

Iraq Explosions Shatter Shiite Areas

BAGHDAD (AP) — A series of coordinated bombings shattered Shiite neighborhoods and struck at Iraqi security forces Sunday, killing at least 26 in attacks that one official described as a rallying call by al-Qaida just days after dozens of militants escaped from prison.

The blasts brought September's death toll from sectarian violence to nearly 200 people — a grim, above-average monthly total for the period since U.S. troops left last year. The steady pace of attacks has worked to undermine confidence in the government.

"The people are fed up with the killings in Iraqi cities," said Ammar Abbas, 45, a Shiite and government employee who lives in a Baghdad neighborhood near one of the bombings. "The government officials should feel shame for letting their people die at the hands of terrorists."

Police said the wave of explosions stretched from the restive but oil-rich city of Kirkuk in the north to the southern Shiite town of Kut, wounding at least 94 people. There was no immediate claim of responsibility for the attacks, but bombings are a hallmark of al-Qaida in Iraq, the Sunni insurgency that has been struggling for years to goad Shiite militias back toward civil war.

A key Shiite lawmaker said the bombings likely sought to galvanize al-Qaida in the wake of a prison break last Friday in Saddam Hussein's northern hometown of Tikrit. Scores of inmates escaped — including as many as 47 convicted al-Qaida militants — in a massive security lapse that the government acknowledged had help from inside.

D.C. Sniper: I Felt Like 'Worst Piece Of Scum'

WASHINGTON (AP) — Convicted D.C. sniper Lee Boyd Malvo said in a newspaper interview published Sunday that the devastated reaction of a victim's husband made him feel like "the worst piece of scum."

Malvo expresses remorse in the interview with *The Washington Post* and urged the families of victims to try and forget about him and his partner John Allen Muhammad so they can move on. Tuesday marks the 10th anniversary of the beginning of the deadly spree in the Washington area carried out by Malvo and John Allen Muhammad. The pair has been linked to 27 shootings across the country, including 10 fatal attacks in the Washington area.

Malvo, 27, told the *Post* in a rare interview that the look on the face of victim Linda Franklin's husband right after she was shot stands out in his memory of the rampage. Franklin, a 47-year-old FBI analyst, was killed as she and her husband loaded supplies outside a Home Depot in Falls Church, Va.

"They are penetrating," Malvo said of Ted Franklin's eyes. "It is the worst sort of pain I have ever seen in my life. His eyes ... Words do not possess the depth in which to fully convey that emotion and what I felt when I saw it. ... You feel like the worst piece of scum on the planet."

Malvo is serving a life sentence with no parole at a prison in southwest Virginia for killing Franklin. Muhammad was executed in Virginia in 2009.

Case Raises Questions About Consent Vs. Crime

KANSAS CITY, Mo. (AP) — Advocates for people who engage in rough but consensual sex say they fear an abuse case unfolding in Missouri ultimately could criminalize their lifestyle.

Ed Bagley faces a federal trial early next year on 11 counts of abuse against a woman authorities say he groomed to be his sex slave. Now prosecutors plan to present consensual, though violent, acts between Bagley and his own wife as evidence that Bagley has a history of sexually assaulting women.

The case will include evidence of "sadistic sexual assaults" committed by Bagley against his wife, Marilyn, prosecutors say.

"Marilyn Bagley's 'consent' to the sexual assaults by Defendant Edward Bagley does not change whether the acts legally constitute assault or not. Pursuant to the Missouri state assault statute ... consent is not a defense to assault resulting in serious physical injury," prosecutors wrote in court documents filed last month.

Some worry the government's assertion could open up people who practice bondage, dominance, sadism and masochism — or BDSM — to criminal charges for consensual acts they're already performing, said Susan Wright, founder of the Baltimore-based National Coalition for Sexual Freedom.

U.S. Economy Is Flashing Conflicting Signals

WASHINGTON (AP) — Anyone puzzled by the most recent U.S. economic data has reason for feeling so: The numbers sketch a sometimes contradictory picture of the economy.

We've learned that:

Consumers are more confident but aren't spending much. Fewer people are losing jobs, but not many are being hired. Home and stock prices are up, but workers' pay is trailing inflation. Auto sales have jumped, but manufacturing is faltering.

This is what an economy stuck in a slow-growth rut can look like, and it's a focal point of the presidential campaign. The U.S. economy grew at a scant 1.3 percent annual rate in the April-June quarter — too weak to reduce high unemployment. And most economists foresee little if any improvement the rest of the year.

Many Americans are reducing debt loads instead of spending freely. Builders are borrowing less and constructing homes at a modest pace. Businesses are being cautious about hiring and expanding.

Minn. Trial Could Expose Al-Shabab Recruiting

MINNEAPOLIS (AP) — A Minnesota man accused of helping to recruit and finance U.S. fighters for an overseas terror group heads to trial Monday in a case that's expected to show how some young Somali expatriates in Minneapolis were persuaded to risk their lives for insurgents back home.

Mahamud Said Omar, 46, faces five terror-related counts as part of a much broader investigation into recruiting by al-Shabab, a U.S.-designated terror group at the center of much of the violence in Somalia.

Since 2007, more than 20 young men are believed to have left Minnesota for the East African nation, presumably to take up arms with al-Shabab. The departures shook the Somali community in Minnesota — the largest in the United States.

While prosecutors don't consider Omar a mastermind in the Minneapolis pipeline, they allege that he was far more than a bit player. They say he encouraged young men to fight, helped some get tickets for travel to Somalia and helped pay for weapons.

"We believe it's a very important case because it will be the government's only opportunity, to date, to explain to the public what has been going on in the Somali community, and how these recruiters have been going after these young men," said U.S. Attorney's Office spokeswoman Jeanne Cooney. "I think it will go a long way in explaining how these cases tie together."

Obama Within Reach Of Second Term

BY THOMAS BEAUMONT
Associated Press

DES MOINES, Iowa — Five weeks to Election Day, President Barack Obama is within reach of the 270 electoral votes needed to win a second term. Republican Mitt Romney's path to victory is narrowing.

To overtake Obama, Romney would need to quickly gain the upper hand in nearly all of the nine states where he and Obama are competing the hardest.

Polls show the president with a steady lead in many of them as Romney looks to shift the dynamics of the race, starting with their first debate Wednesday in Denver.

"We'd rather be us than them," says Jennifer Psaki, an Obama spokeswoman.

But Romney's running mate Paul Ryan says there's time for the GOP ticket to win. "In these kinds of races people focus near the end, and that's what's happening now," he told "Fox News Sunday."

If the election were held today, an Associated Press analysis shows Obama would win at least 271 electoral votes, with likely victories in crucial Ohio and Iowa along with 19 other states and the District of Columbia. Romney would win 23 states for a total of 206.

To oust the Democratic incumbent, Romney would need to take up-for-grabs Florida, Colorado, Nevada, North Carolina, New Hampshire and Virginia, which would put him at 267 votes, and upend Obama in either Ohio or Iowa.

The AP analysis isn't meant to be predictive. Rather, it is intended to provide a snapshot of a race that until recently has been stubbornly close in the small number of the most contested states.



Decision
'12

growing optimism about the economy as well as a series of Romney stumbles. Most notably, a secret video surfaced recently showing the Republican nominee telling a group of donors that 47 percent of Americans consider themselves victims dependent on the government.

To be sure, much could change in the coming weeks, which will feature three presidential and one vice presidential debate. A host of unknowns, both foreign and domestic, could rock the campaign, knocking Obama off course and giving Romney a boost in the homestretch.

Barring that, Romney's challenge is formidable.

Obama started the campaign with a slew of electoral-rich coastal states already in his win column. From the outset, Romney faced fewer paths to cobbling together the state-by-state victories needed to reach the magic number.

It's grown even narrower in recent weeks, as Romney has seen his standing slip in polls in Ohio, with 18 electoral votes, and Iowa, with six. That forced him to abandon plans to try to chal-

lenge Obama on traditionally Democratic turf so he could redouble his efforts in Ohio and Iowa, as well as Colorado, Florida, New Hampshire, North Carolina, Nevada and Virginia.

Romney is hoping that come Election Day, on-the-fence voters tip his way. But there are hurdles there, too.

Early voting is under way in dozens of states, and national and key states surveys show undecided voters feel more favorably toward Obama than Romney.

The Republican is in a tight battle with Obama in Florida, as well as Colorado, North Carolina and Nevada.

But Ohio's shifting landscape illustrates Romney's troubles over the past few weeks.

Republicans and Democrats agree that Obama's solid lead in public and private polling in the state is for real. Over the past month, the president has benefited from an improving economic situation in the state; its 7.2 percent unemployment rate is below the 8.1 percent national average. Obama's team also attributes his Ohio edge to the auto bailout and GM plant expansions in eastern Ohio.

Obama and his campaign have hammered Romney on his tax policies, arguing that the former Massachusetts governor favors the rich while the president as a defender of everyone else.

The president has seen the same good fortune in Iowa. A poll released Saturday by The Des Moines Register illustrates his advantage, showing Obama with 49 percent to 45 percent for Romney. The margin of error was plus or minus 3.5 percentage points.

"It's a direct result of the time and resources he's been forced to spend here," said Iowa Republican strategist John Stineman.

Medicare To Fine Hospitals Over Readmitted Patients

BY RICARDO ALONSO-ZALDIVAR
Associated Press

WASHINGTON — If you or an elderly relative have been hospitalized recently and noticed extra attention when the time came to be discharged, there's more to it than good customer service.

Starting Monday, Medicare will fine hospitals that have too many patients readmitted within 30 days of discharge due to complications. The penalties are part of a broader push under President Barack Obama's health care law to improve quality while also trying to cut costs.

About two-thirds of the hospitals serving Medicare patients, or some 2,200 facilities, will be hit with penalties averaging around \$125,000 per facility this coming year, according to government estimates.

Data to assess the penalties have been collected and crunched, and Medicare has shared the results with individual hospitals. Medicare plans to post details online later and people can look up how their community hospitals performed.

It adds up to a new way of doing business for hospitals, and they have scrambled to prepare for well over a year. They are working on ways to improve communication with rehabilitation centers and doctors who follow patients after they're released, as well as connecting individually with patients.

"There is a lot of activity at the hospital level to straighten out our internal processes," said Nancy Foster, vice president for quality and safety at the American Hospital Association. "We are also spreading our wings a little and reaching outside the hospital, to the extent that we can, to make sure patients are getting the ongoing treatment they need."

Still, industry officials say

they have misgivings about being held liable for circumstances beyond their control. They also complain that facilities serving low-income people, including many major teaching hospitals, are much more likely to be fined, raising questions of fairness.

Consumer advocates say Medicare's nudge to hospitals is long overdue and not nearly stiff enough.

For the first year, the penalty is capped at 1 percent of a hospital's Medicare payments. The overwhelming majority of penalized facilities will pay less. Also, for now, hospitals are only being measured on three medical conditions: heart attacks, heart failure and pneumonia.

Under the health care law, the penalties gradually will rise until 3 percent of Medicare payments to hospitals are at risk.

Iran Touts Domestic Internet As Gmail Ban Rankles

TEHRAN (AP) — Iranian officials announced that they would soon introduce local alternatives to Google and its Gmail e-mail service, even as the country's media and even some officials stepped up complaints over Tehran's decision to enact a ban on Gmail in response to an anti-Islam film, newspapers reported on Sunday.

Last week, Iran blocked Gmail — but not the search engine of the parent company Google — in response to a court order linked to the distribution of a low-budget, U.S.-produced film on YouTube, also owned by Google.

In a country with 32 million Internet users out of a population of 75 million, according to official statistics, that ban has caused widespread resentment. Even many pro-government newspapers have complained of the disruptions.

"Some problems have emerged through the blocking of Gmail," Hussein Garrousi, a member of a parliamentary committee on industry, was quoted Sunday by the independent Aftab daily as saying. He said that parliament would summon the minister of telecom-

munications for questioning if the ban was not lifted.

The deputy minister, Ali Hakim Javadi, told reporters that Iranian authorities were considering lifting the Gmail ban, but also wanted to introduce their own domestic alternatives: the Fakhri ("Pride") search engine and the Fajr ("Dawn") e-mail services, Aftab reported.

Iran's clerical establishment has long signaled its intent to get citizens off of the international Internet, which they say promotes Western values, and onto a "national" and "clean" domestic network. But it is unclear whether Iran has the technical capacity to follow through on its ambitious plans, or is willing to risk the economic damage.

Bans on Gmail and other services like YouTube and Facebook have left Internet users scrambling to find ways to bypass the blocks.

On Saturday, Asr-e Ertebat weekly reported that Iranians had paid a total of 4.5 million U.S. dollars to purchase proxy services to reach blocked sites over the past month.

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