

Balance Of Power In Syrian War Shifting

BEIRUT (AP) — As hopes for a Syrian peace conference fade and the opposition falls into growing disarray, President Bashar Assad has every reason to project confidence.

Government forces have moved steadily against rebels in key areas of the country over the past two months, making strategic advances and considerably lowering the threat to the capital, Damascus.

With army soldiers no longer defecting and elite Hezbollah fighters actively helping, the regime now clearly has the upper hand in a two-year civil war that has killed more than 70,000 people.

In back-to-back interviews with Lebanese TV stations this week, Assad and his foreign minister both projected an image of self-assuredness, boasting of achievements and suggesting that the military's offensive would continue regardless of whether a peace track is in place.

"What is happening now is not a shift in tactic from defense to attack, but rather a shift in the balance of power in favor of the armed forces," Assad said of his troops' recent battleground successes.

Recent Attacks Highlight Intelligence Dilemma

PARIS (AP) — Intelligence agencies that have succeeded in thwarting many of al-Qaida's plans for spectacular attacks are struggling to combat the terror network's strategy of encouraging followers to keep to themselves, use off-the-shelf weapons and strike when they see an opportunity.

In recent weeks — at the Boston Marathon, in the streets of London and in the shadow of one of Paris' most recognizable monuments — young men allegedly carried out attacks with little help, using inexpensive, widely available knives and explosives from everyday ingredients. In each of the attacks, suspects had previously been flagged to law enforcement and deemed not to be a priority.

There are no indications that the suspects in the recent attacks were responding specifically to al-Qaida calls to act in a vacuum — but their alleged actions closely follow the lone wolf model that the network has been promoting.

A tough debate now rages within the intelligence community — previously focused on searching for al-Qaida cells — on how to assess red flags without violating basic liberties.

Pakistan May Be Next Up For An IMF Bailout

ISLAMABAD (AP) — With foreign reserves diminishing fast, Pakistan is on the brink of an economic crisis that may force its new government to ask for an unpopular bailout from the International Monetary Fund requiring a sweeping overhaul of the country's economy.

The troubles could inject a new element of instability into the nuclear-armed nation of 180 million people that Washington is relying on to combat Islamic militants at home and to help negotiate an end to the war in neighboring Afghanistan.

Pakistan's foreign currency reserves stood at just \$6.4 billion as of May 17, down from more than \$14 billion two years ago. That is only enough to cover about 1.5 months' worth of imports while the IMF considers adequate foreign reserves for any country enough to cover three months of imports.

Bottoming out could bring painful consequences: A run on the banks by panicked citizens anxious to convert savings into dollars amid fears of a devaluation, a withdrawal from the stock market, a collapse of economic activity and higher unemployment.

4 Firefighters Killed Battling Houston Hotel Fire

HOUSTON (AP) — Authorities say four firefighters are dead after trying to battle a fire that engulfed a Houston motel along a busy expressway.

The Houston mayor's office released a statement saying the four firefighters were killed Friday after a blaze broke out at the Southwest Inn. The local medical examiner's office says three victims died at the scene, while the fourth died at a hospital.

Five others were injured and are hospitalized for chest pains or leg injuries.

The blaze broke out just after noon Friday at a restaurant and club at the motel along U.S. 59, one of Houston's most heavily traveled expressways. Flames spread to the motel and were shooting from the roof before firefighters extinguished the blaze about two hours later.

The fire's cause hasn't been released.

Arizona Fire Officials: Planes Collide; 4 Dead

PHOENIX (AP) — Authorities say two small planes collided and then crashed in the desert north of Phoenix on Friday, killing all four people aboard the two aircraft.

Phoenix and Daisy Mountain Fire Department officials said the collision and crash involved two single-engine planes with two people in each aircraft.

An initial report said three people were killed and two people were injured. Fire officials with the Peoria Fire Department and Daisy Mountain Fire Department later announced four people had died and there were no survivors.

Television news footage showed only charred wreckage left from one of the planes, while the other was fairly intact.

A Federal Aviation Administration spokesman says the National Transportation Safety Board and the FAA will investigate.

Ricin Seen As Relatively Easy To Prepare

JACKSON, Miss. (AP) — The key ingredient — castor beans — is easy to find. Crude instructions for extracting the lethal poison in them can be found on the Internet. And it doesn't require a chemistry degree or sophisticated lab equipment.

The FBI is investigating at least three cases over the past month and a half in which ricin was mailed to President Barack Obama and other public figures.

Ricin has been sent to officials sporadically over the years, but experts say that there seems to be a recent uptick and that copycat attacks — made possible by the relative ease of extracting the poison — may be the reason.

"I can absolutely promise you that when these kinds of things happen, we're going to have copycats. We expect them. We prepare for them. And we catch them," said Murray Cohen, founder of the Atlanta-based Frontline Foundation, which trains workers in how to respond to bioterrorism and epidemics.

Security and counterterrorism expert Michael Fagel, who teaches at Northwestern University and is a veteran of ricin investigations, said ricin may be employed because castor beans are so easy to come by.

Ex-NBA Guard Critically Injured In Crash

JONESBORO, Ga. (AP) — Former NBA All-Star guard Daron "Mookie" Blaylock was on life support at a hospital Friday after his SUV crossed the center line and crashed head-on into a van in suburban Atlanta, police said.

Blaylock was driving in Jonesboro Friday when he crashed and was airlifted to the Atlanta Medical Center in critical condition, said Clayton County police spokesman Clarence Cox.

Cox says the man and woman riding in the van were also taken to the medical center. Their names and conditions were not immediately available.

The 46-year-old Blaylock was a first-round draft pick by the New Jersey Nets out of Oklahoma in 1989.

He played for the Atlanta Hawks between 1992 and 1999, appeared in the 1994 NBA All-Star game and had his best season in 1996-97, averaging 17.4 points and 5.9 assists.

In 13 NBA seasons with New Jersey, Atlanta and Golden State, he averaged 13.5 points and 6.2 assists.

Medicare Respite; Social Security No Worse

**BY RICARDO ALONSO-ZALDIVAR
AND ALAN FRAM**
Associated Press

WASHINGTON — Medicare's long-term health is starting to look a little better, the government said Friday, but both Social Security and Medicare are still wobbling toward insolvency within two decades if Congress and the president don't find a way to shore up the trust funds established to take care of older Americans.

Medicare's giant fund for inpatient care will be exhausted in 2026, two years later than estimated last year, while Social Security's projected insolvency in 2033 remains unchanged, the government reported.

An overall slowdown in health care spending is helping Medicare. Spending cuts in President Barack Obama's health care law are also having a positive impact on the balance sheet, but they may prove politically unsustainable over the long run.

The relatively good news about two programs that provide a foundation of economic security for nearly every American family is a respite, not a free pass. Program trustees urged lawmakers anew to seize a current opportunity and make long-term changes to improve finances. Action now would be far less jarring than having to hit the brakes at the edge of a fiscal cliff.

Politically, however, Friday's positive report and the absence of a crisis could make legislative action less likely, especially in light of the lack of trust between President Barack Obama and Republicans in Congress. No end is in sight for the partisan standoff over what to do about Social Security and Medicare, two of the government's costliest programs, and the mam-

Social Security and Medicare

The latest projections from the trust fund trustees for Social Security and Medicare show that the programs still face major funding issues.

Social Security

The trustees forecast that the Social Security Trust Fund (surplus) will be depleted by 2033, unchanged from last year's forecast; year-end assets, in trillions

