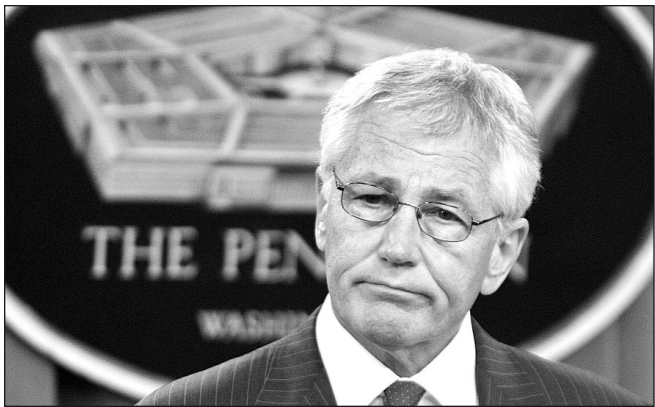


Hagel:

U.S. May Look At Arming Syrian Rebels



OLIVIER DOULIERY/ABACA PRESS/MCT
U.S. Defense Secretary Chuck Hagel, pictured, speaks during a press conference with British Defense Secretary Phillip Hammond at the Pentagon in Arlington, Va., Thursday.

BY LOLITA C. BALDOR
Associated Press

WASHINGTON — The Obama administration is rethinking its opposition to arming the rebels who have been locked in a civil war with the Syrian regime for more than two years, Defense Secretary Chuck Hagel said Thursday, becoming the first top U.S. official to publicly acknowledge the reassessment.

During a Pentagon news conference with British Defense Secretary Philip Hammond, Hagel said arming the rebels was one option that the administration was considering in consultation with its allies. But he said he personally had not decided whether it would be a wise or appropriate move.

“Arming the rebels — that’s an option,” he said. “You look at and rethink all options. It doesn’t mean you do or you will. ... It doesn’t mean that the president has decided on anything.”

Hammond said his country was still bound by a European Union arms embargo on Syria, but he said Britain would look at the issue again in a few weeks when the ban expires and make a decision based on the evolving situation on the ground.

Hagel’s comments affirmed what had been a quiet but emerging dialogue within the Obama administration: That arming the rebels might be preferable amid growing indications that the Syrian regime has used chemical weapons against its own people, an action President Barack Obama characterized as a “game-changer” that would have “enormous consequences.”

Both Hagel and Hammond also indicated that strong evidence still was needed to provide a solid legal basis for any military action the U.S. or its allies might take. While neither would detail the evidence already collected from several reported incidents of chemical weapons use by the Bashar Assad regime, Hammond said the public still remembers that claims of weapons of mass

destruction in Iraq in 2003 turned out to be untrue.

“There is a very strong view that we have to have very clear, very high-quality evidence before we make plans and act on that evidence,” Hammond said. “If there were future use of chemical agents, that would generate new opportunities for us to establish a clear evidence of use to a legal standard of evidence.”

Officials have said that intelligence assessments of the use of sarin gas in Syria are based in part on “physiological samples,” which could include human tissue, blood or other body materials, in addition to soil samples. Asked whether the U.S. and Britain have separate samples or are examining the same material, Hammond declined to specify, but said the two countries were working closely on the analysis.

Hagel said each country uses its own intelligence agencies but works to share information with allies.

Fire Forces Evacuation Of Campus, Homes

LOS ANGELES (AP) — A wildfire fanned by gusty Santa Ana winds raged along the fringes of Southern California communities on Thursday, forcing the evacuation of homes and a university while setting recreational vehicles ablaze.

The blaze erupted during morning rush hour along U.S. 101 in the Camarillo area about 50 miles west of Los Angeles. It was quickly spread by the winds, which also pushed other damaging blazes across the region.

The evacuation orders included the smoke-choked campus of California State University, Channel Islands, which has about 5,000 students.

Flames quickly moved down slopes toward subdivisions, according to the Ventura County Fire Department. More than 6,500 acres — some 10 square miles — were charred, with no containment. A cluster of RVs in a parking lot was destroyed as flames moved close to a mobile home park.

Economic Reports Drive Hope For More Jobs

WASHINGTON (AP) — Fewer Americans are losing their jobs. Employers are struggling to squeeze more work from their staffs. The U.S. is producing so much oil that imports are plunging, narrowing the trade deficit.

A string of data Thursday raised hopes for stronger hiring and U.S. growth in coming months. More jobs would spur spending and help energize the economy, which has yet to regain full health nearly four years after the Great Recession officially ended.

And an interest rate cut Thursday by the European Central Bank, if it helps bolster the European economy, could also contribute to U.S. growth.

The U.S. economic reports came one day before the government will report how many jobs employers added in April. Economists think the gain will exceed the 88,000 jobs added in March, the fewest in nine months.

The government said Thursday that the number of Americans applying for unemployment aid fell last week to a seasonally adjusted 324,000 — the fewest since January 2008. Unemployment applications reflect the pace of layoffs: A steady drop means companies are shedding fewer workers. Eventually, they’ll need to hire to meet customer demand or to replace workers who quit.

Discovery Of Woman Stirs Anger In Daughter

HARRISBURG, Pa. (AP) — The teenage daughter of a woman who just revealed she abandoned her family 11 years ago said Thursday the disclosure has angered her and she is not eager to restart their relationship.

Morgan Heist, who learned last week Brenda Heist had surfaced in the Florida Keys, said the news has made her recall with bitterness the years of mourning she endured when she assumed her mother was dead and feared she’d been murdered.

“I lached every birthday, every Christmas,” said 19-year-old Morgan Heist, a freshman at a community college outside Philadelphia. “My heart just ached. I wasn’t mad at her. I wanted her to be there because I thought something had happened to her. I wish I had never cried.”

Brenda Heist’s mother, Jean Copenhaver, said Thursday that her daughter “had a real traumatic time” but was doing OK.

Brenda Heist was released from police custody on Wednesday and is staying with a brother in northern Florida for now, Copenhaver said.

Review Nears Of Antibacterial Soap Chemical

WASHINGTON (AP) — It’s a chemical that’s been in U.S. households for more than 40 years, from the body wash in your bathroom shower to the knives on your kitchen counter to the bedding in your baby’s basinet.

But federal health regulators are just now deciding whether triclosan — the germ-killing ingredient found in an estimated 75 percent of antibacterial liquid soaps and body washes sold in the U.S. — is ineffective, or worse, harmful.

The U.S. Food and Drug Administration is planning to deliver a review this year of whether triclosan is safe. The ruling, which will determine whether triclosan continues to be used in household cleaners, could have implications for a \$1 billion industry that includes hundreds of antibacterial products from toothpaste to toys.

The agency’s review comes amid growing pressure from lawmakers, consumer advocates and others who are concerned about the safety of triclosan. Recent studies of triclosan in animals have led scientists to worry that it could increase the risk of infertility, early puberty and other hormone-related problems in humans.

“To me it looks like the risks outweigh any benefit associated with these products right now,” said Allison Aiello, professor at the University of Michigan’s School of Public Health. “At this point, it’s just looking like a superfluous chemical.”

Suicide Rate For Middle-Aged Americans Up

NEW YORK (AP) — The suicide rate among middle-aged Americans climbed a startling 28 percent in a decade, a period that included the recession and the mortgage crisis, the government reported Thursday.

The trend was most pronounced among white men and women in that age group. Their suicide rate jumped 40 percent between 1999 and 2010.

But the rates in younger and older people held steady. And there was little change among middle-aged blacks, Hispanics and most other racial and ethnic groups, the report from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention found.

Why did so many middle-aged whites — that is, those who are 35 to 64 years old — take their own lives?

One theory suggests the recession caused more emotional trauma in whites, who tend not to have the same kind of church support and extended families that blacks and Hispanics do.

UN Report Wants To Terminate Killer Robots

UNITED NATIONS (AP) — Killer robots that can attack targets without any human input “should not have the power of life and death over human beings,” a new draft U.N. report says.

The report for the U.N. Human Rights Commission posted online this week deals with legal and philosophical issues involved in giving robots lethal powers over humans, echoing countless science-fiction novels and films. The debate dates to author Isaac Asimov’s first rule for robots in the 1942 story “Runaround.” “A robot may not injure a human being or, through inaction, allow a human being to come to harm.”

Report author Christof Heyns, a South African professor of human rights law, calls for a worldwide moratorium on the “testing, production, assembly, transfer, acquisition, deployment and use” of killer robots until an international conference can develop rules for their use.

His findings are due to be debated at the Human Rights Council in Geneva on May 29.

According to the report, the United States, Britain, Israel, South Korea and Japan have developed various types of fully or semi-autonomous weapons.

Mexican Summit

Obama, Nieto Talk Economy, Security

BY JULIE PACE

AP White House Correspondent

MEXICO CITY — President Barack Obama sought on Thursday to tamp down a potential rift with Mexico over a dramatic shift in the cross-border fight against drug trafficking and organized crime, acceding that Mexicans had the right to determine how best to tackle the violence that has plagued their country.

Since taking office in December, Mexican President Enrique Pena Nieto has moved to end the widespread access that U.S. security agencies have had in Mexico to tackle the violence that affects both sides of the border. It’s a departure from the strategy employed by his predecessor, Felipe Calderon, which was praised by the U.S. but reviled by many Mexicans.

Obama said the shifting security relationship would not hurt cooperation between the neighboring nations.

“I agreed to continue our close cooperation on security, even as the nature of that cooperation will evolve,” Obama said during a joint news conference at Mexico’s grand National Palace. “It is obviously up to the Mexican people to determine their security structures and how it engages with the other nations — including the United States.”

Pena Nieto as well downplayed the notion that the new, more centralized arrangement would damage its security partnership with the United States. He said Obama agreed during their private meeting earlier in the day to “cooperate on the basis of mutual respect” to promote an efficient and effective strategy.

Obama arrived in Mexico Thursday afternoon for a three-day trip that will also include a stop in Costa Rica. Domestic issues followed the president south of the border, with Obama facing questions in his exchange with reporters about the potential escalation of the U.S. role in Syria, a controversy over contraception access for teenage girls, and the delicate debate on Capitol Hill on an immigration overhaul.

The latter issue is being closely watched in Mexico, given the large number of Mexicans who have emigrated to the U.S. both legally and illegally. More than half of the 11 million people in the U.S. illegally are Mexi-



DAVID DE LA PAZ/XINHUA VIA ZUMA PRESS/MCT

Mexican President Enrique Pena Nieto, right, and U.S. President Barack Obama shake hands at the National Palace in Mexico City on Thursday.

can, according to the Pew Research Center.

For Obama, the immigration debate is rife with potential political pitfalls. While he views an overhaul of the nation’s patchwork immigration laws as a legacy-building issue, he’s been forced to keep a low-profile role in the debate to avoid scaring off wary Republicans.

In an effort to court those GOP lawmakers, the draft bill being debated on Capitol Hill focuses heavily on securing the border with Mexico, and makes doing so a pre-condition for a pathway to citizenship for those in the U.S. illegally. But Florida Republican Sen. Marco Rubio, one of the bill’s architects, said Thursday that unless the border security measures are made even tougher, the legislation will face tough odds not only in the GOP-controlled House but also in the Democratic-led Senate.

The president acknowledged there were some areas along the 2,000-mile border between the U.S. and Mexico where security needs to be tightened. But he gently chided Rubio and other Republicans for putting up obstacles that would derail final legislation.

“I suspect that the final legislation will not contain everything I want. It won’t contain everything that Republican leaders want, either,” Obama said. He added that “what I’m not going to do is to go along with something where we’re looking for an excuse not to do it as opposed to a way to do it.”

Despite the intense interest in the immigration debate among Mexicans, Pena Nieto carefully avoided injecting himself in the issue. While he commended the U.S. for tackling the challenge, he said the congressional debate “is a domestic affair.”

Boston Bombing

Remains Of Suspect Are Claimed

BY BRIDGET MURPHY

Associated Press

BOSTON — The body of Boston Marathon bombing suspect Tamerlan Tsarnaev, who was the subject of a massive manhunt and died after a gunbattle with police, was claimed on Thursday.

Department of Public Safety spokesman Terrel Harris said a funeral home retained by Tsarnaev’s family picked up the 26-year-old’s remains. He had no more information.

The medical examiner determined Tsarnaev’s cause of death on Monday, but officials said it wouldn’t become public until his remains were released and a death certificate was filed. It was unclear on Thursday evening whether the death certificate had been filed.

Tsarnaev’s widow, Katherine Russell, who has been living with her parents in North Kingstown, R.I., learned this week that the medical examiner was ready to release his body and wanted it released to his side of the family, her attorney Amato DeLuca said days ago.

Tsarnaev’s uncle Ruslan Tsarni, of Maryland, said Tuesday night the family would take the body.

“Of course, family members will take possession of the body,” Tsarni said. “We’ll do it. We will do it. A family is a family.”

Tsarnaev, who had appeared in surveillance photos wearing a black cap and was identified as Suspect No. 1, died days after the bombing.

The April 15 bombing, using pressure cookers packed with explosives, nails, ball bearings and metal shards near the marathon’s finish line, killed three people and injured more



Tsarnaev

than 260 others. Authorities said Tsarnaev and his younger brother later killed a Massachusetts Institute of Technology campus police officer and carjacked a driver, who es-

caped.

Authorities said that during the gunbattle with police, the Tsarnaev brothers, ethnic Chechens from Russia who came to the United States about a decade ago, set off another pressure cooker bomb and tossed grenades before the older brother ran out of ammunition.

Police said they tackled the older brother and began to handcuff him but had to dive out of the way at the last second when the younger brother, 19-year-old Dzhokhar Tsarnaev, drove a stolen car at them. They said the younger brother ran over his brother’s body as he drove away from the scene to escape.

Dzhokhar Tsarnaev was captured later, wounded and bloody, hiding in a tarp-covered boat in a

suburban Boston backyard. He is in a federal prison and faces a charge of using a weapon of mass destruction to kill.

The Tsarnaev brothers’ mother insists the allegations against them are lies.

Three of Dzhokhar Tsarnaev’s friends, college classmates, were arrested and were accused of helping after the marathon bombing to remove a laptop and backpack from his dormitory room before the FBI searched it.

A top Republican senator on Thursday asked President Barack Obama’s administration to explain how one of the students entered the United States without a valid student visa.

Sen. Chuck Grassley, of Iowa, in a three-page letter to Department of Homeland Security Secretary Janet Napolitano, asked for additional details about the student visa applications for Azamat Tazhayakov and Dias Kadyrbayev, college roommates from Kazakhstan charged with obstruction of justice in the marathon bombing case, and how Tazhayakov was allowed to re-enter the United States in January.

Report: NKorea Moving Toward Nuke Missile

WASHINGTON (AP) — North Korea “will move closer” to its announced goal of being able to strike the U.S. with a nuclear-armed missile if it keeps investing in tests of nuclear and missile technology, the Pentagon said Thursday in a report to Congress.

The unclassified version of the report, which was required by a 2012 law, offered no estimate of when North Korea might achieve that capability. It said the pace of progress will depend in part on how many resources are invested.

The report fits an established U.S. intelligence picture of North Korea making an enormous effort to become a nuclear power and of an economically poor country directing a disproportionate amount of resources to its military.



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