

## Obama's Trade Bill Clears Key Hurdle

WASHINGTON (AP) — In a triumph for President Barack Obama, sweeping legislation to strengthen the administration's hand in global trade talks advanced toward Senate passage Thursday after a showdown vote that remained in doubt until the final moment.

The 62-38 vote, two more than the 60 needed, came from a solid phalanx of Republicans and more than a dozen Democrats. But the decisive thumbs-up came — literally, and long past the allotted time — from Democratic Sen. Maria Cantwell of Washington after she and a few others seized the moment as leverage to demand a vote next month on legislation to renew the Export-Import Bank.

"It was a nice victory. We're going to continue and finish up the bill this week," Majority leader Mitch McConnell, R-Ky., and Obama's most important Senate ally on the trade bill, said after sealing the agreement that Cantwell, Republican Sen. Lindsey Graham of South Carolina and others had sought.

The Senate action to move toward a final vote was "a big step forward," Obama said at the White House, predicting that a trade deal would "open up access to markets that too often are closed." The president was up late Wednesday night placing telephone calls to lawmakers, and he spoke with Cantwell again shortly before the vote.

Final Senate passage would clear the way for a fierce struggle in the House.

## Clinton Corrospended About Benghazi

WASHINGTON (AP) — Former Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton received monthly missives about the growing unrest in Libya from a longtime friend who was previously barred by the White House from working for her as a government employee, according to emails received on her personal account.

The messages show the role played by Sidney Blumenthal, who was working for the Clinton family foundation and advising a group of entrepreneurs trying to win business from the Libyan transitional government. Blumenthal repeatedly wrote dispatches about the events in Libya to Clinton, who often forwarded them to her aides at the State Department.

Clinton's earlier efforts to hire Blumenthal, who has spent nearly two decades working for the Clinton family, as a State Department employee had been rejected by Obama administration officials who said they feared his role spreading harsh attacks against Obama in the 2008 presidential primaries would cause discomfort among members of their new White House team.

Clinton is the leading candidate for the Democratic nomination for president, which has heightened the scrutiny of her use of a private email account and server while serving as secretary of state.

Blumenthal's continued role was revealed in nearly 350 pages of emails, published Thursday by The New York Times, about the 2012 attacks on the U.S. diplomatic post in Benghazi, Libya, that killed four Americans, including U.S. Ambassador Christopher Stevens.

## Surveillance Powers Set To Expire

WASHINGTON (AP) — The chairman of the Senate intelligence committee floated a compromise Thursday that would end bulk collection of phone records by the National Security Agency after a two-year transition period, leaving it up to the House to accept the deal or allow expiration of government surveillance powers June 1.

The proposal by Richard Burr, a North Carolina Republican, came as the White House and House leaders from both parties urged the Senate to take up a House-passed bill that would end NSA bulk collection after six months while preserving other surveillance powers set to expire.

"I don't think anyone in the House wants it to go dead," he told reporters.

With the Senate expected to vote as soon as Friday, Burr predicted the House bill would fail to break the 60-vote threshold needed to end debate, and he envisioned the same fate for a two-month extension of current law proposed by Senate leaders. As a compromise, he predicted, the leadership would propose that the Senate vote Friday to extend current law between 5 days and a month, leaving it up to the House to take or leave the Senate proposal when House members return June 1.

Earlier Thursday, House Speaker John Boehner, R-Ohio, and Democratic leader Nancy Pelosi of California appealed for Senate consideration of the USA Freedom Act, which their chamber passed 338-88 last week.

## Malaysia Orders Search For Migrants

YANGON, Myanmar (AP) — Four Malaysian navy ships began searching the seas for stranded boat people Thursday in the first official rescue operation since desperate migrants started washing onto Southeast Asia's shores, and the U.S. military gave the first indication it was ready to take a direct role in helping address the crisis.

Thousands of Rohingya Muslims from Myanmar and Bangladesh are believed to be trapped on boats with little food or water — some after being pushed back by the navies of at least three countries — and the international community has warned that time to save them is running out.

The announcement Thursday by Malaysian Prime Minister Najib Razak was the latest in a series of breakthroughs, including an offer by his country and Indonesia to provide temporary shelter to the desperate men, women and children until a more permanent solution is found.

He said he had ordered his navy and coast guard to conduct search-and-rescue efforts for other boats.

"We have to prevent loss of life," he tweeted.

## Grand Jury Indicts Officers In Gray Death

BALTIMORE (AP) — A grand jury indicted all six officers charged in the case of Freddie Gray, who died of injuries he suffered in police custody, allowing the state's attorney to press ahead with the most serious charges despite criticism that she was part of an "overzealous prosecution."

The indictments announced Thursday were similar to the charges Baltimore State's Attorney Marilyn Mosby announced nearly three weeks ago. The most serious charge for each officer, ranging from second-degree "depraved heart" murder to assault, stood, though some of the lesser alleged offenses had changed.

Gray suffered a critical spinal injury April 12 after police handcuffed, shackled and placed him head-first into a van, Mosby has said. His pleas for medical attention were repeatedly ignored.

Gray's death a week later spawned protests that on two occasions gave way to violence and looting. In the wake of the riots, Democratic Mayor Stephanie Rawlings-Blake implemented a curfew and Republican Gov. Larry Hogan declared a state of emergency.

Mosby said prosecutors presented evidence to the grand jury for the past two weeks. Some of the charges were changed based on new information, but she didn't say what that was. She also did not take questions.

## Students To Spend Less Time Exams

DENVER (AP) — Students in 11 states and the District of Columbia will spend less time next year taking tests based on the Common Core standards, a decision made in response to widespread opposition to testing requirements.

The decision to reduce testing time by about 90 minutes was made by the states and the Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for Colleges and Career, or PARCC.

The PARCC tests are administered to students in grades three to eight and once in high school. As a result of the decision, the math and English exams will only be given once a year, instead of twice.

The 11 states involved are Arkansas, Colorado, Illinois, Louisiana, Maryland, Massachusetts, Mississippi, New Jersey, New Mexico, Ohio and Rhode Island.

"We've listened to the voices of all stakeholders — educators, parents, and students — and are using the lessons learned," New Mexico Education Secretary Hanna Skandera said in a statement.

# Fears Mount Over Palmyra As IS Expands Territory In Syria

BY ALBERT AJI  
AND ZEINA KARAM

Associated Press

DAMASCUS, Syria — Fears mounted over the fate of one of the Mideast's most prominent archaeological sites after Islamic State militants overran the historic Syrian town of Palmyra, seizing control Thursday of its temples, tombs and colonnades within hours.

The takeover also expanded the extremists' hold, making them the single group controlling the most territory in Syria.

"The Syrian regime appears to be in terminal decline, and the Islamic State group in its timing is capitalizing on recent losses by government forces in the north and south," said Amr Al-Azm, an antiquities expert and professor at Shawnee State University in Ohio.

The militants overran the famed archaeological site early Thursday, just hours after seizing the nearby town in central Syria, activists and officials said.

They also captured Palmyra's airport and the notorious Tadmur prison, delivering a startling new defeat for President Bashar Assad, whose forces quickly retreated. Hundreds of Palmyra residents fled the town of 65,000, and many more were trying to escape, said Talal Barazi, the governor of central Homs province, which includes Palmyra.

An oasis set in the Syrian desert, Palmyra is a strategic crossroads linking the capital Damascus and cities to the east and the west. Its capture raised alarm over some of the world's most important ancient ruins, whose fate remained unknown Thursday, and no photos or video emerged from the militants.

"We are in a state of anticipation and fear," said Maamoun Abdulkarim, the head of the Antiquities and Museum Department in Damascus. "The city is now totally controlled by gunmen and its destiny is dark and dim."

A UNESCO world heritage site, Palmyra boasts 2,000-year-old towering Roman-era colonnades, temples and priceless artifacts that have earned it the affectionate name among Syrians of the "Bride of the Desert."

They are the remnants of an Arab client state of the Roman Empire that briefly rebelled and carved out its own kingdom in the 3rd Century, led by Queen Zenobia, with Palmyra as its capital. Before the war, it was Syria's top tourist attraction, drawing tens of thousands of



CHRISTOPHE CHARON/ABACA PRESS/TNS

**Aerial file photo taken of the ancient and modern (in the background) Palmyra in Syria. Islamic State (IS) militants in Syria have entered the Unesco World Heritage site of Palmyra after seizing the town next to the ancient ruins. IS has previously demolished ancient sites in Iraq that pre-date Islam.**

visitors each year.

It includes a 3,000-seat amphitheater overlooking a colonnaded main avenue where plays, concerts and youth festivals were staged.

With the capture of Palmyra, the Islamic State militants now control half of Syria and most of the country's oil wells, according to the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, making it the group with the most territory under its authority among the myriad factions fighting in the country's civil war.

Its vast terrain inside Syria stretches from the group's westernmost strongholds in Aleppo province to its core territory in northeastern Syria down to central Syria, with footholds in Damascus.

Palmyra's location in Syria's heartland offers the militants several important advantages, said Faysal Itani, a resident fellow at the Atlantic Council. The town can now be used as a launching pad to threaten government positions and supply lines south of Aleppo and east of Homs and Hama, and open up a new approach to Damascus, seat of Assad's power.

IS can also threaten regime supply lines to the eastern city of Deir el-Zour, where government forces are still holding out against the militants.

"If IS manages to cut off Deir el-Zour, it is likely that the city would fall, essentially ending regime presence in that province, and consolidating IS' core territory," he said.

The fall of Palmyra follows major setbacks

for Assad in northern and southern Syria. "This is simply an indication of how overstretched the regime is," Itani said.

The militants' capture of Palmyra came just days after Islamic State fighters seized the strategic Iraqi city of Ramadi, illustrating the extremists' ability to advance on multiple fronts at opposite ends of a sprawling battlefield that spans the two countries, where it has declared a caliphate or Islamic state on the territory it controls.

At the White House, Press Secretary Josh Earnest described the developments in Palmyra and Ramadi as setbacks, but insisted the U.S.-led air campaign was making progress overall "in degrading ISIL capabilities."

The head of the U.N.'s cultural agency called on Syria's warring factions to immediately end hostilities around the archaeological site.

"I am extremely worried about what happens in Palmyra," UNESCO chief Irina Bokova said. "Palmyra is an extraordinary world heritage site in the desert and any destruction to Palmyra is not just a war crime, but ... an enormous loss to humanity."

Al-Azm said he expected the militants to turn to looting and excavating the town's antiquities, selling the artifacts on the black market before eventually destroying the site.

In taking Palmyra, IS also seized control of the notorious Tadmur Prison, freeing some of those imprisoned inside, said Bebars al-Talawy, a Homs activist. The govern-

ment had already transferred thousands of detainees from the prison to a jail near Damascus as IS attacked the city, al-Talawy said. Thousands were believed to still be inside, he said, but he couldn't provide precise figures.

The prison survives in the collective memory of Syrians as the place where dissidents were held for decades and prisoners tortured.

A report by a local Lebanese station that 27 Lebanese prisoners, including some jailed since the 1980s, were among those freed from Tadmur triggered confusion in Beirut among families of missing Lebanese, many of whom believe their loved ones have been languishing in Syrian prisons for decades.

An amateur video posted online purported to show IS fighters inside the Tadmur Prison setting fire to a giant poster of Assad and cheering. The video and its location could not be independently verified but appeared genuine and corresponded to other AP reporting of the events.

Palmyra's fall came at a deadly toll.

The Observatory said Thursday that according to its estimates, 462 people have been killed since IS began its offensive on Palmyra and nearby areas on May 13. It said the dead included 241 troops and pro-government gunmen, as well as 150 IS fighters. The rest were civilians, presumably killed by IS or in cross-fire.

Meanwhile, Islamic State militants made further inroads in Iraq's Anbar province, seizing the Iraqi side of a key border crossing with Syria after Iraqi government forces pulled out, according to Athal al-Fahdawi, a local councilman. The fall of the al-Walid crossing will help the militants to shuttle weaponry and reinforcements more easily across the Iraqi-Syrian borders.

Despite the Islamic State's stunning victories in Palmyra and Iraq, the extremists suffered a setback in Syria's northeastern province of Hassakeh, where they have come under attack by Kurdish fighters.

The Kurdish fighters captured much of the Abdul-Aziz Mountain near the village of Tel Tamr on Wednesday, according to the Observatory and the Kurdish forces known as the People's Protection Units, or YPG.

The Observatory said YPG fighters were backed by airstrikes of the U.S.-led coalition, which has been bombing IS positions in Syria since September.

# China, US Assert Rights After Exchange Over S. China Sea

BY CHRISTOPHER BODEEN

Associated Press

BEIJING — China said Thursday it is entitled to keep watch over airspace and seas surrounding artificial islands it created in the disputed waters of the South China Sea, following an exchange in which its navy warned off a U.S. surveillance plane. The United States said its aerial patrolling was in accordance with international law and "no one in their right mind" would try to stop it.

Neither side says it wants confrontation with the other, but as China seeks to assert its expansive claims to the South China Sea, the U.S. is pushing back and trying to demonstrate that China's massive land reclamation does not give it territorial rights.

A news crew from CNN reported it witnessed an incident Wednesday in which a Chinese navy dispatcher demanded eight times that a U.S. Navy P8-A Poseidon surveillance aircraft leave the area as it flew over Fiery Cross Reef, where China has conducted extensive reclamation work. It said the U.S. crew responded that they were flying through international airspace, to which the Chinese dispatcher answered: "This is the Chinese navy ... You go!"

The Center for Strategic

and International Studies think tank posted more video Thursday of the aerial patrol above the Spratly island chain which it said had been released by the U.S. Navy.

Speaking at a regular daily briefing, Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesman Hong Lei reiterated Beijing's insistence on its indisputable sovereignty over the islands it has created by piling sand on top of atolls and reefs.

While saying he had no information about the reported exchange, Hong said China was "entitled to the surveillance over related airspace and sea areas so as to maintain national security and avoid any maritime accidents." "We hope relevant countries respect China's sovereignty over the South China Sea, abandon actions that may intensify controversies and play a constructive role for regional peace and stability," Hong told reporters.

In Washington, Daniel Russel, the top U.S. diplomat for East Asia, said the flight of a U.S. reconnaissance plane in international airspace over the South China Sea was a regular and appropriate occurrence. He said the U.S. will seek to preserve the ability of not just the United States but all countries to exercise their rights to freedom of navigation and overflight.

"Nobody in their right mind is going to try to stop the U.S. Navy from operating. That would not be a good step. But it's not enough that a U.S. military plane can overfly international waters, even if there is a challenge or a hail and query" from the Chinese military, he said.

"We believe that every country and all civilian actors also should have unfettered access to international waters and international airspace," he said.

China's construction has intensified frictions among competing parties in the South China Sea, which Beijing claims virtually in its entirety along with its scattered island groups. The area that is home to some of the world's busiest commercial shipping routes is also claimed in part or in whole by the Philippines, Taiwan, Brunei, Malaysia and Vietnam.

The U.S. and most of the 10 members of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations want a halt to the projects, which they suspect are aimed at building islands and other land features over which China can claim sovereignty and base military assets.

The U.S. says it takes no position on the sovereignty claims but insists they must be negotiated. Washington also says ensuring maritime

safety and access is a U.S. national security priority.

China is also at odds with Japan over ownership of a group of uninhabited islands in the East China Sea that are controlled by Tokyo but also claimed by Beijing, leading to increased activity by Chinese planes and ships in the area, which lies between Taiwan and Okinawa.

Both sides have accused the other of operating dangerously, prompting fears of an incident such as the 2001 collision between a Chinese fighter jet and a U.S. surveillance plane in which the Chinese pilot was killed and the American crew detained on China's Hainan island.

Also Thursday, the Chinese air force announced its latest offshore training exercises in the western Pacific as part of efforts to boost its combat preparedness.

People's Liberation Army Air Force spokesman Shen Jinke said the exercises were held in international airspace but gave no specifics. In its report on the drills, state broadcaster CCTV showed a video of Xian H-6 twin-engine bombers, a Chinese version of Russia's Tupelov Tu-16, in flight and landing at an air base, although it wasn't clear when the video was shot.

judges to stop.

The latest ruling came in a class-action lawsuit by gay couples across the state.

David Dinielli, deputy legal director of the Southern Poverty Law Center, called the ruling a definitive victory for gay marriage.

# Gay Couples Across Alabama Have Right To Marry

MONTGOMERY (AP) — A federal judge has ruled that gays and lesbians have the right to marry in all Alabama counties, but placed her decision on hold until the U.S. Supreme Court issues a ruling on same-sex marriage.

U.S. District Judge Callie Granade said Thursday that Alabama's ban on same-sex

marriage is unconstitutional and enjoined probate judges from enforcing it. However, she stayed enforcement of her order citing the expected decision this summer.

Granade in January ruled that Alabama's gay marriage ban was illegal. Gay couples married for three weeks until the state Supreme Court ordered probate