

Gov. Can't Keep Up With Information Requests

BY RICHARD LARDNER AND TED BRIDIS
Associated Press

WASHINGTON — The Obama administration couldn't keep pace with the increasing number of people asking for copies of government documents, emails, photographs and more under the U.S. Freedom of Information Act, according to a new analysis of the latest federal data by The Associated Press.

Federal agencies did better last year trying to fulfill requests, but still fell further behind with backlogs, due mostly to surges in immigration records requested from the Homeland Security Department. It released all or portions of the information that citizens, journalists, businesses and others sought — and outright rejected other requests — at about the same rate as the previous two years. The AP analyzed figures over the last three years from 37 of the largest federal departments and agencies.

There was progress: The government responded to more requests than ever in 2011 — more than 576,000 — a 5 percent increase from the year before. Offices less frequently cited legal provisions that allow them to keep records secret, especially emails and documents describing how federal officials make important decisions. Agencies took less time, on average, to turn over records: about one month for requests it considered "simple" and about three months for more complicated requests. And 23 of 37 agencies reduced their individual backlogs of requests or kept buildups from increasing.

The government's responsiveness under the Freedom of Information Act is widely viewed as a barometer of how transparent federal offices are. Under the law, citizens and foreigners can compel the government to turn over copies of federal records for zero or little cost. Anyone who seeks information through the law is generally supposed to get it unless disclosure would

hurt national security, violate personal privacy or expose business secrets or confidential decision-making in certain areas. Sunday was the start of Sunshine Week, when news organizations promote open government and freedom of information.

Across the 37 agencies, the government turned over all or parts of the records people sought in about 65 percent of requests that it considered, a minor improvement over last year. It fully rejected more than one-third of requests, also a minor improvement over last year, including cases when it couldn't find records, a person refused to pay for copies or the request was determined to be improper under the law.

The White House touted its success under its own analysis of how it performed. It said more employees worked to turn over files that people asked for, and it increased the budget for such efforts by \$19 million last year. It said cabinet-level agencies that are directly under the White House's control showed particular improvement. The White House routinely excludes from its assessment instances when it couldn't find records, a person refused to pay for copies or the request was determined to be improper under the law, and says under this calculation that it released all or parts of records sought in 93 percent of requests.

"It is not surprising to see more FOIA requests sent in to an administration that has emphasized transparency," White House spokesman Eric Schultz said. "We're making a strong effort to keep up with that demand by devoting more resources to it."

Even as the Obama administration increased its efforts, people submitted 587,815 requests for information in fiscal 2011 at the 37 agencies reviewed by the AP — about an 8 percent increase over the previous year's figure of 546,445. The administration also agreed more often — in about 25 percent of requests last

year — to quickly consider information sought about subjects described as urgent or especially newsworthy. It was the second time in three years that people asked more than half-a-million times for records.

The biggest increases were at offices within the Department of Homeland Security that deal with immigration files. Overall, DHS received more than twice as many requests for records — 175,656 new requests last year — as any other agency. The Defense Department was second with 74,117 new requests. Smaller government offices, such as the White House drug policy office and the Council on Environmental Quality, received only a few dozen requests each.

The surge for immigration records at the Homeland Security Department meant the government ended the year with 98,183 backlogged requests, an increase of nearly 14 percent over the backlog of 86,370 at the start of the year, according to AP's review. DHS itself accounted for 48,493 of those backlogged requests at year's end.

In another improvement, the government less frequently cited any of the nine exemptions in the law that allow it to keep records secret, especially one that shields materials about an agency's internal personnel rules and practices. The Supreme Court in March 2011 issued a ruling that overturned 30 years of precedent and restricted when the government can use the exemption.

The administration also less frequently invoked the "deliberative process" exemption to withhold records describing decision-making behind the scenes. President Barack Obama had directed agencies to use it less often, but the number of such cases had surged after his first year in office to more than 71,000. It fell last year to 43,731.

Deaths

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Residents said Sunday's attack began around 3 a.m. in two villages in Panjwai district, a rural region outside Kandahar that is the cradle of the Taliban and where coalition forces have fought for control for years. The villages are about 500 yards (meters) from a U.S. base in a region that was the focus of Obama's military surge strategy in the south starting in 2009.

Villagers described covering in fear as gunshots rang out as a soldier stalked house after house firing on those inside. They said he entered three homes in all and set fire to some of the bodies. Eleven of the dead were from a single family, and nine of the victims were children.

Some residents said they believed there were multiple attackers, given the carnage.

"One man can't kill so many people. There must have been many people involved," said Bacha Agha of Balandi village. "If the government says this is just one person's act we will not accept it. ...

After killing those people they also burned the bodies."

But U.S. officials said the shooter, identified as an Army staff sergeant, acted alone, leaving his base in southern Afghanistan and opening fire on sleeping families in two villages. Initial reports indicated he returned to the base after the shooting and turned himself in. He was in custody at a NATO base in Afghanistan.

The suspect, from Joint Base Lewis-McChord, Wash., was assigned to support a special operations unit of either Green Berets or Navy SEALs engaged in a village stability operation, said a U.S. official, speaking on condition of anonymity because the investigation is still ongoing.

Such operations are among NATO's best hopes for transitioning out of Afghanistan, pairing special operations troops with villagers chosen by village elders to become essentially a sanctioned, armed neighborhood watch.

In a statement, Afghan President Hamid Karzai left open the possibility of more than one shooter. He initially spoke of a single U.S. gunman, then referred to "American forces" entering houses. The statement quoted a 15-year-

old survivor named Rafiullah, who was shot in the leg, as telling Karzai in a phone call that "soldiers" broke into his house, woke up his family and began shooting them.

"This is an assassination, an intentional killing of innocent civilians and cannot be forgiven," Karzai said.

Obama phoned the Afghan leader to express his shock and sadness, and offered condolences to the grieving families and to the people of Afghanistan.

In a statement released by the White House, Obama called the attack "tragic and shocking" and not representative of "the exceptional character of our military and the respect that the United States has for the people of Afghanistan." He vowed "to get the facts as quickly as possible and to hold accountable anyone responsible."

The tensions between the two countries had appeared to be easing as recently as Friday, when the two governments signed a memorandum of understanding about the transfer of Afghan detainees to Afghan control — a key step toward an eventual strategic partnership to govern U.S. forces in the country.

Now, another wave of

anti-American hatred could threaten the entire future of the mission, fueling not only anger among the Afghans whom the coalition is supposed to be defending but also encouraging doubts among U.S. political figures that the long and costly war is worth the sacrifice in lives and treasury.

"This is a fatal hammer blow on the U.S. military mission in Afghanistan. Whatever sliver of trust and credibility we might have had following the burnings of the Quran is now gone," said David Cortright, the director of policy studies at Notre Dame's Kroc Institute for International Peace Studies and an advocate for a quick withdrawal from Afghanistan.

Gen. Allen offered his regret and "deepest condolences" to the Afghan people for the shootings and vowed to make sure that "anyone who is found to have committed wrong-doing is held fully accountable."

"This deeply appalling incident in no way represents the values of ISAF and coalition troops or the abiding respect we feel for the Afghan people," Allen said in a statement, using the abbreviation for NATO's International Security Assistance Force.

International Push To End Syria Crisis Stalls

BEIRUT (AP) — An international push to end Syria's conflict stalled Sunday as U.N. envoy Kofi Annan left Damascus without a cease-fire and President Bashar Assad's forces pounded opposition areas and clashed with rebels throughout the country.

Western and Arab powers are struggling for ways to stem the bloodshed in the year-old conflict while both the regime and the opposition reject dialogue. Former U.N. Secretary General Kofi Annan appeared to make little progress during two visits with Assad during his first trip to Syria as the joint U.N.-Arab League envoy.

Annan was seeking an immediate cease-fire to allow for humanitarian aid and the start of a dialogue between all parties on a political solution. After meeting with Assad on Sunday, Annan said he had presented steps to ease the crisis, but gave no details.

"Once it's agreed, it will help launch the process and help end the crisis on the ground," he told reporters. He called for "reforms that will create a strong foundation for a democratic Syria — a peaceful, stable, pluralistic and prosperous society, based on the rule of law and respect for human rights."

But he said a cease-fire must come first.

Health Care Could Take A Decade To Implement

WASHINGTON (AP) — It took only a year to set up Medicare. But if President Barack Obama's health care law survives Supreme Court scrutiny, it will be nearly a decade before all its major pieces are in place.

And that means even if Obama is re-elected, he won't be in office to oversee completion of his signature domestic policy accomplishment, assuming Republicans don't succeed in repealing it.

The law's carefully orchestrated phase-in is evidence of what's at stake in the Supreme Court deliberations that start March 26.

The Affordable Care Act gradually reorganizes one-sixth of the U.S. economy to cover most of the nation's 50 million uninsured, while simultaneously trying to restrain costs and prevent disruptions to the majority already with coverage.

Ark. Family Copes With Loss Of Two Sons

PRESCOTT, Ark. (AP) — When their older brother Jeremy died in Afghanistan, Ben and Beau Wise did what loyal brothers and soldiers do. They stood solemnly in uniform at his memorial, laid red roses in front of his picture, and Ben spoke bravely to a chapel full of loved ones who came to mourn.

Soldiers themselves, Ben and Beau knew what their fallen brother had experienced and seen. They knew the difficulties of being a warrior and a devoted husband, and what a testament it was to Jeremy's character that he had excelled at both.

"Jeremy, I miss you and I love you, brother," Ben said. "And see you again."

Two years later, Ben died at a hospital in Germany after an insurgent attack left him with injuries that first cost him his legs, then cost him his life. He was 34, a year younger than Jeremy was when a suicide bomber killed him at a CIA base where he was working as a defense contractor.

For a family that had already paid the highest price of war, it was time for another funeral, another eulogy, another grave.

The eldest Wise boys are two of the thousands of Americans who have died since the conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan began. But they share a link that most do not: They were brothers.

"They laid down their lives, both of them, so that others could live," their mother, Mary Wise, said.

Brazil's Consumer Class Flocks To U.S.

RIO DE JANEIRO (AP) — The overstuffed bags filling Fernando Mello's luggage cart wobbled precariously as the gym owner made his way home one morning through Rio's international airport. Navigating the terminal, Mello was part of a horde of other Brazilian travelers returning with loot found in the strip malls and discount outlets of southern Florida.

Mello's girlfriend's freshly purchased Michael Kors handbag in gold lame sat atop four bulging suitcases like a shining crown — a testament to the newfound consumer power of Brazilian travelers, who now spend more per capita than any other visitors to the U.S.

In fact, Brazilians are spending so much that flights with Brazil's top airline TAM originating in the U.S. have had to carry more fuel to accommodate the dramatically overweight baggage.

"We left with nothing, just a piece of hand luggage," said the 30-year-old Mello. "We go to the U.S. once a year, stay in great hotels, have a fantastic holiday and shop till we drop and it's still cheaper than shopping in Brazil. It's a no-brainer."

According to the latest statistics, Brazilians spent \$5.9 billion in the U.S. in 2010 in a tsunami of cash that's shifting American immigration practices and boosting economies in hard-hit parts of the U.S. that remain in the doldrums.

1 Of 4 Men Injured In Maine Shooting Dies

LAMOINE, Maine (AP) — State police say one of four men wounded in an early morning shooting outside a home in a coastal town in Maine has died.

Maine Department of Public Safety spokesman Steve McCausland says 32-year-old Lawrence "Randy" Sinclair, of Ellsworth, died at a hospital Sunday, hours after being shot, along with three others, outside a home in Lamoine.

Authorities say 34-year-old Torrey Garland, of Ellsworth, is hospitalized in life-threatening condition. Also injured in the shooting were 30-year-old Michael Carter, of Lamoine, and 35-year-old Joshua McKinney of Ellsworth. Officials say the injuries to Carter and McKinney are not considered life-threatening.

Detectives are investigating the circumstances of the shootings at about 4:30 a.m. Sunday at the home of Carter and 22-year-old Tacy Mullins.

OBITUARIES

Beverly Ranek

TYNDALL — Funeral Mass for Beverly J. Ranek, 81, of Tyndall will be held at 10:30 a.m. on Friday, March 16 at St. Leo Catholic Church in Tyndall with Fr. Joseph Forcelle as Celebrant. Interment will follow in St. Leo Cemetery, Tyndall.

Visitation will be held on Thursday from 3:00 p.m. until 5:30 p.m. at the Goglin Funeral Home of Tyndall. There will be a wake service at 7:00 p.m. on Friday evening at the church.

Beverly passed away on Sunday, March 11, 2012 at the Good Samaritan Society of Tyndall.

Online condolences may be sent at www.goglinfh.com.

Goglin Funeral Home
Tyndall - Scotland - Tripp

www.goglinfh.com

Tillie Varilek

TYNDALL — Funeral Mass for Tillie M. Varilek, 94, of Tyndall will be held at 10:30 a.m. on Saturday, March 17 at St. Leo Catholic Church in Tyndall with Fr. Joseph Forcelle as Celebrant. Interment will follow in St. Leo Cemetery, Tyndall.

Visitation will be held on Friday from 3:00 p.m. until 5:30 p.m. at the Goglin Funeral Home of Tyndall. There will be a rosary at 7:00 p.m. and a wake service at 7:30 p.m. on Friday evening at the church.

Tillie passed away on Saturday, March 10, 2012 at St. Michael's Hospital Avera in Tyndall.

Online condolences may be sent at www.goglinfh.com.

Goglin Funeral Home
Tyndall - Scotland - Tripp

www.goglinfh.com

Hanna Goeken

Hanna Grace Goeken, 43, passed away Friday, March 9, 2012 in Yankton, South Dakota.

Funeral is in Fort Worth, Texas at 9:30 a.m. Tuesday at Lakeland Street Baptist Church. Interment: Laurel Land Memorial Park. Visitation: 6 to 8 p.m. Monday at Greenwood Funeral Home.

Hanna was born July 18, 1968, in Fort Worth. She attended Riverside and Oakhurst Elementary and graduated from Carter-Riverside High School. Hanna also worked as a housekeeper for Dr. John Bowman and his wife, Michelle. They were not only her employers but very special friends to Hanna.

Hanna was a beautiful-spirited special-needs girl. Everywhere she went people would come up to her and receive a big beautiful smile. Hanna was extremely artistic, making beaded jewelry, pottery and drawings.

Hanna was involved in numerous interests and stayed active up to the time she was diagnosed with bladder cancer. She was a member of the Catholic Church in Yankton, S.D. She was a cheerleader for Special Olympics and their team won several awards at cheer competitions. She played guitar, participated in local plays, volunteered at senior citizen facil-



Goeken

ties and accomplished a black belt in karate. She went to nationals with her karate and presented karate moves for the public. Hanna enjoyed swimming, bowling, her job in a dentist office

where she was able to wear scrubs, singing lessons and receiving tutoring in math. She was also the number one fan of Elvis Presley.

Hanna was preceded in death by her parents, Bobbie L. and Lloyd A. Goeken.

Survivors: Sister, Julia Dangel and husband, Mike; brother, Mike Odum and wife, Brenda; nephews, Jonathan Dangel, Matthew Dangel and wife, Kayla, James Dangel, and Chris Odum and wife, Andie; niece, April Beard and husband, Layne; special friend, Jerri "Mamma" Smith; aunts, Nelda Wallace, Allene Bell and Janet Hegwer; uncle, Buddy Triplett; and many cousins, but most especially Joe and Shannon.

Yankton Press & Dakotan
March 12, 2012

Audrey Gall

Audrey Gall, 87, of Yankton died Saturday, March 10, 2012, at her home in Yankton.

Arrangements are pending with Wintz & Ray Funeral Home and Cremation Service, Yankton.

Marlis Jensen

VIBORG — Marlis Jensen, 81, died March 10, 2012, at Sanford Hospital, Sioux Falls.

Services are at 1:30 p.m. Wednesday at Spring Valley Lutheran Church, rural Viborg.

Visitation is 4-8 p.m. Tuesday, with family present from 7-8 p.m. at the Viborg Funeral Home.

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WITH WALTER CRONKITE

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"The German High Command"


Narrated by Walter Cronkite & produced by CBS News.

Although this is part of the series, you do not need to have seen the previous videos to enjoy this feature!



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Popcorn & Refreshments Provided!


HONORING THEIR MEMORY
Our Thoughts And Prayers Are With Them

Our care and concern does not end with the funeral service. This week we remember with family and friends the anniversary of the deaths of:

Nadine Mickelson
who passed away on
March 12, 2011

Emil Pechous
who passed away on
March 12, 2011

Lavern (Vern) H. Rusch
who passed away on
March 13, 2011

Elverna A. Hart
who passed away on
March 13, 2011

Frank A. Ogan
who passed away on
March 13, 2011


Hayden Caton
who passed away on
March 15, 2011

Hallgerd Sorlien
who passed away on
March 18, 2011

Lawrence O'Brien
who passed away on
March 18, 2011

Margaret K. Weiss
who passed away on
March 12, 2008

This remembrance is brought to you free of charge. If you have a loved one you would like remembered, contact us at Opsahl-Kostel Funeral Home & Crematory. Guiding and serving families with compassion and trust.



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