

Afghan Villagers: Slaying Was In Retaliation

KANDAHAR, Afghanistan (AP) — Residents of an Afghan village near where an American soldier is alleged to have killed 16 civilians are convinced that the slayings were in retaliation for a roadside bomb attack on U.S. forces in the same area a few days earlier.

In accounts to The Associated Press and to Afghan government officials, the residents allege that U.S. troops lined up men from the village of Mokhoyan against a wall after the bombing on either March 7 or 8, and told them they would pay a price for the attack.

The lawyer for Army Staff Sgt. Robert Bales, who is accused in the March 11 killings of the 16 civilians, has said that his client was upset because a buddy had lost a leg in an explosion on March 9.

It's unclear if the bombing cited by attorney John Henry Browne was the same as the one described by the villagers that prompted the alleged threats. After a meeting at a military prison in Fort Leavenworth, Kansas, Browne said Bales told him a roadside bomb blew off the leg of one of his friends two days before the shootings occurred.

A spokesman for the U.S. military declined to give any information on the bombing or even confirm that it occurred, citing the investigation of the shootings. He also declined to comment on the allegation that U.S. troops threatened retaliation.

Syrian Forces Take Eastern City From Rebels

BEIRUT (AP) — Syrian soldiers backed by tanks seized the eastern city of Deir el-Zour from rebels on Tuesday, the latest opposition stronghold to fall to an offensive by the better equipped Syrian military.

Activist Osama Mansour said government troops and armored cars entered the city about 100 kilometers (60 miles) from the Iraqi border from four sides, sparking short gunbattles with fighters from the Free Syrian Army.

Mansour, reached by telephone in Deir el-Zour, said the rebels quit fighting and took shelter in homes and apartments, fearing that protracted clashes would destroy the city.

Taking back rebel-held cities in the past weeks, government troops have often heavily shelled neighborhoods before sending in troops, killing civilians and damaging buildings.

"They knew they could not hold control of the neighborhoods, so they decided to stop fighting, knowing that the regime would bring in heavy weapons and kill many civilians," Mansour said.

Experts: Buffett Rule Wouldn't Raise Enough

WASHINGTON (AP) — A bill designed to enact President Barack Obama's plan for a "Buffett rule" tax on the wealthy would rake in just \$31 billion over the next 11 years, according to an estimate by Congress' official tax analysts obtained by The Associated Press.

That figure would be a drop in the bucket of the over \$7 trillion in federal budget deficits projected during that period. It is also minuscule compared to the many hundreds of billions it would cost to repeal the alternative minimum tax, which Obama's budget last month said he would replace with the Buffett rule tax.

The alternative minimum tax, originally aimed at ensuring that wealthy Americans pay taxes despite deductions and other breaks, has begun affecting upper middle-class families. Congress acts every year to minimize its impact.

The Buffett rule has become a leading symbol of Obama's and congressional Democrats' election-year efforts to persuade voters that they are the party championing economic fairness. Republicans have mocked it as one aimed at scoring political points that would have little real budgetary impact.

The plan is named for billionaire investor Warren Buffett, who has said taxes on the rich are too low. Obama has proposed requiring that people earning at least \$1 million annually pay at least 30 percent of their income in taxes, but has provided few details.

New Clue May Help Uncover Fate Of Earhart

WASHINGTON (AP) — A new clue in one of the 20th century's most enduring mysteries could soon uncover the fate of American aviator Amelia Earhart, who went missing without a trace over the South Pacific 75 years ago, investigators said Tuesday.

Enhanced analysis of a photograph taken just months after Earhart's Lockheed Electra plane vanished shows what experts think may be the landing gear of the aircraft protruding from the waters off the remote island of Nikumaroro, in what is now the Pacific nation of Kiribati, they said.

Armed with that analysis by the State Department, historians, scientists and salvagers from The International Group for Historic Aircraft Recovery, are returning to the island in July in the hope of finding the wreckage of Earhart's plane and perhaps even the remains of the pilot and her navigator Fred Noonan.

Ric Gillespie, executive director of the group, acknowledged that the evidence was "circumstantial" but "strong" but stopped short of predicting success. The new search is scheduled to last for 10 days in July and will use state-of-the-art underwater robotic submarines and mapping equipment.

"The most important thing is not whether we find the ultimate answer or what we find, it is the way we look," he said. "We see this opportunity to explore ... the last great American mystery of the 20th century as a vehicle for demonstrating how to go about figuring out what is true."

Builders Betting On Brighter Housing Market

WASHINGTON (AP) — U.S. builders are betting that the housing market is finally on the path back to health.

They requested 5 percent more permits in February to build single-family homes and apartments in the coming months. That increased the annual rate to a seasonally adjusted 717,000 permits, the Commerce Department said Tuesday.

While that's still half the rate considered healthy by most economists, it's the highest since October 2008.

"This report is one of the more encouraging new construction reports we have seen in the last four years," said Patrick Newport, an economist with IHS Global Insight.

Builders have grown more confident over the past six months after seeing more people express interest in buying a home.

The rise in permits suggests builders see that interest translating into sales over the next 12 months. That's how long it typically takes to build a home after a permit is obtained.

Economists cautioned that construction levels remain depressed and the housing market has a long way to go before it is back to full health.

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Romney Routs Santorum In Illinois

BY DAVID ESPO AND STEVE PEOPLES
Associated Press

SCHAUMBURG, Ill. — Mitt Romney took a major stride toward the Republican presidential nomination Tuesday night, routing Rick Santorum in the Illinois primary for his third-straight big-state win and padding his already-formidable lead in the race for convention delegates.

"What a night," Romney exulted to cheering supporters in suburban Chicago. Looking beyond his GOP rivals, he said he had a simple message for President Barack Obama, the man Republicans hope to defeat next fall: "Enough. We've had enough."

Returns from 61 percent of Illinois' precincts showed Romney gaining 48 percent of the vote compared to 34 percent for Santorum, 9 percent for Ron Paul and 8 percent for a fading Newt Gingrich.

That was a far more substantial showing for Romney than the grudging victories he eked out in the previous few weeks in Michigan and Ohio, primaries that did as much to raise questions about his ability to attract Republican support as to quell those questions.

Santorum, who hopes to rebound in next Saturday's Louisiana primary, sounded like



Romney

anything but a defeated contender as he spoke to supporters in Gettysburg, Pa. He said he had outpolled Romney in downstate Illinois and the areas "that conservatives and Republicans populate. We're very happy about that and we're happy about the delegates we're going to get, too."

"Saddle up, like (Ronald) Reagan did in the cowboy movies," he urged his backers.

Romney triumphed in Illinois after benefiting from a crushing, 7-1 advantage in the television advertising wars, and as his chief rival struggled to overcome self-imposed political wounds in the marathon race to pick an opponent to Obama.

Most recently, Santorum backpedaled after saying on Monday that the economy wasn't the main issue of the campaign. "Occasionally you say some things where you wish you had a do-over," he said later.

Over the weekend, he was humbled in the Puerto Rico primary after saying that to qualify for statehood the island commonwealth should adopt English as an official language. Initial results showed Romney's victory



RED HUBER/ORLANDO SENTINEL/MCT
The makeshift memorial for slain teenager Trayvon Martin continues to grow daily Tuesday outside of the Retreat at Twin Lakes community in Sanford, Florida, where Trayvon was shot and killed.

Fla. Probes Shooting By Watch Captain

BY MIKE SCHNEIDER AND CURT ANDERSON
Associated Press

SANFORD, Fla. — An unarmed black teenager shot to death by a neighborhood watch captain told his girlfriend moments before he was killed that he was being followed, a lawyer said Tuesday as federal and state prosecutors announced they would investigate.

"Oh he's right behind me, he's right behind me again," 17-year-old Trayvon Martin told his girlfriend on his cellphone, the Martin family's attorney said.

The girl later heard Martin say, "Why are you following me?" Another man asked, "What are you doing around here?" attorney Benjamin Crump said.

The phone call that recorded Martin's final moments was disclosed as the U.S. Justice Department opened a federal civil rights probe into the Feb. 26 shooting and the local prosecutor convened a grand jury to investigate.

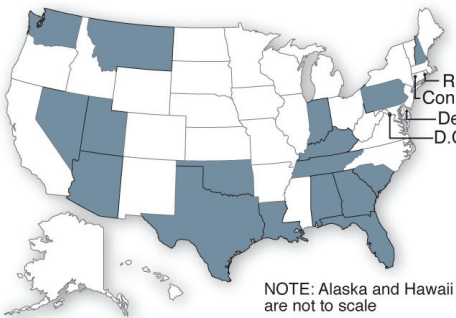
The neighborhood watch captain, George Zimmerman, has not been charged and has said he shot Martin, who was returning to a gated community in Sanford after buying candy at a convenience store, in self-defense after Martin attacked him. Police say Zimmerman is white; his family says he is Hispanic.

The case has ignited racial tensions in this Orlando suburb of 53,500 people, sparking rallies and a protest in Gov. Rick Scott's office on Tuesday. The Rev. Al Sharpton is joining Sanford city leaders at a town hall meeting later Tuesday to discuss the investigation.

'Stand Your Ground'

"Stand Your Ground," or "Shoot First," laws could hamper the prosecution of a neighborhood watch volunteer who shot and killed Trayvon Martin, an unarmed teenager, in a gated Florida community.

■ States with 'Stand Your Ground' laws



NOTE: Alaska and Hawaii are not to scale

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Source: The Institute for Southern Studies, Reuters
Graphic: Pat Carr

About the law

- Allows a potential crime victim who is in fear of grave harm to use deadly force in public places
- Extends the Castle Doctrine, which allows a person to use deadly force to protect his home
- Eliminates the need to retreat in order to claim one acted in self defense

Police say Zimmerman was bleeding from his nose and the back of his head, and told police he had yelled out for help before he shot Martin.

Crump told reporters Tuesday that Martin cried out when a man bearing a 9mm handgun came at him.

Martin called his 16-year-old girlfriend in Miami several times on Feb. 26, including just before the shooting, Crump said. The discovery of the lengthy conversations, including one moments before the shooting, was made over the weekend by Martin's father by checking his son's cell phone log, Crump said.

"She absolutely blows Zimmerman's absurd self-defense claim out of the water," Crump said of Martin's girlfriend, whose name was withheld.

Martin, who was in town from

Miami to visit his father in Sanford, told the girl on his way back from the store he'd taken shelter from the rain briefly at an apartment building in his father's gated community, Crump said. Martin then told the girl he was being followed and would try to lose the person, Crump said.

"She says: 'Run.' He says, 'I'm not going to run, I'm just going to walk fast,'" Crump says, quoting the girl.

After Martin encountered Zimmerman, the girl thinks she heard a scuffle "because his voice changes like something interrupted his speech," Crump said. The phone call ended before the girl heard gunshots.

The last call was at 7:12 p.m. Police arrived at 7:17 p.m. to find Martin lying face down on the ground.

7.4 Quake Shakes Mexico

BY KATHERINE CORCORAN
Associated Press

MEXICO CITY — A strong 7.4-magnitude earthquake hit central and southern Mexico on Tuesday, damaging some 800 homes near the epicenter and swaying tall buildings and spreading fear and panic hundreds of miles away in the capital of Mexico City.

One of the strongest to shake Mexico since the deadly 1985 temblor that killed thousands in Mexico City, Tuesday's earthquake hit hardest in border area of southern Oaxaca and Guerrero states, where Guerrero official confirmed that some 800 homes had been damaged, with another 60 having collapsed.

Hours after the shaking at noon local time (18:06 GMT), there were still no reports of death or serious injury, even after a less powerful, magnitude-5.1 aftershock was felt in the capital and several other aftershocks near the epicenter in a mountainous rural region.

"It was very strong, very substantial," said Campos Benitez, hospital director in Ometepepec, about 15 miles (25 kilometers) from the epicenter.

Guerrero Gov. Angel Aguirre, who is from Ometepepec, was headed there to survey the damage and ordered emergency crews and civil protection to the area to help with the damage. The state did not say how many were displaced.

In Mexico City, frightened workers and residents poured into the streets of the capital. Telephone service was down in the city and throughout the area where the quake was felt and some neighborhoods were without power, according to Mexico City Mayor Marcelo Ebrard, who set up a hotline for people to report damage.

A pedestrian bridge collapsed on an empty transit bus.

About 40 passengers were stranded for a short time on the Mexico City airport air train, but later released. The airport closed for a time but officials said there was no runway damage and they resumed operations.

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