

Lawyer:

Afghanistan Suspect Was Loath To Deploy

BY GENE JOHNSON
Associated Press

SEATTLE — The U.S. soldier accused of slaughtering 16 Afghan civilians last weekend had twice been injured during tours in Iraq and was reluctant to leave on his fourth deployment, a Seattle lawyer said Thursday.

“He wasn’t thrilled about going on another deployment,” said the lawyer, John Henry Browne. “He was told he wasn’t going back, and then he was told he was going.”

Browne, a well-known Seattle defense attorney who once represented serial killer Ted Bundy, said he has been asked to represent the soldier, a 38-year-old staff sergeant from Joint Base Lewis-McChord, near Tacoma.

The soldier lives in the Seattle area and asked to be represented by Browne when he was taken into custody, the lawyer said. Browne said he has met with the staff sergeant’s family, and unless the soldier is returned to Joint Base Lewis-McChord in the next few days, he will travel to meet the soldier wherever he is in custody.

Browne declined to release the soldier’s name, which the Army has withheld, but said he has two young children, ages 3 and 4.

“Everybody is worried about the safety of his family, and I am honoring that,” Browne said.

Browne said he has a limited amount of information about his prospective client. He described the soldier as highly decorated and said he had twice been injured during deployments to Iraq, once suffering a concussive head injury

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JOHN HENRY BROWNE

and once a serious leg injury. Browne said the soldier is originally from the Midwest, but would not be more specific.

Some reports have indicated that alcohol may have been a factor in the shootings. Browne said that as far as the soldier’s family knew, he did not have a drinking problem. He also said reports that there may have been marital problems were not correct.

“They’ve got a fabulous marriage,” Browne said.

The soldier is suspected of going on a shooting rampage in villages near his base in southern Afghanistan early Sunday, killing nine children and seven other civilians and then burning some of their bodies. The shooting, which followed a controversial Quran-burning incident involving U.S. soldiers, has outraged Afghan officials.

The suspect was flown out of Afghanistan on Wednesday evening to what officials describe as a pretrial confinement facility in Kuwait. Officials have anonymously described him as a father of two who has been in the military for 11 years. He has served three tours in Iraq and began his first deployment to Afghanistan in December.

A congressional source, speaking on the condition of anonymity due to the sensitivity of the information, told The Associated Press that he was with the 2nd Battalion, 3rd Infantry Regiment of the 3rd Stryker Brigade Combat Team before being assigned to a village stability operation near the villages where the attack took place.

Browne recently represented Colton Harris-Moore, a youthful thief known as the “Barefoot Bandit” who gained international attention for stealing airplanes, boats and cars during a two-year run from the law. Browne and his co-counsel, Emma Scanlan, helped Harris-Moore reach state and federal plea deals, then persuaded a state judge to give him the low end of the sentencing range: seven years in prison.

Browne said he has only handled three or four military cases before. The soldier will also have at least one military lawyer.

Military lawyers say once attorneys involved in the initial investigation of an alleged crime involving a service member have what they believe to be a solid understanding of what happened and are satisfied with the evidence collected, they draft charges and present them to a commander.

That person then makes a judgment on whether there is probable cause to believe that an offense was committed and that the accused committed it.

That commander then “prefers” the charges to a convening authority, who typically is the commander of the brigade to which the accused is assigned but could be of higher rank.

Taliban Nixes Talks With U.S.

KABUL, Afghanistan (AP) — The American campaign in Afghanistan suffered a double blow Thursday: The Taliban broke off talks with the U.S., and President Hamid Karzai said NATO should pull out of rural areas and speed up the transfer of security responsibilities to Afghan forces nationwide in the wake of the killing of 16 civilians.

The moves represent new setbacks to America’s strategy for ending the 10-year-old war at a time when support for the conflict is plummeting. Part of the U.S. exit strategy is to transfer authority gradually to Afghan forces. Another tack is to pull the Taliban into political discussions with the Afghan government, though it’s unclear that there has been any progress since January.

Although Karzai has previously said that he wanted international troops to transition out of rural areas, the apparent call for an immediate exit is new. Karzai also said he now wants Afghan forces take the lead for countrywide security in 2013, in what appeared to be a move to push the U.S. toward an earlier drawdown.

A statement released by Karzai’s office said that during his meeting with visiting U.S. Defense Secretary Leon Panetta, the president “requested that the international forces come out of Afghan villages and stay in their bases.”

30 Iranian Banks Cut Off From Most Commerce

BRUSSELS (AP) — Dozens of Iranian banks were blocked from doing business with much of the world as the West tightens the financial screws on a country it wants to prevent from developing nuclear weapons.

The Belgium-based company that facilitates most international bank transfers on Thursday took the unprecedented step of blocking 30 Iranian banks from using its service. The move is likely to hurt Iran’s all-important oil industry and make it difficult for citizens to receive money from relatives living abroad.

The move by the Society for Worldwide Interbank Financial Telecommunication, or SWIFT, is part of a broader effort by Western nations to isolate Iran financially and force it to demonstrate that it is not trying to develop nuclear weapons. Iran says that its nuclear program is for peaceful purposes only, but officials in many other countries believe otherwise.

SWIFT said it was forced by recent European Union sanctions to discontinue service to the Iranian banks beginning Saturday. SWIFT is a secure private network used by nearly every bank around the world to send payment messages that lead to the transfer of money across international borders.

The chief executive of SWIFT, Lazaro Campos, described the move as “extraordinary and unprecedented.”

No End In Sight For Syrian Uprising

BEIRUT (AP) — Thousands of Syrians rallied Thursday in Damascus in a display of loyalty to President Bashar Assad, waving flags under a slate gray sky to protest the anniversary of a rebellion that the government says is driven by terrorists, gangsters and extremists.

Outside the Syrian capital, however, tanks and snipers besieged opposition areas, including the southern city of Daraa where the uprising began a year ago, touched off by the arrest of a group of youths who scrawled anti-regime graffiti on a wall.

One year into the Syrian revolt, the fight to oust Assad is cascading toward civil war with more than 8,000 killed and no end in sight to the bloodshed. Worst-case scenarios are playing out in a country where many remain shackled by corruption, a suffocating security apparatus and a family dictatorship that rules over 22 million people.

“We know that this is a criminal regime, but we didn’t expect it to reach this amount of killing,” Amer Mattar, a 26-year-old activist, told The Associated Press from Jordan, where he fled to safety after being arrested twice in Syria.

Despite widening international condemnation and biting sanctions, Assad’s regime has remained intact and intelligence analysts say the rebels have yet to pose a serious challenge to his powerful military.

Sales Begin Fri. For iPad With Faster Processor

NEW YORK (AP) — Let the wild rumpus start.

The customary storefront crowds are expected to gather as Apple’s latest iPad goes on sale Friday. Long lines are likely even though customers could have ordered the new tablet computer ahead of time for first-day home delivery.

The third version of Apple’s iPad will be available in the U.S. and nine other countries beginning at 8 a.m. local time. The new model comes with a faster processor and a much sharper screen. It also boasts an improved camera, similar to that of the latest iPhone.

For many customers, visiting a store in person — instead of having one shipped — offers consumers a chance to mingle with die-hard Apple fans.

Race Proving Costly For Romney

BY STEVE PEOPLES
Associated Press

SAN JUAN, PUERTO RICO — The long and increasingly messy Republican presidential contest is starting to hit Mitt Romney where it hurts most: his wallet.

New signs of financial stress are emerging in Romney’s campaign, which has built a wide lead in delegates thanks in part to the might of his bank account and multistate operation. As rival Rick Santorum’s surging strength keeps extending the nomination battle, Romney has scaled back expenses, trimmed field staff in some cases and begun to count more on free media coverage to reach voters.

And he’s still relying on an allied super political action committee to supplement his spending on expensive TV ads.

This week, the former Massachusetts governor was forced to spend two days privately courting donors in the New York area, even as his Republican rivals were wooing voters ahead of pivotal elections in places like Illinois, where he hasn’t been in four months, and as President Barack Obama was stockpiling cash for the fall general election fight.

On Wednesday, Romney had five finance events in New York, all packed, raising about \$3 million, with more set for Thursday. So the news is hardly all bad. Wednesday “was the best day we’ve had so far,” said New York Jets owner Woody Johnson, who accompanied Romney to multiple events, including a donor breakfast in New York City.



Romney

Blagojevich Begins Prison Term

BY MICHAEL TARM
AND P. SOLOMON BANDA
Associated Press

LITTLETON, Colo. — Convicted Illinois Gov. Rod Blagojevich never allowed himself to even think about spending the next decade of his life behind bars. Less than an hour before he began serving his 14-year sentence on corruption charges, he could hardly say that word: “prison.”

Now, he is Inmate No. 40892-424.

With helicopters and TV news crews broadcasting his every move Thursday, the one-time golden boy of Illinois politics stepped out of a black SUV, the Colorado mountains on the horizon, and just before noon walked into the Federal Correctional Institution Englewood in suburban Denver.

Inside, there was a protocol: full-body strip search, hand over all personal belongings. That means the man with a taste for fine Oxford-label suits traded in his clothing, save for his wedding ring, for khaki prison garb and boots.

Jurors convicted Blagojevich on 18 counts, including charges that he tried to sell or trade President Barack Obama’s old U.S. Senate seat. FBI wiretaps revealed a fouled-mouth Blagojevich describing the opportunity to exchange an appointment to the seat for campaign cash or a top job as “f—golden.”

Although he was sentenced in December, he was given more than three months to say goodbye to his wife, Patti, and their two daughters.

“I keep speaking euphemistically about ‘a place,’” the 55-year-old Blagojevich said about an hour before entering prison, during a stop at a nearby restaurant. “I look at it like I am reporting for military service ... that is a game I play with myself. But the sad reality is that’s a prison that I have to walk into shortly.”

As he rode around in his rental car before reporting to the prison,



WILLIAM DESHAZER/CHICAGO TRIBUNE/MCT
Former Gov. Rod Blagojevich waves to the crowd in front of his Chicago home as he leaves for prison, Thursday, March 15, 2012. Blagojevich is heading to Federal Correctional Institution Englewood in Littleton, Colorado to serve 14 years on corruption charges.

his youngest daughter — 8-year-old Anne — continually called on his cellphone, upset at his departure, he said. Blagojevich could be seen leaning against the vehicle, talking on the phone in the parking lot.

“I kept trying to reassure her,” he told reporters, sounding subdued.

Blagojevich is the second ex-Illinois governor in a row sent to prison for corruption.

In what had become a familiar scene in the three years since his arrest, the famously talkative and confident Democrat bounded down the stairs of his Chicago home through a throng of photographers and cameramen Thursday morning as he headed to the airport. Supporters were shouting encouragement.

“Saying goodbye is the hardest thing I’ve ever had to do,” said Blagojevich, who wasn’t accompanied by his wife, though she could be seen through the windows. One of their two daughters peeked out a window before her father departed.

A night earlier, he invited media to hear his final public statement and seemed to relish in

the attention when roughly 300 people crowded into his yard. The one-time reality show contestant said he always believed what he did while governor was legal and was confident “the truth ultimately will prevail.”

Blagojevich requested the prison in Littleton, just outside Denver. Although designated a low-security facility, it looks every bit a prison: Stone buildings are institutional beige, the grounds encircled by high razor-wire fencing. Blagojevich, leaving behind his family’s spacious Chicago home, will share a cell the size of a large walk-in closet with up to three inmates.

Flooding

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spring break” from flooding, said National Weather Service Deputy Director Laura Furgione. “Due to a lack of snow pack, residents along the Red River of the north may finally enjoy spring without sandbagging.” That hasn’t happened since 2008.

This spring less than 5 percent of the continental United States has an above-normal risk of flooding, compared to nearly half the country last year at this time, according to the weather service.

Flooding is the biggest weather killer in the United States on average, she said. There still could be flash flooding from extreme rainfall, Furgione said.

Meteorologists say drought should continue across much of the West and South, but shouldn’t be quite as extreme as last fall, forecasters said. The Southeast should brace for some restriction on water use and in some places those have already started. While more of the country has severe drought, only 7 percent of the nation has extreme or excessive drought conditions, which are even worse

Spring flood forecast

For the first time in four years, no area of the U.S. is at high risk of major spring flooding. This is mainly due to limited winter snow.

Spring flood risk

Below normal Above normal

• Ohio River basin is the only area with soil moisture and river levels above normal

• Heavy spring rains can lead to flooding at any time even in areas where overall risk is below normal



Source: National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (U.S.)
Graphic: Robert Dorrell, Judy Treible

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than severe, said senior meteorologist David Miskus of the Climate Prediction Center.

The same conditions that made the winter so snowless and mild are likely to keep spring warm and dry, said Ed O’Lenic, operations branch chief at the climate prediction center. That’s heavily influenced by the Arctic Oscillation, a northern cousin to the more well-known El Nino weather phenomenon. The Arctic Oscillation has kept storms and cold bottled far up north, making it milder and drier in much of the country.

While meteorologists can’t

connect a single weather event — like the unusual heat outbreak going on in much of the country — these types of extreme will happen more often and become more likely as the world’s climate changes from man-made global warming, said O’Lenic and climate scientists.

Spring has started so early that weather forecasters are working with the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention in Atlanta to see if there is a way to monitor diseases that come from pests that would arrive earlier and stay longer because of warmer weather.

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