people caught lying on gun background-check forms and ordering federal agencies to send data to the National Gun Background Check Database.

Some of those pieces could happen by executive action, but congressional say-so would be needed for more far-reaching changes such as reinstating the ban on assault weapons and high-capacity ammunition magazines. Congress let the ban expire in 2004 under heavy pressure from the NRA. Democrats blamed a backlash against some lawmakers who voted for its enactment 10 years earlier for steep election losses that year.

Since then Democrats have been wary of legislating on guns, and efforts have fizzled in Congress. Already there are signs any new legislative effort by Obama could face tough going. Some pro-gun Democrats have voiced doubts, and the Senate's top Republican has warned it could be spring before Congress begins considering any gun legislation.

Obama has said that his efforts on guns can be successful only if he has the support of the public, and advocates who attended Wednesday's Biden

meeting said part of the White House message was for participants to spread the word and keep up pressure on Washington.

"They have made clear that they're in this for the long haul and they want us to be in this for the long haul," said Dan Gross, president of the Brady Campaign to Prevent Gun Violence.

Advocates participating in Wednesday's meeting, some of whom have been critical of Obama's silence on guns in the past, said they were optimistic that the president and Biden are committed to the effort this time around.

"I think it's for real," said Shira Goodman, executive director of CeaseFirePA.

Biden also held a call with Wednesday with more than 30 governors, mayors and other state and local officials to get their input on ways to curb gun violence.

For Biden, Thursday will bring a tougher audience when the NRA joins a meeting at the White House along with other gun-owner groups and retailers including Wal-Mart. NRA officials didn't return messages for comment Wednesday but the group's executive vice president, Wayne LaPierre, has dismissed the assault weapons ban as "a phony piece of legislation" and has recommended putting armed guards in all schools as a way to stop another school shooting.

Biden said he wanted to hear from "all parties, on whatever side of this debate you fall."

The president hopes to announce his administration's next steps to tackle gun violence shortly after he is sworn in for a second term on Jan. 21.

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