

# Suicides Surging Among U.S. Troops

BY ROBERT BURNS

AP National Security Writer

WASHINGTON — Suicides are surging among America's troops, averaging nearly one a day this year — the fastest pace in the nation's decade of war.

The 154 suicides for active-duty troops in the first 155 days of the year far outdistance the U.S. forces killed in action in Afghanistan — about 50 percent more — according to Pentagon statistics obtained by The Associated Press.

The numbers reflect a military burdened with wartime demands from Iraq and Afghanistan that have taken a greater toll than foreseen a decade ago. The military also is struggling with increased sexual assaults, alcohol abuse, domestic violence and other misbehavior.

Because suicides have leveled off in 2010 and 2011, this year's upswing has caught some officials by surprise.

The reasons for the increase are not fully understood. Among explanations, studies have pointed to combat exposure, post-traumatic stress, misuse of prescription medications and personal financial problems. Army data suggest soldiers with multiple combat tours are at greater risk of committing suicide, although a substantial proportion of Army suicides are committed by soldiers

who never deployed.

The unpopular war in Afghanistan is winding down with the last combat troops scheduled to leave at the end of 2014. But this year has seen record numbers of soldiers being killed by Afghan troops, and there also have been several scandals involving U.S. troop misconduct.

The 2012 active-duty suicide total of 154 through June 3 compares to 130 in the same period last year, an 18 percent increase. And it's more than the 136.2 suicides that the Pentagon had projected for this period based on the trend from 2001-2011. This year's January-May total is up 25 percent from two years ago, and it is 16 percent ahead of the pace for 2009, which ended with the highest yearly total thus far.

Suicide totals have exceeded U.S. combat deaths in Afghanistan in earlier periods, including for the full years 2008 and 2009.

The suicide pattern varies over the course of a year, but in each of the past five years the trend through May was a reliable predictor for the full year, according to a chart based on figures provided by the Armed Forces Medical Examiner.

The numbers are rising among the 1.4 million active-duty military personnel despite years of effort to encourage troops to seek help with mental health problems. Many in the military believe that going for help is

seen as a sign of weakness and thus a potential threat to advancement.

Kim Ruocco, widow of Marine Maj. John Ruocco, a helicopter pilot who hanged himself in 2005 between Iraq deployments, said he was unable to bring himself to go for help.

"He was so afraid of how people would view him once he went for help," she said in an interview at her home in suburban Boston. "He thought that people would think he was weak, that people would think he was just trying to get out of redeploying or trying to get out of service, or that he just couldn't hack it - when, in reality, he was sick. He had suffered injury in combat and he had also suffered from depression and let it go untreated for years. And because of that, he's dead today."

Jackie Garrick, head of a newly established Defense Suicide Prevention Office at the Pentagon, said in an interview Thursday that the suicide numbers this year are troubling.

"We are very concerned at this point that we are seeing a high number of suicides at a point in time where we were expecting to see a lower number of suicides," she said, adding that the weak U.S. economy may be confounding preventive efforts even as the pace of military deployments eases.

Garrick said experts are still struggling to understand suicidal behavior.

## Exhibit

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religious education and fun activities.

"It's especially timely for the exhibit to be here," noted the Rev. Dan Smith, pastor at Sacred Heart Church.

The exhibit provides an important illustration of Jesus Christ's presence in the bread and wine at communion, Smith said. "Our faith doesn't come from miracles, but miracles help support our faith," he said.

The exhibit made its debut in the diocese last fall at St. Nicholas Parish in Tea. A group of St. Nicholas members worked together to bring the exhibit to the Sioux Falls Diocese.

St. Nicholas parishioner Earl Markley helped bring the exhibit to eastern South Dakota. "We banded together for fundraising, and we found \$10,000 to cover the cost of the posters and other expenses. We also designed our own easels to make it easier for displaying the posters," he said.

Markley remains hopeful that each of the 150 diocesan parishes will sign up and bring the exhibit to their church.

While Markley helps oversee the exhibits, Julie (Kolda) Dickes of Sioux Falls schedules the tours. Usually, a request for a local exhibit is initiated by the parish priest or someone working with the priest, she said. Volunteers also work with the local exhibits.

"The exhibit has been as far away (in the diocese) as Herreid, Selby and Eureka, and those towns are five hours from Sioux Falls," she said. "The exhibit usually comes to a parish for a week, although we may schedule a parish for two weeks during the winter in case there is bad weather (that keeps away visitors)."

Prior to the Yankton visit, the Eucharistic miracles exhibit will appear Friday-Sunday at the Marian Congress in Alexandria. The exhibit will be held in conjunction with the 25th anniversary of the Fatima Family Shrine in that community.

The Eucharistic miracles exhibit draws people of all faiths and has inspired intense reactions from visitors, said Dickes, a Wagner native.

"People have been on their knees, weeping because of what they have seen," she said. "We had a Lutheran couple who came (to view the exhibit) and they could only stay a little while because it totally overwhelmed them."

Budig believes the Yankton exhibit can inspire similar strong emotions as visitors witness the miracles.

"Until we are able to see it, we can't explain it or fathom it," he said. "But once you see it, your senses can perceive something that is real."

For more information about the Yankton exhibit, call the Sacred Heart Parish Office at (605) 665-3655. For more information on the Sioux Falls Diocese exhibit, contact Markley at (605) 214-1620.

More information on the exhibit's contents and history can be found online at [www.eucharisticmiraclesexhibit.com](http://www.eucharisticmiraclesexhibit.com).

You can follow Randy Dockendorf on Twitter at [twitter.com/RDockendorf](https://twitter.com/RDockendorf)

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**A Free Syrian Army member stands guard over an FSA base in central Syria, June 6, 2012. Throughout northern Syria, the FSA has carved out areas that are safe from the army's incursion, allowing them to launch attacks and then pull back with relative impunity.**

DAVID ENDERS/MCT

## U.N. Monitors Shot At Near Site Of Latest Syrian Mass Killing

BY ZEINA KARAM  
AND EDITH M. LEDERER

Associated Press

BEIRUT — U.N. observers came under fire Thursday as they tried to reach the site of the latest reported mass killing in Syria — about 80 people, including women and children who were shot or stabbed. The deaths added urgency to diplomatic efforts to end the escalating bloodshed.

As reports emerged of what would be the fourth such mass slaying of civilians in Syria in the last two weeks, the United States condemned President Bashar Assad, saying he has "doubled down on his brutality and duplicity."

International envoy Kofi Annan, whose peace plan brokered in April has not been implemented, warned against allowing "mass killings to become part of everyday reality in Syria."

"If things do not change, the future is likely to be one of brutal repression, massacres, sectarian violence, and even all-out civil war," Annan told the U.N. General Assembly in New York. "All Syrians will lose."

U.N. diplomats said Annan was proposing that world powers and key regional players, including Iran, come up with a new strategy



to end the 15-month conflict at a closed meeting of the Security Council that took place Thursday.

Speaking to reporters after the meeting, Annan highlighted the urgency of taking action to diffuse the situation.

Standing alongside Annan and League of Arab States Secretary General Nabil Elaraby, U.N. Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon echoed the sense of urgency.

"The three of us agree: Syria can quickly go from a tipping point to a breaking point. The danger of full-scale civil war is imminent and real, with catastrophic consequences for Syria and the region," Ban warned.

Any proposal to resolve the

situation, however, must be acceptable to Russia and China, which have protected ally from past U.N. sanctions, as well as the U.S. and its European allies, they said, speaking on condition of anonymity because consultations have been private.

The latest violence centered on Mazraat al-Qubair, a small farming community of 160 people, mostly Bedouins, in central Hama province. Activists said the Sunni village is surrounded by Alawite villages. Alawites are an offshoot of Shiite Islam and Assad is a member of the sect, while the opposition is dominated by Sunnis.

A resident said troops shelled the area for five hours Wednesday before government-aligned militiamen known as "shabiha" entered the area that is known to shelter army defectors, "killing and hacking everyone they could find."

Leith Al-Hamwy told The Associated Press by telephone that he survived by hiding in an olive grove about 800 meters (yards) from the farms as the killings took place. But he said his mother and six siblings, the youngest 10-year-old twins, did not.

"When I came out of hiding and went inside the houses, I saw bodies everywhere. Entire families either shot or killed with sharp sticks and knives," he said.

## Many Liberals Frustrated With Obama

PROVIDENCE, R.I. (AP) — They are trying to be hopeful, but the Democratic Party's most passionate voters are struggling to hide their frustration with President Barack Obama.

Republicans attack the president as a big-government liberal. Many liberals meeting Thursday at Netroots Nation — it describes the annual convention as "a giant family reunion for the left" — argue instead that Obama hasn't fought hard enough for progressive priorities on taxes, health care and the economy.

Even more problematic for the president: With the election just five months away, some are threatening not to donate money or time or even vote in November for the man who overwhelmingly ignited their passions and captured their imaginations four years ago.

"I want to be happy with him," said Democrat Kristine Vaughan, a 45-year-old school psychologist from Canton, Ohio. "But I am finding that he has succumbed to the corporate influence as much as everyone else. I think he has so much potential to break out of that, but overall he has been a disappointment."

Vaughan isn't sure whether she'll vote for Obama a second time and probably won't donate money as she did during his first campaign. She refuses to support Republican challenger Mitt Romney, but is considering writing in another candidate in protest.

## House Republicans Press AG Holder For Info

WASHINGTON (AP) — Attorney General Eric Holder clashed Thursday with congressional Republicans seeking more information about a flawed gun-trafficking investigation in Arizona.

Lawmakers at a House Judiciary Committee hearing asked Holder what he knew in advance of public disclosure of a so-called gun-walking tactic in early 2011. As part of Operation Fast and Furious, agents were told to forego immediate arrests of suspected straw purchasers of guns and instead try to track the guns to higher-ups in gun-smuggling rings. Such a tactic is normally barred under Justice Department policy.

Agents lost track of hundreds of guns which flowed south to Mexico, where many were recovered at crime scenes. Two such guns were found in the U.S. at the scene of the killing of border agent Brian Terry.

Holder told the committee he became aware of the gun-walking tactic at the same time as the public and that he found out "about the same time" that guns found at the scene of Terry's death were part of Operation Fast and Furious.

Holder has faced off repeatedly with Issa and other Republicans in recent months over his handling of the aborted firearms investigation. Issa's committee has prepared a contempt citation against Holder but not voted on it yet, applying pressure for more documents on Operation Fast and Furious.

## Romney And GOP Raise \$76.8M In May

WASHINGTON (AP) — Mitt Romney outraised President Barack Obama in May, the first time the Republican presidential challenger has jumped ahead of Obama and his prodigious fundraising apparatus. The numbers illustrate how Romney and the Republican Party have jelled as a force after a protracted GOP primary.

Romney and his party raised more than \$76 million last month, the campaign said Thursday. Obama's campaign reported that it and the Democratic Party raised \$60 million for the month.

Obama, forced onto the defensive by lackluster employment numbers, also launched a new television ad Thursday in nine key election-year states targeting Congress and blaming lawmakers for not acting on his jobs proposals. The approach represents an expanded ad focus for Obama, who had been going after Romney.

The fundraising numbers and Obama's new ad signal a new stage in the campaign as a resurgent Romney capitalizes on his emergence as the GOP's standard-bearer and as Obama is forced to confront the political implications of a weak economic recovery.

"We got beat," Obama campaign manager Jim Messina wrote bluntly in an e-mail to supporters, urging contributors to step up their giving.

## Ark. Teen Hated Sister He Killed, Friend Says

LITTLE ROCK, Ark. (AP) — An Arkansas teenager who admitted shooting and killing his sister as she slept never told police or prosecutors why he did it, but according to a childhood friend, the 15-year-old hated the straight-A student and athlete.

That friend described animosity between Colton Harvey and his 16-year-old sister, Candace, in an interview with authorities obtained Thursday by The Associated Press under a Freedom of Information Act request. Harvey pleaded guilty to second-degree murder this week in exchange for a 45-year prison sentence.

"He's always said that he hated his sister, but he wasn't ever saying nothing about he was gonna kill his sister," the friend said in February, about a month after Harvey pointed his father's rifle at his sister's head and fired three shots.

Harvey turned himself in the morning of the shooting, after heading to that friend's home and telling him what happened.

Harvey never explained to authorities or the court why he killed his sister. While his friend's answers hint at one possible explanation, his mother, in another interview with authorities, said her children didn't really fight.



Spencer-Hufford

Ashley Spencer and James Hufford of Yankton announce their engagement. Parents of the couple are Bret and Linda Spencer of Tabor and Carrie Fuerst of Huron.

Ashley attended Stewart's School and is currently a licensed cosmetologist at Smart Style in Yankton. James is employed by Avera Sister James Care Center in Yankton. A June 23, 2012, wedding is planned in Huron.

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