CHAL SECUP

exhausted;

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, Damas-

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

'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

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 expresswav.

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

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 col lision and crash involved two single-engine planes with two people in

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 FÂA 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 Atlantabased 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

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

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 Jer-

sey 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.

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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

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 fis-

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

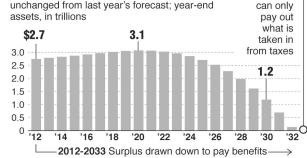
costliest programs, and the mam-

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



Medicare ■ Projected income, Medicare Trust Fund will be depleted by 2026, two years

■ Projected projected cash flow* 300 200

*Also known as Part A; helps pay for hospital, home health, skilled nursing facility, hospice Source: Social Security Administration, 2012 Annual Report of the Board of Trustees

fuel. Still, fresh warnings were sounded.

moth budget deficits they help

"Under current law, both of these vitally important programs are on unsustainable paths," said economist Robert D. Reischauer, one of two independent public trustees overseeing the annual reports.

The window for action "is in the process of closing even as we speak," said his counterpart, Charles Blahous III, also a prominent economist.

Social Security provides monthly benefit checks to about 57 million people, including 40 million retirees and their dependents, 11 million disabled workers and dependents and 6 million survivors of deceased workers. Medicare covers nearly 51 million people, mainly retirees but also disabled workers.

If the funds ever become exhausted, the nation's two biggest benefit programs would collect only enough money to pay partial

Social Security could cover only

about 75 percent of benefits, while Medicare's fund for hospital and nursing rehabilitation care could pay 87 percent of costs.

13

With 10,000 baby boomers turning 65 every day, America's aging population is straining both programs.

While the combined Social Security fund was projected to be depleted in 2033, the trustees warned that the threat to one of its component trust funds that makes payments to workers on disability is much more urgent. They projected that the disability trust fund would deplete its reserves in just three years, in 2016. That date is unchanged from last year's report.

Blahous said he hoped that would prod lawmakers to act on the broad challenges facing Social Security.

The remaining trustees are senior administration officials, including Treasury Secretary Jacob Lew and Health and Human Services Secretary Kathleen Sebelius. While acknowledging the need for long-term changes to improve program finances, they used the occasion of the annual report to assert that Obama's policies are working, particularly his health care overhaul.

White House spokesman Josh Earnest saw validation in the reports, too. The Medicare numbers showed Obama's health overhaul "is having a positive effect on the deficit," he said, while the Social Security report supports the president's contention that the retirement program is "not driving our short-term deficit."

Motivation for both sides to tackle federal spending deficits always risky because of the pain that could cause voters - has already declined because the improving economy has also pushed projected federal deficits downward. This year's shortfall is now expected to be \$642 billion, down from \$1.1 trillion last year.

2 Dead As Tornado Hits Oklahoma posted Friday night near Tulsa while her young nieces played on

BY SEAN MURPHY **Associated Press**

OKLAHOMA CITY - Tornadoes rolled in from the prairie and slammed Oklahoma City and its suburbs on Friday, killing a mother and baby and crumbling cars and tractor-trailers along a

major interstate. The broad storm hit during the evening rush hour, causing havoc on Interstate 40, a major artery connecting suburbs east and west of the city. To the south, winds approaching 80 mph were forecast for Moore, where a top-of-thescale EF5 tornado killed 24 on

May 20. Floodwaters up to 4 feet deep hampered rescue attempts and frequent lightning roiled the skies well after the main threat had passed to the east.

Oklahoma Highway Patrol Trooper Betsy Randolph said troopers found the bodies of a woman and an infant near their vehicle. Randolph said it's not known if the woman was driving into the storm when it hit around 7 p.m. Friday.

Emergency officials reported numerous injuries were reported in the area along I-40, and Randolph said there were toppled and wrecked cars littering the area. Troopers requested a number of ambulances at I-40 near Yukon, west of Oklahoma City.

Hail and heavy rain pelted the



metro area to the point that emergency workers had trouble responding to "widespread" reports of injuries.

'We're scrambling around," said Lara O'Leary, a spokeswoman for the local ambulance agency. "There is very low visibility with the heavy rain ... so we're having trouble getting around.

The damage is very, very widespread."

Standing water was several feet deep, and downtown Oklahoma City looked more like a hurricane had gone through than a tornado.

Tornado warnings were also

and near St. Louis. In Oklahoma, storm chasers with cameras in their cars transmitted video showing a number of funnels dropping from the supercell thunderstorm as it passed

homa City just south of downtown. Police urged motorists to leave I-40 and seek a safe place. "I'm in a car running from the tornado," said Amy Sharp, who last week pulled her fourth-grade daughter from the Plaza Towers Elementary School as a storm approached with 210 mph winds.

south of El Reno and into Okla-

last week's storm. "I'm with my children who wanted their mother out of that town," Sharp said, her voice quivering with emotion.

I'm in Norman and it just hit

Yukon where I was staying" since

At Will Rogers World Airport southwest of Oklahoma City, passengers were directed into underground tunnels and inbound and outbound flights were canceled.

Television cameras showed debris falling from the sky and power transformers being knocked out by high winds.

As the storm bore down on suburban Oklahoma City, Adrian Lillard, 28, of The Village, went to the basement of her mother's office building with a friend, her nieces, nephews and two dogs.

"My brother's house was in Moore, so it makes you take more immediate action," Lillard said a blanket on the floor of the parking garage. "We brought toys and snacks to try our best to keep them comfortable." Well before Oklahoma's first

thunderstorms fired up at late afternoon, the Storm Prediction Center in Norman was already forecasting a violent evening. From the Texas border to near Joplin, Mo., residents were told to keep an eye to the sky and an ear

Forecasters warned of a "particularly dangerous situation, with ominous language about strong tornadoes and hail the size of grapefruits — 4 inches in diam-Flash flooding and tornadoes

killed three people in Arkansas late Thursday and early Friday. Three others were missing in floods that followed 6 inches of rain in the rugged Quachita Mountains near Y City, 125 miles west of Little Rock.

This spring's tornado season got a late start, with unusually cool weather keeping funnel clouds at bay until mid-May. The season usually starts in March and then ramps up for the next couple of months.

Most tornadoes in the United States are relatively small. Of the 60 EF5 tornadoes to hit since 1950, Oklahoma and Alabama have been hit the most — seven times each.

Woman's Jailing In Mexico Highlights Tourists Risks Kidnappings and cartel vio-

BY BOB CHRISTIE, CRISTINA SILVA **AND ELLIOT SPAGAT**

Associated Press

PHOENIX — The weeklong detention of an American woman after Mexican authorities said they found 12 pounds of marijuana under her bus seat illustrates just one of the perils Americans face while traveling in Mexico.

Yanira Maldonado, 42, walked out of a prison on the outskirts of Nogales, Mexico, and into her husband's arms late Thursday after a judge dismissed drug-smuggling charges against her.

The judge determined Maldonado was no longer a suspect after viewing video that showed the couple climbing on the bus with just a purse, blankets and bottles of water.

"Many thanks to everyone, especially my God who let me go free, my family, my children, who with their help, I was able to survive this test," she said outside the jail before crossing through the Nogales port of entry into Ari-

The governor of the Mexican state of Sonora, where Nogales is located, apologized for Maldonado's ordeal during a visit to Phoenix on Friday. He said he made sure she was safe and wasn't transferred to a federal prison and worked to ensure the court proceedings went quickly. "In a few words I could say

we're very sorry that she was in the wrong place in the wrong moment," Gov. Guillermo Padres Elias said. "But we're very glad that she's OK and she still says ... that she will continue visiting our country and she will continue going on tourism trips to Sonora. "Because Sonora really likes

the United States people and Arizonans to go down there. We welcome them with open arms with a big smile and we see you as a family, so we want to continue with

With kidnappings, drug cartel shootouts and other violent crime pervasive in parts of Mexico, the tourism industry has taken a hit, although popular destinations like Cancun are so well-protected that problems are rare.

lence are prominent among the U.S. State Department's lengthy set of warnings about travel in Mexico. But there are also warnings about getting caught up in drug smuggling, either by being used as a "blind mule" who doesn't know drugs have been put in their car or luggage, or by being strong-armed by smugglers who threaten harm if a person doesn't carry drugs.

Maldonado also may have been caught up in a shakedown by Mexican police who were seeking a bribe. Her husband said police sought \$5,000 to let her go.



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