

Obama Sets High Bar For U.S. Military Action In Iraq

BY JULIE PACE AND LOLITA C. BALDOR
Associated Press

WASHINGTON — President Barack Obama vowed Friday that the United States would not be “dragged back” into military action in Iraq as long as leaders in Baghdad refuse to reform a political system that has left the country vulnerable to a fast-moving Islamic insurgency.

The president ruled out the possibility of putting American troops on the ground in Iraq, but said he was considering a range of other options drawn up by the Pentagon. Administration officials said those include strikes using drones or manned aircrafts, as well as boosts in surveillance and intelligence gathering, including satellite coverage and other monitoring efforts.

The U.S., which routinely has an array of ships in the region, has the aircraft carrier USS George H.W. Bush and an accompanying Navy cruiser in the northern Arabian Sea, while two Navy destroyers from the Bush strike group have been operating in the Persian Gulf. The ships carry Tomahawk missiles, which could reach Iraq, and the Bush is carrying fighter jets that could also easily get to Iraq.

Still, the president appeared to leave himself a clear off-ramp by making military action contingent on a “serious and sincere effort by Iraq’s leaders to

set aside sectarian differences” between the nation’s Sunnis and Shiites. “We can’t do it for them,” he said. “And in the absence of this type of political effort, short-term military action, including any assistance we might provide, won’t succeed.”

U.S. intelligence agencies assess that Baghdad is unlikely to fall, according to officials who were briefed on the matter but could not be quoted by name because the briefings were classified. Iraq’s Shiite soldiers who deserted en masse because they were unwilling to fight and die for Sunni towns such as Tikrit are much more likely to fight for Baghdad and its Shiite-dominated national government, U.S. intelligence officials believe. U.S. agencies also assess that the units around Baghdad are marginally better.

Officials said they estimate there are several thousand insurgents but well short of 10,000.

The security situation in Iraq rapidly deteriorated this week as the al-Qaida-inspired group Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant quickly overran Iraq’s second-largest city of Mosul, Saddam Hussein’s hometown of Tikrit and smaller communities, as well as military and police bases — often meeting little resistance from state security forces. The militants have vowed to press on to Baghdad.

The rebellion has emerged as the

biggest threat to Iraq’s stability since the U.S. withdrew its military in late 2011 after more than eight years of war. Obama said the militants also pose a threat to U.S. national security interests, which could ultimately be used as a justification for a unilateral American strike.

Over the past several days, the United States has urged Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki to make his government more inclusive and avoid further alienating Iraqi Sunnis who are eyeing the insurgency as an alternative to supporting the Shiite leadership in Baghdad. That message was delivered to al-Maliki in a phone call from Vice President Joe Biden and also personally by Deputy Assistant Secretary of State Brett McGurk, who has years-long ties to the prime minister and is in Iraq this week to help negotiate a solution.

Obama suggested it could take several days to gather the intelligence necessary to make a final decision on the U.S. response to the situation. Following his statement, Obama departed on a four-day trip to North Dakota and California. Officials said he had no plans to cut it short.

For Obama, launching military strikes in Iraq would pull the U.S. back into a conflict he declared over more

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Bergdahl ‘Looked Good’ Upon Return

SAN ANTONIO (AP) — Army Sgt. Bowe Bergdahl “looked good” after arriving back in the United States and is working daily with health professionals after being held by the Taliban for five years in Afghanistan, military officials said Friday.

Bergdahl’s family has not joined him since he arrived at Brooke Army Medical Center at Fort Sam Houston after midnight Friday, and Army officials would not say when relatives might show up.

Maj. Gen. Joseph P. DiSalvo said during a news conference Friday that Bergdahl was in stable condition, “looked good” and showed “good comportment” after being transported to Texas from an Army medical facility in Germany. “The reintegration of Sgt. Bergdahl is comprehensive. There is no set timeline,” said DiSalvo, who will be in charge of that process.

As far as Bergdahl’s interaction with relatives, Col. Bradley Poppen, an Army psychologist, said a soldier typically determines when to reunite with his or her family. Poppen declined to release further details, citing the family’s request for privacy.

Obama Stands By Plan To Await GOP

WASHINGTON (AP) — To the frustration of many of his supporters, President Barack Obama is backing away from immigration changes he could make on his own. He is kicking the issue to House Republicans instead, despite mounting evidence they won’t address the millions of immigrants living illegally in the United States.

This week, lawmakers from both parties summarily declared immigration-overhaul efforts dead after House Majority Leader Eric Cantor suffered an unexpected defeat at the hands of a fellow Republican who criticized him as too soft on the issue. But Obama still voices hope Congress will act.

“Our strategy has not changed,” says White House communications director Jennifer Palmieri. “The impetus for action remains on the House.”

It’s an approach that’s drawing friendly fire from immigration advocates who say Obama has been sitting on his hands long enough. For starters, they want immediate action to slow deportations.

But the White House wants to ensure that if and when an overhaul ultimately dies in Congress, Republicans can’t claim it was Obama who pulled the plug. Instead, Obama hopes his strategy will allow Democrats down the road to put all the blame on Republicans for failing to deal with immigrants in the U.S. illegally.

Dave Brat Shies Away From Media

RICHMOND, Va. (AP) — The giant slayer isn’t quite ready for his close up.

For the three days since Dave Brat took down House Majority Leader Eric Cantor in the GOP primary Tuesday, he’s been holed up in his suburban home, avoiding the reporters and TV trucks waiting out front. While the world wants to know more about the economics professor turned sudden tea party star, Brat’s in hiding, apparently unprepared for the tempest he unleashed.

“I need a few days to decompress after that election,” Brat told a CNN crew when he briefly emerged Thursday to get a haircut.

In a text message to The Associated Press, Brat said he was not doing any public appearances and had “shut down for a week with the family.” On election night, the 49-year-old said he was looking forward to a steak dinner with his wife to make up for having celebrated their 19th wedding anniversary while on the campaign trail.

Brat is set to square off against Democrat Jack Trammell, who like Brat teaches at the tiny Randolph-Macon College just north of Richmond, in the general election. Virginia’s 7th District leans heavily Republican and went for Republican Mitt Romney over President Barack Obama by 57 percent to 42 percent in 2012.

IRS Tells Congress It Has Lost Emails

WASHINGTON (AP) — The Internal Revenue Service said Friday it has lost a trove of emails to and from a central figure in the agency’s tea party controversy, sparking outrage from congressional investigators who have been probing the agency for more than a year.

The IRS told Congress Friday it cannot locate many of Lois Lerner’s emails prior to 2011 because her computer crashed during the summer of that year.

Lerner headed the IRS division that processed applications for tax-exempt status. The IRS acknowledged last year that agents had improperly scrutinized applications for tax-exempt status by tea party and other conservative groups.

“The fact that I am just learning about this, over a year into the investigation, is completely unacceptable and now calls into question the credibility of the IRS’ response to congressional inquiries,” said Rep. Dave Camp, R-Mich., chairman of the House Ways and Means Committee. “There needs to be an immediate investigation and forensic audit by Department of Justice as well as the inspector general.”

The Ways and Means Committee is one of three congressional committees investigating the IRS over its handling of tea party applications from 2010 to 2012. The Justice Department and the IRS inspector general are also investigating.

Ukrainian Troops Drive Rebels Out Of Mariupol

BY MARKO DROBNJAKOVIC
AND DAVID MCHUGH
Associated Press

MARIUPOL, Ukraine (AP) — Ukrainian troops and pro-Russian separatists clashed Friday in a southern port town, as the United States confirmed earlier reports that a convoy of armored vehicles including three T-64 Russian tanks moved into Ukraine from Russia and now are in the hands of the rebels.

About 100 soldiers emerged triumphant from the previously rebel-occupied buildings in Mariupol, shouting the name of their battalion, Azov, and singing the Ukrainian national anthem. They also destroyed an armored vehicle and a heavy truck used by the separatists, leaving the vehicles scorched and riddled with large-caliber bullet holes.

Mariupol is the second-largest city in the eastern Donetsk region, where armed separatists have declared independence from the government in Kiev. The Azov Sea port sits along the main road leading from

Russia to the Crimean Peninsula, which Russia annexed in March from Ukraine.

Interior Minister Arsen Avakov said four government troops were wounded in what he called a successful operation. Witnesses said they saw troops capture at least four separatist fighters. There was no immediate word of casualties on the rebel side, and Associated Press journalists at the site were blocked from entering the buildings.

Ukraine and the West have accused Moscow of fomenting the unrest in eastern Ukraine and supporting the separatist fighters. Russia, however, has denied sending troops or weapons to Ukraine and has described the Russian citizens fighting with the separatists as volunteers.

The renewed fighting Friday came as State Department officials in Washington confirmed Russia had sent tanks and rocket launchers to the rebels.

U.S. State Department spokeswoman Marie Harf said the U.S. had information that Russia has accumulated

tanks of a type no longer used by its own forces at a site in southwest Russia, and some had recently left that spot. Internet videos later showed tanks of the same make moving through several cities in eastern Ukraine.

“In the last three days, a convoy of three T-64 tanks, several BM-21 or Grad multiple rocket launchers and other military vehicles crossed from Russia into Ukraine near the Ukrainian town of Snizhne. This is unacceptable,” Harf told reporters in Washington.

She added: “We are confident that these tanks came from Russia.”

Also Friday, rebel leaders confirmed they had obtained three tanks.

Denis Pushilin, a leader of the separatist Donetsk People’s Republic, told Russian state television Friday that they had the tanks but it was “improper to ask” where they had gotten them.

“They are in Donetsk and are the minimum that we have to defend the city,” he said.

NATO condemned the reports of Russian tanks.

“I am concerned about reports that pro-Russian armed gangs are acquiring heavy weapons from Russia, including Russian tanks,” NATO Secretary-General Anders Fogh Rasmussen said in a statement Friday. “This would mark a serious escalation of the crisis in eastern Ukraine.”

Rasmussen urged Russia “to complete the withdrawal of its military forces on the border with Ukraine, to stop the flow of weapons and fighters across the border, and to exercise its influence among armed separatists to lay down their weapons and renounce violence.”

The U.S. also urged Russia to back the peace plan laid out by new Ukrainian President Petro Poroshenko.

Russia has not commented on the tanks, but its border guard service said two Ukrainian armored vehicles crossed the border in the opposite direction Friday, into Russian territory near the southern city of Rostov-on-Don. Russian news agencies quoted a

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Italy’s Renzi Enhances Anti-Corruption Czar

BY COLLEEN BARRY
Associated Press

MILAN (AP) — Premier Matteo Renzi gave his top anti-corruption official enhanced powers Friday aimed at preventing scandals like the one that forced the resignation earlier in the day of Venice’s mayor.

Mayor Giorgio Orsoni resigned under pressure for his role in a sweeping bribery scandal tainting a major public works project to protect Venice from flooding — just one of a series of corruption scandals in recent weeks that have drawn comparisons with Italy’s “Clean Hands” investigations of the 1990s.

The crescendo of scandals has heaped pressure on Renzi to tackle Italy’s endemic corruption, which deters international investment and erodes public trust in institutions.

The premier, whose party backed Orsoni in his 2010 election, said the Venice mayor had a duty to resign “once he made a plea agreement, declaring himself guilty.”

Orsoni was among more than 30 people, including other politicians and officials,

arrested last week in a wide-ranging probe that alleged the consortium building underwater barriers in the Venetian lagoon had amassed a 25 million-euro (\$34 million) slush fund abroad to bribe officials.

The mayor was accused of accepting contributions for his 2010 campaign from the slush fund, although he denies knowing that any of the donations to his campaign were illegal. He was released from house arrest Thursday after accepting a four-month suspended sentence.

The ambitious barrier project, meanwhile, has suffered long delays and is more than four times over its initial cost projection. It is currently expected to be finished by 2016.

Under the government’s new measures, the country’s anti-corruption czar will have the ability to take over parts of public works projects tainted by scandal, like the world’s fair Expo 2015 in Milan swept up in a bribery investigation. Renzi said the move is critical to ensuring new investments are made in Italy, and that routing corruption is a long-term project.

“Let’s be clear: corruption cannot be fought with new rules, corruption is fought with an educational and civic bet, and with a large investment in the country’s moral conscience,” Renzi said.

Also Friday, a longtime ally of former Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi who authorities said fled to Lebanon to escape

a prison sentence for Mafia association was extradited to Italy under Interpol guard. Marcello Dell’Utri was transferred to a prison in the northern city of Parma.

And another one-time Berlusconi aide, three-time government minister Claudio Scajola, was granted house arrest Friday weeks after being arrested on suspicion of aiding a businessman convicted of Mafia association to flee abroad.

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