

## Syrians Vote In Election Derided As Sham

DAMASCUS, Syria (AP) — Against a backdrop of civil war, tens of thousands of Syrians voted in government-controlled cities and towns Tuesday to give President Bashar Assad a new seven-year mandate, with some even marking the ballots with their own blood.

The carefully choreographed election was ignored and even mocked in opposition-held areas of Syria where fighting persisted, with some rebels derisively dropping their shoes in a phony ballot box in a show of disgust. Western leaders also have called it a sham.

A victory for Assad is likely to bolster his base of support at home and provide further evidence that he has no intention of relinquishing power, making a protracted conflict the likely outcome in fighting that has already lasted three years.

Fears that the rebels would rain down mortar shells on government-controlled territory did not materialize, but fighting persisted.

In Damascus, the dull sounds of explosions reverberated in the distance as government forces and rebels battled in nearby rural towns and plumes of gray smoke marked the skyline. Several mortar rounds reportedly hit in the capital, including one that fell near the Opera House on a major plaza.

## Ukraine President Faces Tough Realities

KIEV, Ukraine (AP) — Ukraine's president-elect will likely have little trouble wooing Western leaders, including President Barack Obama, when he travels to Poland and France this week — many have already hailed the rise of the pragmatic, Western-leaning leader.

For Petro Poroshenko, who takes office on Saturday, the real task will be grappling with a pro-Russia uprising sweeping Ukraine's east, and a political system dominated by grudging political allies and holdovers from the previous corrupt administration.

That will mean proving to Ukrainians that his government is not a throwback to the corruption and political infighting that have long plagued Ukraine.

"For so long, corruption has been a cost-free, risk-free exercise in Ukraine," said Steven Pifer, a former U.S. ambassador to Ukraine who is now an analyst at the Brookings Institution.

"While countries can tear themselves up by getting too bogged down in the past and in prosecutions, Poroshenko will have to deal with a lot of public suspicion, because so many of these players have been around for the last 10 years."

## 'Hunger Games' Salute Used In Protest

BANGKOK (AP) — The three-finger salute from the Hollywood movie "The Hunger Games" is being used as a real symbol of resistance in Thailand. Protesters against the military coup are flashing the gesture as a silent act of rebellion, and they're being threatened with arrest if they ignore warnings to stop.

Thailand's military rulers said Tuesday they were monitoring the new form of opposition to the coup. Reporters witnessed the phenomenon and individuals were captured on film making the raised-arm salute.

"Raising three fingers has become a symbol in calling for fundamental political rights," said anti-coup activist Sombat Boonngam-anong on his Facebook page. He called on people to raise "3 fingers, 3 times a day" — at 9 a.m., 1 p.m. and 5 p.m. — in safe public places where no police or military are present.

The gesture emerged over the weekend as protesters joined small flash mobs, or stood alone, flashing three fingers in the air.

"We know it comes from the movie, and let's say it represents resistance against the authorities," Col. Weerachon Sukhondhapatipak, a spokesman for the junta, told The Associated Press.

## Egypt's President-Elect: 'Time To Work'

CAIRO (AP) — Egypt's president-elect, the former army chief Abdel-Fattah el-Sissi, told Egyptians it is now "time to work" to rebuild the economy after he was officially declared the landslide winner of last week's election, restoring a career military man to the country's top office.

Thousands celebrated in public squares around the country with cheers, fireworks and pro-military songs after the Election Commission officially announced el-Sissi's victory with nearly 97 percent of the vote in an election that it said saw a turnout of just over 47 percent.

El-Sissi brings Egypt into a new phase in its tumultuous drama since the 2011 pro-democracy uprising that ousted autocrat Hosni Mubarak after 29 years in power. The following year, Islamist Mohammed Morsi became the country's first democratically elected president, only to face massive protests by millions against him and his Muslim Brotherhood.

El-Sissi, then the army chief, ousted Morsi last summer and led a heavy crackdown on the Brotherhood and other Islamists that killed hundreds and jailed thousands more. The now retired field marshal was elevated to heroic status among his supporters, who hailed his removal of Islamists and saw him as the hope for restoring stability after three years of turmoil.

El-Sissi now restores a chain of five Egyptian presidents of military background since the 1952 coup against the monarchy — with Morsi the sole exception, not counting two interim presidents.

## Obama Plan Could Boost Climate Talks

BRUSSELS (AP) — President Barack Obama's move to limit U.S. carbon emissions may prompt an important shift by China in its climate policies, where officials are increasingly worried about the costs of pollution anyway, according to a Chinese expert and activists closely following the international negotiations.

The initiative may be a crucial move in pressuring Beijing to accept binding goals to cut greenhouse gases, while also allowing the U.S. to start catching up with the European Union in the fight against climate change.

"This is the kind of leadership that's highly needed," said Martin Kaiser, head of international climate politics at Greenpeace. The proposal should have been twice as ambitious, he added, but "it demonstrates that the Obama administration wants to seriously tackle climate change."

The plan, unveiled Monday, would reduce carbon dioxide emissions from U.S. power plants, many of which are coal-fired, by 30 percent from 2005 levels by 2030.

Governments want an agreement by late next year in Paris to curb emissions of greenhouse gases blamed for global warming. Unlike the 1997 Kyoto Protocol, which exempted developing nations from emissions limits, this deal is supposed to cover every country.

## US Home Price Gains Slow In April

WASHINGTON (AP) — U.S. home prices rose in April compared with a year earlier, but the increase was the smallest annual gain in 14 months. Price gains have slowed this year as sales have faltered.

Data provider CoreLogic says prices rose 10.5 percent in April from 12 months earlier. That is a healthy gain, but it's down from March's 11.1 percent increase and February's 12.2 percent gain.

On a month-to-month basis, April prices rose 2.1 percent. But CoreLogic's monthly figures aren't adjusted for seasonal patterns, such as warmer spring weather.

Higher mortgage rates, tight credit and a limited supply of available homes have slowed the housing recovery. Sales of existing homes ticked up in April after falling to a 20-month low in March. They were still 6.8 percent lower than a year ago.

# Obama Boosting America's Military Effort In Europe

BY JULIE PACE

AP White House Correspondent

WARSAW, Poland — President Barack Obama pledged Tuesday to boost U.S. military deployments and exercises throughout Europe, an effort costing as much as \$1 billion to demonstrate American solidarity with a continent rattled by Russia's intervention in Ukraine.

But even as Obama warned that Moscow could face further punishments, leaders of Britain, France and Germany were lining up to meet with Russian President Vladimir Putin at week's end.

Those one-on-one meetings would appear to send a mixed message about the West's approach to relations with Russia, given that the same leaders are also boycotting a summit Putin had been scheduled to host this week.

Obama does not plan to hold a formal meeting with Putin while both attend events Friday marking the 70th anniversary of the D-Day invasion that hastened the end of World War II, though the two leaders are likely to have some interaction. The U.S. president suggested there was no contradiction between efforts to isolate Russia and engaging directly with Putin.

"The fact of the matter is that Russia is a significant country with incredibly gifted people, resources, an enormous land mass, and they rightfully play an important role on the world stage and in the region," Obama said during a news conference with Polish President Bronislaw Komorowski. He added that it could be possible for Putin to "rebuild some of the trust that's been shattered during this past year" but said that would take time.

Western leaders, including Obama, have spoken with Putin by phone multiple times since Russia annexed the Crimean Peninsula from Ukraine and stationed tens of thousands of troops



U.S. President Barack Obama and Polish President Bronislaw Komorowski wave at Belvedere Palace Tuesday in Warsaw, Poland. Obama is visiting Warsaw, Brussels, Paris and Normandy this week where he is expected to elaborate on the U.S. commitment to counter Russian moves against Ukraine and reassure nervous allies.

on its border with the former Soviet republic. But until this week, they've avoided face-to-face meetings with Putin to avoid giving the impression that the Russian leader can slide back into normal relationships with U.S. and European leaders that have accused him of stoking instability in Ukraine.

Putin's meetings this week will be closely watched by Poland and other Central and Eastern European nations. Many countries in the regions have been pressing for broader NATO assistance to serve as a buffer in case Russia tries to advance beyond Ukraine.

Obama's announcement Tuesday of a "European Reassurance Initiative," costing up to \$1 billion, was aimed at quelling some of that anxiety. It marks a significant departure from a two-decade trend toward a smaller U.S. military presence in Europe amid a shift by the

Obama administration to a more visible and active naval and air power presence in the Asia-Pacific region. Just three years ago the Pentagon downgraded the top U.S. Army Europe commander from a four-star to a three-star general.

If the U.S. Congress approves the funding, the Pentagon would ramp up its air and ground force rotations in Europe, as well as boost military exercises and position more equipment on the continent.

The plan also calls for increasing the U.S. Navy participation in NATO deployments in the Black and Baltic Seas and helping non-NATO nations such as Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine bolster their own defenses. But key details of the effort were unclear, including how big the U.S. troop increase on the continent might be.

# Top Military Officer Says Bergdahl Case Not Closed

BY LOLITA C. BALDOR AND ROBERT BURNS

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — The nation's top military officer said Tuesday the Army could still throw the book at Sgt. Bowe Bergdahl, the young soldier who walked away from his unit in the mountains of eastern Afghanistan and into five years of captivity by the Taliban.

Charges are still a possibility, Gen. Martin Dempsey, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, told The Associated Press as criticism mounted in Congress about releasing five high-level Taliban detainees in exchange for Bergdahl. The Army might still pursue an investigation, Dempsey said, and those results could conceivably lead to desertion or other charges.

Congress began holding hearings and briefings into the deal that swapped Bergdahl for Taliban officials who had been held at Guantanamo Bay, Cuba, and several lawmakers said that President Barack Obama didn't notify them as a law governing the release of Guantanamo detainees requires. White House staff members called key members of Congress to apologize, but that didn't resolve the issue.

Since Dempsey issued a statement Saturday welcoming Bergdahl home, troops who served with the soldier have expressed anger and resentment that his freedom — from a captivity that they say he brought upon himself — may have cost comrades' lives. Troops sat in stony silence at Bagram Air Field when Defense Secretary Chuck Hagel announced Bergdahl's release over the weekend.

"Today we have back in our ranks the only remaining captured soldier from our conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan. Welcome home, Sgt. Bowe Bergdahl," Dempsey said on Saturday.

However, Dempsey called the AP on Tuesday to note that charges were still a possibility, and he focused his thanks on the service members who searched fruitlessly for Bergdahl after he walked away, unarmed, on June 30, 2009.

"This was the last, best opportunity to free a United States soldier in captivity," Dempsey said. "My first instinct was gratitude for those who had searched for so long, and at risk for themselves. ... Done their duty in order to bring back a missing soldier. For me, it was about living up to our ethos, which is to leave no soldier behind. And on that basis I was relieved to get Sgt. Bowe Bergdahl back in the ranks, and very happy for the men and women who had sacrificed to do so."

Dempsey said Bergdahl's

## The Bergdahl prisoner swap

Key dates in the effort to free Army Sgt. Bowe Bergdahl in exchange for five high-level Taliban members held at Guantanamo detention facility.

- 2009** June 30 Bergdahl detained by Taliban after he is found unarmed, wandering in Paktika province, Afghanistan
- 2011** Prisoner swap talks first begin as part of U.S. effort to facilitate direct peace talks between Taliban and Afghan government
- 2013** June Taliban opens political office in Qatar; U.S. says it is amenable to indirect talks
- Sept.** Taliban says it's interested in talks about Guantanamo detainees
- 2014** Jan. Taliban releases video of Bergdahl to show U.S. that he is still alive
- Feb.** Taliban suspends talks to exchange five Taliban for Bergdahl
- March** Qatar agrees to be intermediary in U.S.-Taliban talks
- May 27** President Barack Obama talks with Qatari emir about conditions for Taliban release
- May 30** Qatari diplomats arrive at Guantanamo
- May 31** Defense Dept. notifies House Armed Services Committee that five detainees would leave Guantanamo for Qatar in five hours; plane carrying detainees and Qatari diplomats departs before 2 p.m. ET; U.S. Embassy in Qatar gets call that Bergdahl is in U.S. hands



Source: AP, House Armed Services Committee, ESRI, McClatchy Washington Bureau. Graphic: Judy Treibie © 2014 MCT

next promotion to staff sergeant, which was to happen soon, is no longer automatic because the soldier is no longer missing in action and job performance is now taken into account.

Dempsey said he does not want to prejudice the outcome of any investigation or influence other commanders' decisions. But he noted that U.S. military leaders "have been accused of looking away from

misconduct" and said no one should assume they would do so in this case.

Army Chief of Staff Gen. John McHugh later said that after Bergdahl recovers physically and is "reintegrated," the Army would "review the circumstances" of his case.

Some former soldiers who served with him were already passing judgment.

Joshua Cornelison, who was a medic in Bergdahl's platoon said he believes Bergdahl should be held accountable for walking away.

"After he actually left, the following morning we realized we have Bergdahl's weapon, we have Bergdahl's body armor, we have Bergdahl's sensitive equipment (but we don't have Bowe Bergdahl)," Cornelison said from Sacramento, California. At that point, Cornelison said, it occurred to him that Bergdahl was "that one guy that wanted to disappear, and now he's gotten his wish."

Evan Buetow, who was a sergeant in Bergdahl's platoon, said from Maple Valley, Washington, that Bergdahl should face trial for desertion, but he also said it was less clear that he should be blamed for the deaths of all soldiers killed during months of trying to find him. Buetow said he knew of at least one death on an intelligence-directed infantry patrol to a village in search of Bergdahl.

"Those soldiers who died on those missions, they would not have been where they were ... if Bergdahl had never walked away," he said. "At the same time I do believe it is somewhat unfair for people to say, 'It is Bergdahl's fault that these people are dead.' I think that's a little harsh."

The White House took a fourth straight day of heat for not giving Congress the required 30 days notice of a detainee release. Obama had issued a statement when he signed the law containing that requirement giving himself a loophole for certain circumstances under the executive powers clause of the Constitution.

Obama, at a news conference in Poland, defended the decision to move quickly on the exchange, saying without offering details that U.S. officials were concerned about Bergdahl's health. Bergdahl was reported to be in stable condition at a military hospital in Germany.

"We had the cooperation of the Qataris to execute an exchange, and we seized that opportunity," Obama said. He said the process of notifying Congress was "truncated because we wanted to make sure that we did not miss that window" of opportunity.

## Republicans Offer Alternative VA Bill

WASHINGTON (AP) — A bill proposed by four Senate Republicans would give veterans more flexibility to see a private doctor if they are forced to wait too long for an appointment at a Veterans Affairs hospital or clinic.

Arizona Sen. John McCain and three other GOP senators introduced the bill Tuesday, the latest response in Congress to a furor over patient delays and cover-ups at VA health facilities nationwide.

A federal investigation into the troubled Phoenix VA Health Care System found that about 1,700 veterans in need of care were "at risk of being lost or forgotten" after being kept off an electronic waiting list. The investigation also found broad and deep-seated problems throughout the sprawling health care system, which provides medical care to about 6.5 million veterans annually.

A document released Tuesday by Sens. Pat Roberts and Jerry Moran, both Kansas Republicans, showed that at least 108 veterans waited more than 90 days for appointments with a primary care doctor at nine hospitals and 51 outpatient clinics in Kansas, Missouri and parts of four other states: Illinois, Indiana, Kentucky and Arkansas.

A bill being crafted by the Republican chairman of the House Veterans Affairs Committee would require the VA to offer outside care to veterans who cannot be seen within 30 days. And the Senate Veterans Affairs Committee's chairman, an independent, has proposed a bill to pay for veterans' appointments at community health centers and military hospitals or with private doctors if they cannot get a timely appointment at a VA facility.

Meanwhile, Rep. Jeff Miller, R-Fla., chairman of the House panel, asked acting VA Secretary Sloan Gibson on Tuesday to respond within a week to a month-old subpoena demanding documents related to an investigation of alleged falsified records and other problems that have surfaced in the past six weeks across the 1,700-facility VA health care system.