

## NATION/WORLD DIGEST

## Obama: Afghan Withdrawal Still On Track

WASHINGTON (AP) — The war in Afghanistan will get worse before it gets better, President Barack Obama warned on Wednesday, but he declared his plan to begin withdrawing U.S. forces next year remains on track.

Standing alongside Afghan President Hamid Karzai, Obama said, "What I've tried to emphasize is the fact that there is going to be some hard fighting over the next several months." The two leaders spoke at a White House news conference as U.S.-led forces in Afghanistan prepare to push hard into the Taliban's birthplace in Kandahar Province in June. The campaign for Kandahar, already under way in districts outside the city, is expected to be among the bloodiest of the nearly nine-year-old war.

"There is no denying the progress," Obama said. "Nor, however, can we deny the very serious challenges still facing Afghanistan."

Karzai's warm White House welcome followed months of sniping and frustration over management of the war and about fraud allegations surrounding Karzai's re-election last year. Both leaders said disagreements are normal with so much at stake.

## Boy Sole Known Survivor In Plane Crash

TRIPOLI, Libya (AP) — A 10-year-old Dutch boy lay in a hospital bed, head bandaged, skin pale and legs shattered — the lone "miracle" survivor of a plane crash Wednesday that killed 103 people in the Libyan capital. Most victims were Dutch tourists returning from vacation in South Africa.

Little was known about the dark-haired boy, who was rushed to a hospital in Tripoli where he underwent surgery for multiple fractures in both legs.

The barely conscious child muttered "Holland! Holland!" after he was found, a Dutch official said.

Libyan TV footage showed the boy, one eye bruised and swollen closed, breathing through an oxygen mask with multiple intravenous lines connected to his body and a monitor at his bedside. Doctors later said he was out of danger.

The boy appeared groggy as he was tended by a doctor in green scrubs and a veiled, gloved and masked nurse. The injured youngster wore a crisp pink gown and lay on a blue disposable pad. A bandage of layers of white gauze and hand-lettered with the date — 5/12 — covered his head.

## 9 Indicted For Accessing Obama Records

DES MOINES, Iowa (AP) — Nine people were indicted Wednesday on federal charges of accessing President Barack Obama's student loan records while they were employed for a Department of Education contractor in Iowa.

The U.S. attorney's office said a grand jury returned the indictments in U.S. District Court in Davenport.

All nine are charged with exceeding authorized computer access. They are accused of gaining access to a computer at a Coralville office where they worked between July 2007 and March 2009, and accessing Obama's student loan records while he was either a candidate for president, president-elect or president.

U.S. attorney spokesman Mike Bladel referred questions to online copies of the indictments.

Each of eight indictments posted by Wednesday night were brief, saying the charged individual "intentionally exceeded authorized access to a computer and thereby obtained information from a department and agency of the United States" and "intentionally accessed student loan records" of Obama without authorization.

Those charged are Andrew J. Lage, 54, Patrick E. Roan, 51, Sandra Teague, 54 and Mercedes Costoyas, 53, all of Iowa City; Gary N. Grenell, 58, and Lisa Torney, 49, of Coralville; Anna C. Rhodes, 32, of Ainsworth; Julie L. Kline, 38, of West Branch; and John P. Phommivong, 29, for whom no hometown was listed.

Lage told The Associated Press on Wednesday evening he did not know about the indictment and declined comment.

Six of them are accused of accessing Obama's records when he was a candidate, according to the indictments online. One is accused of accessing the records when he was president-elect. An indictment for the ninth defendant was not immediately available online.

Court records did not name the contractor that employed the defendants.

Arrests are scheduled for May 24. The charge is punishable by up to one year in prison and a fine of up to \$100,000.

## GOP Chooses Tampa for 2012 Convention

OXON HILL, Md. (AP) — Republicans chose Tampa as the site of their 2012 presidential convention Wednesday, hoping the swing state of Florida will help them defeat President Barack Obama.

A Republican National Committee panel recommended the Gulf Coast city during a closed-door meeting, rejecting GOP strongholds of Salt Lake City and Phoenix. The decision came amid calls from Hispanic groups and others to boycott Arizona after it adopted a law to crack down on illegal immigrants, although party members insisted their decision against Phoenix was not linked to that legislation.

"We got it!" RNC Secretary Sharon Day, a Floridian, shouted into a hotel hallway as she danced out of the closed-door meeting.

"I think that we are one of the bellwether states. ... We'll be stronger for 2012. It will give us an opportunity to strengthen our vol- unteer base," she said.

## L.A. City Council Approves Arizona Boycott

LOS ANGELES (AP) — Los Angeles on Wednesday became the largest city yet to boycott Arizona over its tough new law targeting illegal immigration in a move that likely will affect some \$8 million in contracts with the state.

The City Council voted 13-1 to bar Los Angeles from conducting business with Arizona unless the law is repealed. The vote followed an emotional council discussion during which many members noted that their ancestors were U.S. immigrants.

Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa already has said he would approve the boycott.

The proposal could affect investments and contracts worth as much as \$52 million, including contracts for airport, harbor and trucking services, according to a report from the city's chief legislative analyst. That report recommends the council consider suspending travel, cutting contracts and refraining from making any new ones with Arizona-based companies.

But Councilwoman Janice Hahn, who co-authored the resolution, said it would be impractical to cancel most of those deals and only about \$7 million to \$8 million in city contracts probably would be affected.

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## GULF OIL SPILL

## Probe: Complex Flaws Caused Failure

BY FREDERIC J. FROMMER  
AND H. JOSEF HEBERT  
Associated Press Writers

WASHINGTON — Bad wiring and a leak in what's supposed to be a "blowout preventer." Sealing problems that may have allowed a methane eruption. Even a dead battery, of all things.

New disclosures Wednesday revealed a complex cascade of deep-sea equipment failures and procedural problems in the oil rig explosion and massive spill that is still fouling the waters of the Gulf of Mexico and threatening industries and wildlife near the coast and on shore.

The public also got its first look on Wednesday of oil gushing from the broken pipe that rests nearly a mile under water as BP PLC, the well's operator, released a video taken by a remotely controlled camera. Oil flowing from a break in the yellowish pipe becomes lighter in color as it mixes with natural gas. Over the past 21 days more than 4 million gallons of oil have been released.

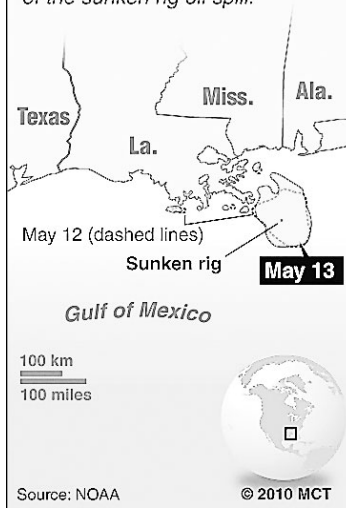
A litany of worrisome events and findings that were at play on the night of the well explosion and pipe rupture was described in internal corporate documents, marked confidential but provided to a House committee by BP and by the manufacturer of the safety device. Lawmakers released them at a House hearing.

A senior BP executive, Lamar McKay, cautioned, "It's inappropriate to draw any conclusions before all the facts are known." But the documents established the firmest evidence to date of the sequence of catastrophic events that led to the explosion and worsening spill, a series of failures more reminiscent of the loss of the space shuttle Challenger than the wreck of the Exxon Valdez.

Like the 1986 Challenger disaster, the investigation into the Gulf spill may well show that complex and seemingly failproof technical systems went wrong because of overlooked problems that interacted with each other in unexpected ways. In the 1989 Exxon Valdez disaster, a captain simply

## Oil spill update

Forecasted location of the sunken rig oil spill:



ran his ship onto a reef in Alaska's Prince William Sound, spilling nearly 11 million gallons of oil.

The April 20 BP rig explosion 40 miles off the Louisiana coast killed 11 people. Oil continuing to flow into Gulf waters threatens sensitive ecological marshes and wetlands and the region's fishing industry.

Congressional investigators revealed Wednesday that a key safety system, known as the blowout preventer, used in BP's oil-drilling rig in the Gulf had a hydraulic leak and a failed battery that probably prevented it from working as designed.

They said that BP documents and others also indicated conflicting pipe pressure tests showed that those on the rig that poor pipe integrity may have been allowing explosive methane gas to leak into the well.

"Significant pressure discrepancies were observed in at least two of these tests, which were conducted just hours before the explosion," said Rep. Henry Waxman, D-Calif., at a House hearing on the rig fire and oil leak, citing documents his committee had received from BP.

Asked about the tests, Steven Newman, president of Transocean, which owned the drilling rig, and Lamar McKay, president of BP America told the committee the pressure readings were worrisome.

## As Summer Nears, Expect Gas Prices To Go ... Down?

BY MARK WILLIAMS  
AP Energy Writer

Gas prices are poised to fall as Memorial Day approaches, a welcome change for motorists who have gotten used to seeing increases cut into their summer vacation money.

Experts who had been predicting a national average of more than \$3 per gallon by Memorial Day now say prices have likely peaked just beneath that threshold. Rising supplies and concerns about the global economy have helped send wholesale gasoline prices plummeting by 22 cents a gallon since last week.

"Gasoline supplies are about as good as they've ever been going into the summer driving season," says oil analyst Phil Flynn of PFGBest in Chicago.

The decline in prices is starting to filter down to motorists, but it will take several weeks for the full effects to be reflected in pump prices, which average \$2.90 nationwide.

By summer, the nationwide average could be below last summer's peak of around \$2.70 a gallon, says Tom Kloza of Oil Price Information Service. In July 2008, the retail price of regular gasoline peaked at \$4.11.

Economists say the coming drop in energy costs will not have a significant impact on overall consumer spending or economic growth. But motorists will feel better having a little

more money to save or spend on clothes, dinner or a summer vacation.

From their peaks on May 3, oil prices have declined by 13 percent to \$75.65 a barrel. Wholesale gasoline prices have declined by 9 percent to \$2.21 a gallon.

Analysts were forecasting a nationwide retail average well above \$3 a gallon just a few months ago. So what changed?

— The European debt crisis escalated. This undermined confidence in the strength of the global economic recovery and prompted analysts to lower their energy demand forecasts. The crisis also sent institutional investors flocking to the dollar, a relative safe haven. And, these days, when the dollar goes up, the price of oil goes down.

— Supplies of gasoline have risen steadily. As of Friday, the U.S. had 222 million barrels of gasoline in storage — about 5 percent more than a year ago. Output from refineries has been growing at a faster pace than demand.

— Political unrest in oil-producing nations has been muted. This is a wild card that could change quickly. But lately, violence in Nigeria and tensions in the Middle East have been relatively minor, traders say.

The massive oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico has had no impact on fuel prices because it's had only minimal impact on petroleum production, analysts say.

They indicated "that there was something happening in the well bore that shouldn't be happening," said Newman. McKay said the issue "is critical in the investigation" into the cause of the accident.

The well explosion unleashed a massive oil spill that after three weeks remains uncontained.

But Waxman said important elements of what went wrong

were beginning to surface.

While "we have far more questions than answers," it appears clear that there were problems with the blowout preventers before the accident and confusion almost right up to the time of the explosion over the success of a process in which cement is injected into the well to temporarily close it in anticipation of future production.

## SUPREME COURT

## Nominee Kagan Makes Rounds On Capitol Hill

WASHINGTON (AP) — Supreme Court nominee Elena Kagan defended herself Wednesday against Republican doubts about her fitness to be a justice as she met for the first time with senators who hold the key to her confirmation.

Mostly mum in public as she made the rounds on Capitol Hill, Kagan sought during a series of private meetings to beat back GOP suggestions that she'd be a liberal rubber stamp for President Obama, who named her Monday to succeed retiring Justice John Paul Stevens.

"She's been politically active throughout her life, she's identified with the American liberal position, she clerked for two activist judges," said Sen. Jeff Sessions of Alabama, the top Republican on the Judiciary panel that will hold hearings on Kagan's nomination.

Sessions said he asked Kagan during a lengthy meeting whether she understood she might be called upon as a justice to issue rulings that might disappoint her "fans and supporters." The 50-year-old solicitor general responded "that she would be faithful to the law," Sessions said, "but of course every nominee says that. Some of our most activist judges have said that."

The exchange came on a day when senators in both parties promised a fair confirmation process for Kagan, and Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid, D-Nev., pledged as he welcomed her to the Capitol to make it "as smooth as possible." Barring a surprise, Kagan is likely to be confirmed this summer by a Senate where Democrats have more than enough votes to prevail and Republicans are showing little appetite for a Supreme Court showdown.

Still, the debate is virtually certain to become a forum for the two parties to battle



OLIVIER DOULIERI/ABACA PRESS/MCT  
U.S. Supreme Court nominee, Solicitor General Elena Kagan meets with Senator Jeff Sessions on Capitol Hill Wednesday in Washington.

over the direction of the court and hot-button legal issues from abortion to political speech.

Sen. Mitch McConnell of Kentucky, the Republican leader, said before visiting with her that Kagan must prove that her current post on Obama's team wouldn't skew her rulings to favor his policies.

"It's my hope that the Obama administration doesn't think the ideal Supreme Court nominee is someone who would rubber stamp its policies," McConnell said.

"Americans want to know that Ms. Kagan will be independent, that she won't prejudice cases based on her personal opinions, that she'll treat every one equally, as the judicial oath requires."

Kagan said little publicly Wednesday as reporters and photographers trailed her through the Capitol and senators' office buildings, shuttling from meeting to closely watched meeting.

"Haven't I seen you someplace before?," she joked with reporters as she entered her eighth and final meeting of the day, with Sen. Dianne Feinstein, D-Calif., a Judiciary Committee member.

"Everybody's been very gracious," she said.

Sen. Patrick Leahy, D-Vt., Judiciary Committee chairman, said Kagan will get "a fair hearing."

"I will guarantee that all Democratic senators and all Republican senators are able to ask all relevant questions, and I'm sure she'll answer them," he said after their visit.

And he suggested the former Harvard Law School dean could be a welcome counterbalance to what he called an "activist conservative majority" that currently dominates the high court.

"We've seen how a narrow conservative majority on the nation's highest court has ignored in many instances congressional intent and the court's own precedent to overturn decades of law, to limit protections for workers of all ages, to curb access to court, to muzzle Americans' voices in their elections," Leahy said. Kagan, he added, "feels the law matters in people's lives."

Republicans, on the other hand, worry that Kagan will bring liberal extremism to the court.

"She does come out of a tradition of activist judges," Sessions said, citing her clerkships for Abner Mikva and Thurgood Marshall.

Sessions pressed Kagan during their meeting about her decision to bar military recruiters from Harvard's campus because she disagreed with the military's "don't ask, don't tell" policy for gay soldiers. Sessions called that "a big mistake."

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