

## Ferguson Police Chief Resigns

FERGUSON, Mo. (AP) — Ferguson, Missouri's mayor says the city's departing police chief is an "honorable man" who resigned with hopes of helping the community heal from racial unrest stemming from last summer's police shooting death of an unarmed, black 18-year-old.

Chief Thomas Jackson's resignation Wednesday came a week after a scathing U.S. Justice Department report found the St. Louis suburb to have a profit-driven court system and widespread racial bias in the police force.

Mayor James Knowles III says after much "soul-searching" Jackson agreed to resign. His March 19 departure allows him to help transition the department to the man who'll be acting chief, Lt. Col. Al Eickhoff.

Knowles says a national search for Jackson's permanent successor is planned.

Jackson will receive one year of his roughly \$96,000 annual salary and health coverage.

## Utah Approves Firing Squad Executions

SALT LAKE CITY (AP) — A vote by Utah lawmakers to bring back executions by firing squad is the most dramatic illustration yet of the nationwide frustration over bungled executions and shortages of lethal-injection drugs.

Utah and several other states are scrambling to modify their laws on the heels of a botched Oklahoma lethal injection last year and one in Arizona in which the condemned man took nearly two hours to die. Meanwhile, Texas prepared to execute a Mexican mafia hit man Wednesday night with its second-to-last dosage of drugs.

Utah Republican Gov. Gary Herbert has declined to say if he will sign the firing-squad bill, a decision that's not expected for a week or so.

"States are wondering which way to go, and one way is to send up a warning flag that if you don't allow us freedom in this lethal-injection area, we'll do something else," said Richard Dieter, executive director of the Washington, D.C.-based Death Penalty Information Center, which opposes capital punishment. "This might be a message rather than a preferred route of punishment."

States have struggled to keep up their drug inventories as European manufacturers opposed to capital punishment refuse to sell the components of lethal injections to U.S. prisons. The Texas deadline is the most imminent, but other states are struggling, too.

## Shiite Militia Invades IS-Held Tikrit

BAGHDAD (AP) — Iraqi soldiers and allied Shiite militiamen swept into the Islamic State-held city of Tikrit on Wednesday, launching a two-front offensive to squeeze extremists out of Saddam Hussein's hometown in a major test of the troops' resolve.

Explosions and heavy gunfire echoed through Tikrit, a key way station for Iraqi forces trying to expel the militants who hold roughly a third of the country and neighboring Syria. The offensive also will serve as a major crucible for Iraqi forces, which collapsed under the extremists' initial offensive last year and now face street-by-street fighting in one of the Islamic State group's biggest strongholds.

Allied Iraqi forces first entered the city through its northern Qadisiyya neighborhood, according to video obtained by The Associated Press. Overhead, an attack helicopter fired missiles as soldiers and militiamen laid down heavy machine gunfire in the neighborhood's dusty streets as downtown Tikrit loomed in the distance, black smoke rising overhead.

Officials quickly established a supply line through the neighborhood to reinforce troops, Salahuddin police Brig. Khayon Rasheed told the state-run Iraqiya television. Authorities offered no immediate casualty figures, though Iran's state-run Press TV satellite channel reported that a mortar attack wounded one of its cameramen there.

## France Ids Man, Boy In IS Video

PARIS (AP) — A man and a boy featured in an Islamic State group propaganda video that threatens Jews and shows the killing of a Palestinian have been identified as French citizens, and investigators are looking into whether the man is related to an extremist who attacked a Jewish school in southern France in 2012, an official told The Associated Press on Wednesday.

The extremist group claimed the Palestinian was an agent for the Mossad and the adult in the video made reference to the targeting of Jews both in Europe and ultimately in Israel. But the man's father told The Associated Press he had simply regretted his decision to join IS and was killed because he wanted to go home.

# Iran-Backed Militias In Iraq Worry U.S.

BY DEB RIECHMANN

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — Iran is playing a helpful role against Islamic State militants in Iraq now, but once the extremists are vanquished, Tehran-backed militias could undermine efforts to unify the country, the top U.S. military officer said Wednesday.

Army Gen. Martin Dempsey told lawmakers that any move to counter IS is a 'positive thing.' But he said there are worries about whether those Shiite militias will later turn against Sunni or Kurdish Iraqis and hamper efforts to bridge ethnic and political divisions that have made peace elusive in Iraq.

"We are all concerned about what happens after the drums stop beating and ISIL is defeated, and whether the government of Iraq will remain on a path to provide an inclusive government for all of the various groups within it," Dempsey said, using an acronym for the militant group.

The chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff said officials are watching to see whether the militias, after recapturing lost ground, "engage in acts of retribution and ethnic cleansing." At this point, "there no indication that that is a widespread event."

Dempsey joined Secretary of State John Kerry and Defense Secretary Ash Carter in testifying for more than three hours at a Senate Foreign Relations Committee hearing called to examine President Barack Obama's proposal for new war powers to fight IS, which holds about one-third of Iraq and neighboring Syria.

The committee chairman, Sen. Bob Corker, R-Tenn., lamented that Obama's proposal does not give the U.S. military clear authority to defend moderate forces training for the Syrian fight from the bombing risk by troops loyal to Syrian President Bashar Assad.

Dempsey cited "active discussion" about the kind of support "we would supply once the new Syrian forces are fielded."

Carter later told reporters at the Pentagon that the U.S. will have "some obligation" to support the moderates as they take on IS and face possible attacks from Assad.

"We all understand that," Carter said.



OLIVIER DOULIERY/ABACA PRESS/TNS  
U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry (R) and U.S. Secretary of Defense Ashton Carter testify before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee in Washington, D.C.

"And we're working through what kinds of support and under what conditions we would do so, to include the possibility that, even though they're trained and equipped to combat ISIL, they could come into contact with forces of the Assad regime."

Carter and Dempsey's comments opened the door to possible U.S. military action against Assad forces, if needed, to protect moderate rebels during a clash with regime troops. Obama has ruled out U.S. troops in ground combat in Syria.

Earlier Wednesday, Iraqi soldiers and Shiite militiamen entered IS-held Tikrit, Saddam Hussein's hometown. They breached one of extremists' strongholds in an important test for Iraqi forces.

Iranian military advisers were helping guide Iraqi forces in the advance. Among those directing operations was the commander of Iran's powerful Revolutionary Guard's Quds Force.

"The Tikrit operation will be a strategic inflection point one way or the other in terms of easing our concerns or increasing them," Dempsey said.

Sen. Marco Rubio, R-Fla., said he

thinks much of the U.S. strategy is being driven by a desire not to upset the Iranians so they do not walk away from international negotiations aimed at preventing the Islamic Republic from being able to develop nuclear weapons.

"I believe that our military strategy toward IS is influenced by our desire not to cross red lines that the Iranians have about U.S. military presence in the region," Rubio said.

"Absolutely, not in the least," Kerry replied.

On the issue of new powers to fight IS, the three witnesses defended the proposal that Obama submitted to Congress last month. The legislation, once finalized, would set up the first war vote in Congress in 13 years.

Carter said Obama's draft would allow U.S. military force against IS for three years. That would give the next president and Congress the chance to reauthorize it, if needed. He said there are no geographical restrictions included in the proposal because IS has shown signs of activity beyond Syria and Iraq.

7 Marines and 4 soldiers are missing after their military helicopter crashed off the coast of Florida



Source: AP  
Graphic: Staff, TNS

## Fog Hampers Helicopter Search

EGLIN AIR FORCE BASE, Fla. (AP) — Searchers struggled Wednesday to find the seven Marines and four soldiers killed when a helicopter crashed, hampered by the same fog that plagued a nighttime training mission.

A second helicopter turned back safely shortly before the wreck, which left debris washing ashore along the Florida coast, officials said.

Military officials haven't said what caused the crash of the UH-60 Black Hawk, but the weather was bad enough for the other crew to return to land, said Maj. Gen. Glenn H. Curtis, adjutant general of the Louisiana National Guard.

The helicopter that crashed had a veteran crew from Hammond, Louisiana, that served multiple tours in Iraq and helped humanitarian missions after Gulf Coast hurricanes and the BP oil spill.

They were carrying uncon-

ventional warriors from the Marines Special Operations Command. Like the Army's Green Berets and the Navy's SEALs, they were highly trained to endure grueling conditions and sensitive assignments on land and at sea, from seizing ships to special reconnaissance missions and direct action inside hostile territory.

Tuesday night's training involved practicing "insertion and extraction missions," using small boats and helicopters to get troops into and out of a target site, said Capt. Barry Morris, spokesman for the Marine Corps Special Operations Command at Camp Lejeune, North Carolina.

Even the training can be dangerous.

"It has everything in it except for the bullets, so when they are actually training, it's like being in combat in a lot of ways," said Bruce Labrecque,

the owner of the Mariners Inn in Hammond, Louisiana, near where the Guardsmen were based. The spot is popular for lunch for locals and military in the area.

President Barack Obama expressed his condolences to the families and said he's confident of a detailed and thorough investigation, said his spokesman, Josh Earnest.

"Our thoughts and prayers are with them and their families as the search and rescue continues," Defense Secretary Ash Carter said on Capitol Hill.

Human remains were found Wednesday before the weather deteriorated again, and all 11 service members were presumed killed. But it was still considered a search and rescue mission.

A small flotilla of boats searched the choppy water, airmen walked shoulder-to-shoulder down the beach, scanning the sand.

## House Leaders Look For Deal Halting Medicare Payment Cuts

BY ALAN FRAM

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — Aides to top House Republicans and Democrats are trying to negotiate a bipartisan compromise to permanently revamp a law that annually threatens cuts in Medicare payments to doctors, including a 21 percent reduction set to take effect April 1.

As part of the talks, bargain-hunters are considering budget cuts that could offset part, but not all, of the measure's costs, according to lobbyists following the negotiations. The estimated 10-year price of repealing the annual Medicare cuts is roughly \$175 billion.

The lobbyists said Wednesday that the package also might provide money for a children's health program that would otherwise run out of money Oct. 1. A four-year extension of the Children's Health Insurance Program would cost about \$10 billion.

The lobbyists, who spoke on condition of anonymity to discuss information gathered

from congressional staff, said the talks are continuing and details could change. They say lawmakers might have to settle for a temporary bill, which they have done many times before. Congressional aides confirmed talks are underway but declined to provide detail.

"We are all aware" of the approaching deadline, said Michael Steel, spokesman for House Speaker John Boehner, R-Ohio. "Members and staff from both leadership and the committees are naturally discussing a range of options."

At issue is a formula, known as the sustainable growth rate, from a 1997 budget-cutting law that included curbs on doctor's reimbursements under Medicare, the federal health care program for the elderly. The formula has repeatedly forced Congress to defuse cuts that over time have grown unrealistically high.

Lawmakers from both parties are eager to end Congress' annual struggle to avoid the fee cuts and find savings to pay for it. Disagreements over

how to pay for preventing the cuts has long been the most intractable dispute.

Before the House left Washington last week for a recess, House Ways and Means Committee Chairman Paul Ryan, D-Wis., told a reporter that it was most likely that Congress would temporarily avoid the fee cuts. But, he added: "That's not our goal, though. We want to get a full deal."

Sen. Ron Wyden of Oregon, top Democrat on the Senate Finance Committee, said Wednesday that replacing the fee cuts with a new payment system would put Medicare on "a sustainable path going forward." He said providing money for the children's health program was also "critically important."

The prospects for congressional passage of a package

whose cost is not fully financed are unclear.

The measure would have to get by conservative Republicans reluctant to drive up budget deficits. Depending on what savings the package would impose, the measure could meet resistance from Democrats if it relies too heavily on reductions to Medicare beneficiaries.

If agreement can't be reached on a permanent package, congressional leaders would try passing a bill that temporarily forestalls the Medicare payment cuts for a few months, providing more time to work out a deal.

Since allowing a 4.8 percent Medicare fee cut in 2002, Congress has passed 17 bills that have temporarily avoided the reductions.

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