

# Time To Wind Down

## U.S. May Speed Up Drawdown Of Troops From Afghanistan

BY ROBERT BURNS AND JULIE PACE  
Associated Press

WASHINGTON — Uneasy allies, President Barack Obama and Afghan President Hamid Karzai demonstrated Friday they could agree on one big idea: After 11 years of war, the time is right for U.S. forces to let Afghans do their own fighting. U.S. and coalition forces will take a battlefield back seat by spring and, by implication, go home in larger numbers soon thereafter.

"It will be a historic moment," Obama declared.

In a White House meeting billed as a chance to take stock of a war that now ranks as America's longest, Obama and Karzai agreed to accelerate their timetable for putting the Afghanistan army in the lead combat role nationwide. It will happen this spring instead of summer — a shift that looks small but looms larger in the debate over how quickly to bring U.S. troops home and whether some should stay after combat ends in 2014.

The two leaders also agreed that the Afghan government would be given full control of detention centers and detainees. They did not reach agreement on an equally sticky issue: whether any U.S. troops remaining after 2014 would be granted immunity from prosecution under Afghan law. Immunity is a U.S. demand that the Afghans have resisted, saying they want assurances on other things — like authority over detainees — first.

At a joint news conference with Karzai in the White House East Room, Obama said he was not yet ready to decide the pace of U.S. troop withdrawals between now and December 2014. That is the target date set by NATO and the Afghan government for the international combat mission to end. There are now 66,000 U.S. troops there.

Obama's message was clear: The Afghans must now show they are capable of standing on their own.

"By the end of next year, 2014, the transition will be complete — Afghans will have full responsibility for their security, and this war will come to a responsible end," he said, noting that more than 2,000 Americans have died since the war began in October 2001.

The Afghan army and police now have 352,000 in training or on duty, although that number is viewed by many as unsustainable because the government is almost entirely reliant on international aid to pay the bills.

Some private security analysts — and some



MARK WILSON/GETTY IMAGES VIA ABACA PRESS/MCT  
**President Barack Obama (right) meets with Afghan President Hamid Karzai in the Oval Office at the White House Friday in Washington. Karzai is on a visit in Washington to discuss the continued transition in Afghanistan and the partnership between the two nations.**

in the Pentagon — worry that pulling out too quickly will leave Afghanistan vulnerable to collapse. In a worst-case scenario, that could allow the Taliban to regain power and revert to the role they played in the years before the Sept. 11, 2001, attacks as protectors of al-Qaida terrorists bent on striking the U.S.

Many Americans, however, are weary of the war and skeptical of any claim that Afghanistan is worth more U.S. blood.

In a reflection of the diminishing support in Congress for a robust U.S. role in Afghanistan, Sen. Joe Manchin, D-W.Va., a member of the Armed Services Committee, sent a letter to Obama on Friday urging him to significantly reduce the number of American troops in the region and bring American forces home as quickly as possible.

"Our troops have accomplished their mission: Osama bin Laden is dead, extremist networks in Afghanistan have been disrupted so that they are no longer a credible international threat and the Afghan security forces have re-

ceived training and equipment for nearly a decade," Manchin wrote. "It is now time to let Afghanistan determine its own future."

Obama and Karzai also have to decide whether a residual U.S. force will remain after 2014 to prevent al-Qaida from re-establishing a substantial presence in Afghanistan and to continue training and advising Afghan forces. U.S. commanders have recommended that 6,000 to 15,000 U.S. troops remain for those purposes, but the White House seems to believe the true need is closer to 3,000 — or possibly even zero.

Asked at the news conference about a potential post-2014 U.S. military presence, Karzai said, "Numbers are not going to make a difference to the situation in Afghanistan. It's the broader relationship that will make a difference."

Although it's not widely recognized in the U.S., American forces have greatly scaled back their combat role already. In a joint statement, Obama and Karzai said Afghan forces now lead more than 80 percent of combat operations,

# Influenza Cases Are Now Widespread

BY MIKE STOBBE  
AP Medical Writer

NEW YORK — Flu is now widespread in all but three states as the nation grapples with an earlier-than-normal season. But there was one bit of good news Friday: The number of hard-hit areas declined.

The flu season in the U.S. got under way a month early, in December, driven by a strain that tends to make people sicker. That led to worries that it might be a bad season, following one of the mildest flu seasons in recent memory.

The latest numbers do show that the flu surpassed an "epidemic" threshold last week. That is based on deaths from pneumonia and influenza in 122 U.S. cities. However, it's not unusual — the epidemic level varies at different times of the year, and it was breached earlier this flu season, in October and November.

And there's a hint that the flu season may already have peaked in some spots, like in the South. Still, officials there and elsewhere are bracing for more sickness.

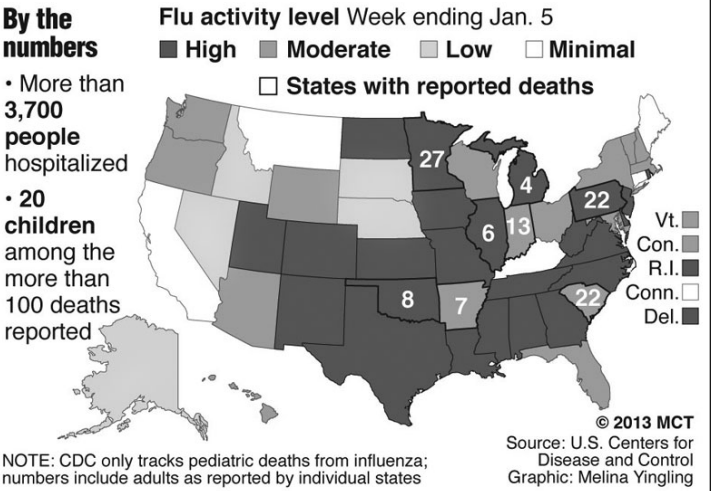
In Ohio, administrators at Miami University are anxious that a bug that hit employees will spread to students when they return to the Oxford campus next week.

"Everybody's been sick. It's miserable," said Ritter Hoy, a spokeswoman for the 17,000-student school.

Despite the early start, health officials say it's not too late to get a

## The flu's reach

Forty-seven states have reported widespread flu activity, but officials are hopeful the virus may be beginning to wane.



flu shot. The vaccine is considered a good — though not perfect — protection against getting really sick from the flu.

Flu was widespread in 47 states last week, up from 41 the week before, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention said on Friday. The only states without widespread flu were California, Mississippi and Hawaii.

The number of hard-hit states fell to 24 from 29, where larger numbers of people were treated for flu-like illness. Now off that list: Florida, Arkansas and South Carolina in the South, the first region

hit this flu season.

Recent flu reports included holiday weeks when some doctor's offices were closed, so it will probably take a couple more weeks to get a better picture, CDC officials said Friday. Experts say so far say the season looks moderate.

"Only time will tell how moderate or severe this flu season will be," CDC Director Dr. Thomas Frieden said Friday in a teleconference with reporters.

The government doesn't keep a running tally of adult deaths from the flu, but estimates that it kills about 24,000 people in an average

year. Nationally, 20 children have died from the flu this season.

Flu vaccinations are recommended for everyone 6 months or older. Since the swine flu epidemic in 2009, vaccination rates have increased in the U.S., but more than half of Americans haven't gotten this year's vaccine.

Nearly 130 million doses of flu vaccine were distributed this year, and at least 112 million have been used. Vaccine is still available, but supplies may have run low in some locations, officials said.

To find a shot, "you may have to call a couple places," said Dr. Patricia Quinlisk, who tracks the flu in Iowa.

In midtown Manhattan, Hyrmete Sciuto got a flu shot Friday at a drugstore. She skipped it in recent years, but news reports about the flu this week worried her.

During her commute from Edgewater, N.J., by ferry and bus, "I have people coughing in my face," she said. "I didn't want to risk it this year."

The vaccine is no guarantee, though, that you won't get sick. On Friday, CDC officials said a recent study of more than 1,100 people has concluded the current flu vaccine is 62 percent effective. That means the average vaccinated person is 62 percent less likely to get a case of flu that sends them to the doctor, compared to people who don't get the vaccine. That's in line with other years.

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## Video Game Industry Defends Its Practices

WASHINGTON (AP) — The video game industry, blamed by some for fostering a culture of violence, defended its practices Friday at a White House meeting exploring how to prevent horrific shootings like the recent Connecticut elementary school massacre.

Vice President Joe Biden, wrapping up three days of wide-ranging talks on gun violence prevention, said the meeting was an effort to understand whether the U.S. was undergoing a "coarsening of our culture."

"I come to this meeting with no judgment. You all know the judgments other people have made," Biden said at the opening of a two-hour discussion. "We're looking for help."

The gaming industry says that violent crime, particularly among the young, has fallen since the early 1990s while video games have increased in popularity.

There are conflicting studies on the impact of video games and other screen violence. Some conclude that video games can desensitize people to real-world violence or temporarily quiet part of the brain that governs impulse control. Other studies have concluded there is no lasting effect.

## Mali: French Launch Military Operations

BAMAKO, Mali (AP) — France launched airstrikes Friday to help the government of Mali defeat al-Qaida-linked militants who captured more ground this week, dramatically raising the stakes in the battle for this vast desert nation.

French President Francois Hollande said the "terrorist groups, drug traffickers and extremists" in northern Mali "show a brutality that threatens us all." He vowed that the operation would last "as long as necessary."

France said it was taking the action in Mali at the request of President Dioncounda Traore, who declared a state of emergency because of the militants' advance.

The arrival of the French troops in their former colony came a day after the Islamists moved the closest yet toward territory still under government control and fought the Malian military for the first time in months, seizing the strategic city of Konna.

Sanda Abou Moahmed, a spokesman for the Ansar Dine group, condemned Mali's president for seeking military help from its former colonizer.

## Student Stopped Shooting After Apology

TAFT, Calif. (AP) — Morgan Alldredge had just finished her oceanography test when a classmate she knows well suddenly walked in the open door to her science class with a shotgun.

"He didn't say anything. He just shot right away," said the 16-year-old junior who was sitting by the doorway as the terrifying events unfolded Thursday morning at Taft Union High School, about 120 miles northwest of Los Angeles.

The round struck a boy in the chest and shoulder. The shooter then quickly pumped the gun Alldredge identified as a Winchester 12-gauge and immediately fired another round at students trying to flee out a back door.

"He had a kind of disturbing smile on his face. Kind of a smirk," said Alldredge, who estimated she was about 5 feet from the gunman. He then looked at her and mouthed the words "not you" as she sat frozen at her desk, Alldredge said. "All I want is Jacob," he said.

That boy, Alldredge's former boyfriend, was hiding behind a desk in the classroom.

## Ohio School Board May Arm Non-Educators

TOLEDO, Ohio (AP) — A rural school district in Ohio is drawing attention with its plans to arm a handful of its non-teaching employees with handguns this year — perhaps even janitors.

Four employees in the Montpelier schools have agreed to take a weapons training course and carry their own guns inside the district's one building, which houses 1,000 students in kindergarten through 12th grade, school officials said.

"It's kind of a sign of the times," Superintendent Jamie Grime said Friday.

The Toledo Blade reported that the employees were janitors, but school officials would not confirm that to The Associated Press, saying only that they are employees who don't have direct supervision over the students in the northwest Ohio district.

The four employees who will carry guns all volunteered to take part, Grime said. The school plans to pay for them to attend a two-day training course.

## Report: Warming Is Changing U.S. Daily Life

WASHINGTON (AP) — A massive new federal scientific report says global warming is already changing America from sea to rising sea and how Americans live.

The government issued Friday a 1,146-page draft report that details in dozens of ways how climate change is already disrupting the health, homes and other facets of daily American life. It warns that those disruptions will increase in the future.

The blunt report takes a global environmental issue and explains what it means for different U.S. regions, for various sectors of the economy and for future generations.

The National Climate Assessment doesn't say what should be done about global warming. White House science adviser John Holdren writes that it will help leaders, regulators, city planners and even farmers figure out what to do to cope with coming changes.

# Computer Users Advised To Disable Java

WASHINGTON (AP) — The U.S. Department of Homeland Security is advising people to temporarily disable the Java software on their computers to avoid potential hacking attacks.

The recommendation came in an advisory issued late Thursday, following up on concerns raised by computer security experts.

Experts believe hackers have found a flaw in Java's coding that creates an opening for criminal activity and other high-tech mischief.

Java is a widely used technical language that allows computer programmers to write a wide variety of Internet applications and other software programs that can run on just about any computer's operating system.

Oracle Corp. bought Java as

part of a \$7.3 billion acquisition of the software's creator, Sun Microsystems, in 2010.

Oracle, which is based in Redwood Shores, Calif., had no immediate comment late Friday.

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