

## Kidnapping, Sex Assault Victim Found

SANTA ANA, Calif. (AP) — A woman who was 15 when she disappeared from her California home a decade ago has contacted police and told them she was kidnapped by a man who sexually assaulted her, forced her into marriage and fathered a child with her, authorities said Wednesday.

Police have arrested Isidro Garcia, 41, of Bell Gardens, on suspicion of kidnapping for rape, lewd acts with a minor and false imprisonment, according to a statement from the Santa Ana Police Department.

In 2004, when the victim was 15 and had recently arrived in the United States without legal documentation, Garcia was dating her mother and lived with the family, authorities said. The mother suspected that he was sexually abusing her daughter, police said.

In August 2004, Garcia assaulted the mother, drugged the girl and then fled with her to a house in Compton, locking her in a garage, the statement said.

Garcia provided the girl with false identification and used physical and emotional abuse to prevent her from fleeing, police said. Garcia repeatedly told the victim that her family had stopped searching for her and that they would be deported if she tried to leave, the statement said. They also moved frequently to avoid being found, police said.

## Boko Haram Attacks Nigerian Villages

JOS, Nigeria (AP) — Islamic militants killed 48 villagers in northeastern Nigeria near the town where they kidnapped 300 schoolgirls, and the U.S. said Wednesday it was sending in 80 military personnel to expand the drone search for the captives.

The developments came hours after twin car bombings claimed at least 130 lives in this central city — an escalating campaign of violence blamed on the Boko Haram terrorist network and its drive to impose an Islamic state on Nigeria.

The three villages attacked overnight Tuesday and early Wednesday are near the town of Chibok, where the girls were abducted from their boarding school in a brazen April 15 assault that has ignited a global movement to secure their freedom.

The first lady Michelle Obama is among those who have joined a viral social media campaign under the hashtag (hash)BringBackOurGirls, tweeting earlier this month, "Our prayers are with the missing Nigerian girls and their families. It's time to (hash)BringBackOurGirls."

On Wednesday, President Barack Obama announced that the U.S. was sending in 80 military personnel to help in the search for the missing schoolgirls. In a letter to House Speaker John Boehner and the Senate, Obama said the service members were being sent to Chad, which borders northeastern Nigeria, to help with intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance aircraft missions over Nigeria and the nearby region.

## Supreme Court Halts Execution

BONNE TERRE, Mo. (AP) — The U.S. Supreme Court on Wednesday halted the execution of a Missouri inmate with a rare medical condition who challenged the state's refusal to disclose the source of its lethal injection drug.

The justices said a lower federal court needs to take another look at the case of Russell Bucklew, whose execution would have been the nation's first since last month's botched execution in Oklahoma. Bucklew had been scheduled to be put to death at 12:01 a.m. Wednesday for the 1996 killing of a man during a violent crime spree, but Supreme Court Justice Samuel Alito blocked the execution late Tuesday to give the full court time to consider the matter.

By law, Missouri has a 24-hour window to carry out a scheduled execution, and the ruling from the full Supreme Court Wednesday evening meant the state Supreme Court would have to set a new execution date if Missouri is to carry out the punishment.

Minutes after the U.S. Supreme Court ruling, people who were to have witnessed Bucklew's execution on the state's behalf were released. Eric Slusher, a spokesman for Missouri Attorney General Chris Koster, confirmed that no further litigation was expected Wednesday.

"This is something the attorney general's office is going to have to respond to and take up in court. As a result, we will stand down tonight," Missouri Department of Corrections spokesman Mike O'Connell told reporters.

## Proposal: Airlines Must Disclose Fees

WASHINGTON (AP) — Passengers love the idea, but airlines hate it. The government wants to require that travelers be told upfront about basic services that aren't included in the price of a ticket and how much extra they'll cost.

The Transportation Department proposed Wednesday that passengers be provided detailed information on fees for a first checked bag, a second checked bag, advance seat assignments and carry-on bags.

The rules would apply whether passengers bought tickets on the phone, in person or online — and not just from airline websites. Airlines that want their tickets to remain available through travel agents and online ticketing services would have to provide them information on fees for basic services, too, something most have been reluctant to do.

The idea is to prevent consumers from being lured by low advertised fares, only to be surprised later by high fees for services once considered part of the ticket price.

Airlines currently are required to disclose only bag fees, and even then they don't have to provide an exact price. Some provide a wide range of possible fees in complex charts.

## Russia To Supply Natural Gas To China

SHANGHAI (AP) — China signed a landmark \$400 billion deal Wednesday to buy natural gas from Russia, binding Moscow more closely to Beijing at a time when President Vladimir Putin's relations with the West have deteriorated to the lowest point ever.

China's president also called for an Asian security arrangement that would include Russia and Iran and exclude the United States.

The 30-year gas deal, worked out during a two-day visit by Putin to China, gives Moscow an economic boost at a time when Washington and the European Union have imposed sanctions against Russia and Europe has threatened to cut its gas imports to punish the Kremlin over the crisis in Ukraine.

The agreement enables Russia to expand the market for its gas, which now goes mostly to Europe.

It "opened the door for Russia to enter into Asia's gas market," said Keun-Wook Paik, senior research fellow at the Oxford Institute for Energy Studies.

## 71 People Charge In Child Porn Case

NEW YORK (AP) — Seemingly respectable members of the mainstream — a police officer, a paramedic, a rabbi, an airline pilot, an architect, a Boy Scout leader — were caught using the Internet to collect and trade child pornography, federal officials said Wednesday.

The six were among 70 New York City-area men and one woman charged as the result of a five-week investigation by the Homeland Security Investigations arm of U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement.

Some of the defendants, using search terms like "real child rape" and "family sex," had downloaded thousands of disturbing images on their computers inside suburban homes they shared with their families. The lone woman was accused of allowing another suspect to videotape her son.

Federal and state officials who announced the arrests on Wednesday called it one of the largest local roundups ever of people who seek to anonymously share the porn online — and a stark reminder that they come from all walks of life.

"This operation puts the lie to the classic, stereotypical profile that child predators are nothing more than unemployed drifters," said James Hayes, head of ICE's New York office.

# Obama Vows Fix To Veterans' Health Care Troubles

BY JULIE PACE AND MATTHEW DALY  
Associated Press

WASHINGTON — With outrage mounting over veterans' health care, President Barack Obama declared Wednesday that allegations of misconduct at VA hospitals will not be tolerated, and he left open the possibility that Secretary Eric Shinseki, a disabled war veteran, could be held to account.

"I will not stand for it — not as commander in chief but also not as an American," Obama said following an Oval Office meeting with the embattled Shinseki.

Congress moved to keep up the pressure on the administration, with the House easily approving a measure Wednesday evening that would give the VA secretary more authority to fire or demote the 450 senior career employees who serve as hospital directors or executives in the agency's 21 regions. The vote was 390 to 33.

Rep. Jeff Miller, R-Fla., chairman of the House Veterans Affairs Committee, sponsored the measure, saying VA officials who have presided over mismanagement or negligence are more likely to receive bonuses or glowing performance reviews than any sort of punishment. He declared that a "widespread and systemic lack of accountability is exacerbating" the department's problems.

The White House said it supported the goal of seeking greater accountability at the VA but had unspecified concerns about the legislation.

The growing furor surrounding the Department of Veterans Affairs centers on allegations of treatment delays and preventable deaths at VA hospitals. The department's inspector general's office says 26 facilities are being investigated nationwide, including a Phoenix hospital facing



OLIVIER DOULIERY/ABACA PRESS/MCT  
President Barack Obama speaks at the White House in Washington, D.C., Wednesday, saying he "will not stand" for misconduct and mismanagement at the Department of Veterans Affairs, but defended his VA chief, Secretary Eric K. Shinseki, as dedicated to fixing the troubled the agency.

allegations that 40 people died while waiting for treatment and staff kept a secret list of patients in order to hide delays in care.

The allegations have raised fresh concerns about the Obama administration's management of a department that has been struggling to keep up with the influx of new veterans returning home from the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. Obama's comments Wednesday — his first on the matter in more than three weeks — signaled a greater urgency by the White House to keep the matter from spiraling into a deeper political problem in a midterm election year.

"We are going to fix whatever is wrong, and so long as I have the privilege of serving as commander in chief, I'm going to keep on fighting to deliver the care and the benefits and the opportunities that you and your families deserve, now and for decades to come," Obama said.

Yet the president's remarks did little to quell the criticism of both the VA troubles and his own handling of the matter.

Arizona Republican Sen. John McCain, a former prisoner of war, said Obama's comments were "wholly

insufficient in addressing the fundamental, systemic problems plaguing our veterans' health care system." And the American Legion, the nation's largest veterans service organization, said Obama was making an "unfortunate" decision by keeping Shinseki at the helm of the VA.

"Words are nice, and even somewhat comforting, but when will the VA's house be cleansed of those who are soiling it and dishonoring the system?" American Legion National Commander Daniel M. Dellinger said in a statement.

Several GOP lawmakers also are seeking Shinseki's resignation, as are Georgia Reps. John Barrow and David Scott, who on Wednesday became the first Democrats to call for the secretary to step down. Barrow is facing one of the most challenging re-election fights of any House Democrat.

Shinseki, a retired Army four-star general, did not appear with the president publicly Wednesday. While Obama spoke of the secretary warmly, saying he had put his "heart and soul" into improving care for the nation's veterans, he added that there would be "accountability throughout the system" if the allegations are

proved true.

The White House's more immediate concern appears to be quickly getting the results of the VA's internal reviews of the hospital troubles. Shinseki is due to give Obama a preliminary report next week, with a broader review being overseen by White House deputy chief of staff Rob Nabors scheduled to wrap up in June.

Nabors, who also took part in the Oval Office meeting with Shinseki, headed to Phoenix on Wednesday to meet with staff at the VA hospital that is at the center of the allegations.

The current director of the Phoenix VA Health Care System, Sharon Helman, has been placed on leave while the VA's inspector general investigates the claims raised by several former VA employees. Investigators probing the claims say they have so far not linked any patient deaths in Phoenix to delayed care. A report is due in August.

Last year, Helman was awarded a \$9,345 bonus in addition to her \$169,000 annual salary. Shinseki rescinded the bonus on Wednesday, the VA said. A spokesman said the bonus had been awarded through an administrative error.

Two Republican senators have introduced legislation to prohibit payment of bonuses to employees at the Veterans Health Administration through next year. Sens. Richard Burr of North Carolina and Deb Fischer of Nebraska said the VA should focus its spending on fixing problems at the agency, "not rewarding employees entrenched in a failing bureaucracy." Burr is the senior Republican on the Senate Veterans Affairs Committee, and Fischer is on the Senate Armed Services Committee. Both have called for Shinseki to step down.

The House passed a bill in February that would eliminate performance bonuses for the department's senior executive staff through 2018.

## Pa. Won't Appeal Same-Sex Marriage Case

BY MARC LEVY  
Associated Press

HARRISBURG, Pa. — Pennsylvania's governor ended his fight Wednesday to stop same-sex marriage in the state, allowing a growing number of couples to proceed with their wedding plans with greater peace of mind.

A day after a federal judge struck down the state's same-sex marriage ban, Gov. Tom Corbett announced he would halt his court fight because "the case is extremely unlikely to succeed on appeal."

The governor's decision means that same-sex marriage will remain legal in Pennsylvania, without the threat that a higher court will reinstate the ban.

U.S. District Court Judge John Jones III struck down a 1996 state law banning recognition of gay marriage, calling it unconstitutional. One widow, 11 couples and one couple's teenage daughters had sued. Their lawyers said another party has never been allowed to appeal in the state's place.

Corbett's decision goes against the Republican governor's personal beliefs. He opposes same-sex marriage and supported thus-far unsuccessful efforts to amend the state constitution to ban gay marriage. In October, he took heat for comparing the marriage of same-sex couples to the marriage of a brother and sister.

"As a Roman Catholic, the traditional teaching of my faith has not wavered," Corbett said in a statement. "I continue to maintain the belief that marriage is between one man and one woman. My duties as governor require that I follow the laws as interpreted by the courts and make a judgment as to the likelihood of a successful appeal."

Corbett, who is seeking re-election this year facing poor public approval ratings, has sought in recent months to move to the political center and away from staunchly conservative positions on several hot-button issues.

At an unrelated public event in Pittsburgh on Wednesday, Corbett declined to discuss the decision beyond the statement. He said he has personal feelings about the issue, but "I'm going to keep it to myself."

Pennsylvania is the 19th state to recognize same-sex marriages and the last northeastern U.S. state to do so. Hundreds of gay couples rushed to apply for marriage licenses after Jones' ruling Tuesday.

At least one couple even got married.

On Wednesday, about an hour before Corbett revealed his decision, Pamela VanHaitmsa and Jess Garrity of Pittsburgh were married in front of a district judge, said their lawyer, Sam Hens-Greco.

Pennsylvania requires a three-day

waiting period before a couple with a marriage license can wed, but Hens-Greco asked a county judge to waive it, he said. The judge did and they got married right away.

A suburban Pittsburgh couple, Stephen Miller and Jim Devaty, plan to get married Tuesday after almost two decades together. They applied for their license online Tuesday after Jones struck down the law.

"I'm in shock," Miller said Wednesday. "In a way, I never thought I'd live to see the day when Jim and I could get married."

They'll crack a bottle of champagne they've been saving and plan a gathering for family and friends. They're not sure where yet, but their son, 6-year-old Aiden, suggested the backyard.

"We're anxious, we're excited," Miller said. "It's been almost 24 years that we've been together. We're excited to make it legal."

Shari Gross of Erie said she and her partner of almost six years are legally married in New York, but their marriage was done quietly and with just a few friends. But they promised they would have a big party once their home state recognized their union, and perhaps at the beginning of the party, they'll repeat their pledges to each other.

"But from then on out," said Gross, 51, "it's going to be a celebration."

## School Board Members Met Privately On Bible Class

BY BAILEY ELISE MCBRIDE  
Associated Press

OKLAHOMA CITY (AP) — A school board that approved a Bible-based curriculum for pupils next fall broke into small groups and met privately with the program's chief backer, the president of the Hobby Lobby arts and crafts store chain, to get around an Oklahoma law that requires government bodies to be open to the public, according to emails obtained by The Associated Press.

The April 14 meetings with Steve Green and other members of the Museum of the Bible curriculum team occurred just hours before the Mustang School Board approved the course as an elective for the fall. The Mustang superintendent acknowledged insisting on separate presentations so the public wouldn't have to be invited, and did so at the direction of Green and his public relations representatives.

"I want to emphasize again that per my conversation with Ashleigh and the decision to break into two groups, that this will not be a public meeting," Superintendent Sean McDaniel wrote in one of the emails obtained under an Open Records Act request, referring to a woman at the

Saxum public relations company, which represents Hobby Lobby and helped set up the meetings.

The Oklahoma County prosecutor said the move — which involved the board leaving its base in Canadian County and traveling to Oklahoma City — could create a potential violation if it is proven to be a deliberate attempt to go around laws that require government bodies to meet openly.

"Even if there's an out-of-county board, if they come here and meet in an attempt to circumvent the Open Meetings Act, just because they've met in a place that's not routine, doesn't mean they circumvent their requirements for meetings," Oklahoma County District Attorney David Prater said. "If someone is going to that great of length to avoid quorum, it sounds like they're being pretty darn careful."

Boards can meet without a quorum present, Prater said, but no one at one meeting can be present at the other to give information to the other members, and no action can be taken by the members. Green was present at both meetings April 14, as was McDaniel. Others present for both include members of the curriculum design team and curators

from the Green-backed Museum of the Bible.

Green, whose Hobby Lobby is leading a court case against the U.S. government over the federal health care law and religious objections to some birth control, hopes to expose more children to the Bible by using it to teach archaeology, history and the arts — but some question whether he also wants to proselytize. The curriculum says people should rest on the Sabbath because God did so after six days of creation, and says people risk God's punishment if they do not obey him, according to a draft copy obtained by The Associated Press.

"I think the things to take away from it are that Green's involvement is much more than anyone is willing to admit, and they've been a bit disingenuous about it," said Andrew Seidel, a lawyer with the Freedom from Religion Foundation. "They deliberately tried to keep the meetings closed to the public, which is not something you would hope to see with a public curriculum."

Three of the district's five board members attended the meetings, according to the emails. In an interview, board member Jeff Landrith denied knowledge of the meetings

until he was reminded that he had sent a note to McDaniel saying he would be unable to attend. He said later that the gathering did not sound like a "meeting." Other members of the board did not respond to emails or calls from The Associated Press.

McDaniel denied any illicit intent in holding separate meetings.

"This was something that we wanted to be able to have conversation about and ask questions. If we have the media and the public coming into Hobby Lobby headquarters with us, that can just be confusing and awkward since we're all seeing it for the first time," McDaniel said in an interview. "My thought was, 'Hey, let's hold off on having a public meeting until we see a little more.'"

Joey Senat, a journalism professor at Oklahoma State University and author of an open government blog for FOI Oklahoma Inc., said the Mustang board violated the spirit of the law by holding meaningful discussions about the curriculum outside earshot of school patrons.

"It ought to anger the public when they see a public body doing this," Senat said. "Nothing should make residents of Mustang madder than that."