

US Suspects Some Attacks Linked To Haqqani

KABUL, Afghanistan (AP) — The Haqqani insurgent network, based in Pakistan and with ties to al-Qaida, is suspected of being a driving force behind a significant number of the “insider” attacks by Afghan forces that have killed or wounded more than 130 U.S. and allied troops this year, American officials said Friday.

Until now, officials had said the attacks seemed to stem either from personal grievances against the allies or from Taliban infiltration. The Taliban has publicly claimed to be orchestrating the campaign to subvert the U.S.-Afghan alliance.

New data provided to The Associated Press this week also reveal that in addition to 35 U.S. and allied troops killed in insider attacks last year, 61 were wounded. Those included 19 in a single attack in the eastern province of Laghman on April 16, 2011, in which six American servicemen were killed. Thus far in 2012 there have been 53 killed and at least 80 wounded, the figures showed.

Haqqani involvement in the plotting would add a new dimension to that group’s insurgent activity, which has been marked largely by spectacular attacks against targets inside Kabul.

Haqqani leaders have pledged allegiance to Taliban leader Mullah Omar, but the group largely operates independently. The two groups have a shared interest in evicting foreign forces.

Syrian Regime Opens New Urban Front

BEIRUT (AP) — The Syrian military opened a second urban front Friday, attacking the rebel stronghold of Homs with the most intense artillery barrage in months and putting opposition fighters there and in Syria’s largest city, Aleppo, increasingly on the defensive.

Syria’s civil war has been locked in a bloody stalemate, and embattled President Bashar Assad could extend his hold on power if he retakes Aleppo and Homs. Amateur video from Homs, a symbol of resistance, showed black columns of smoke rising from the city, as loud explosions went off every few seconds.

While Assad stepped up attacks at home, tensions with neighboring Turkey flared again Friday, reviving fears that the 18-month-old conflict in Syria could ignite a regional conflagration.

The crisis began on Wednesday, when a Syrian shell killed five civilians in a Turkish border town and triggered unprecedented artillery strikes by Turkey, coupled with warnings that Turkey would no longer tolerate such acts. On Friday, a Syrian mortar round again hit inside Turkey, causing no injuries, and Turkish troops returned fire, the state-run news agency Anadolu said.

In the past, Turkey did not respond to stray Syrian shells, but Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan suggested Friday that those days are over. “I once again call on Assad’s regime and its supporters: Do not try to test Turkey’s patience, do not try to test Turkey’s limits,” Erdogan said.

Friendly Fire May Have Had Role In Shooting

PHOENIX (AP) — The shooting of two U.S. Border Patrol agents near the Arizona-Mexico border may have been a case of friendly fire, a union chief for border agents and law enforcement officials said Friday.

The development could shake up the investigation into the death of one of the agents that reignited the political debate over security on the border.

George McCubbin, president of the National Border Patrol Council, a union representing about 17,000 border agents, said Friday that he has learned new details that make him believe friendly fire could have played a part in the shooting.

“The only thing I can say is that the possibility of friendly fire is a higher likely scenario,” McCubbin said, declining to elaborate on the new details.

Two law enforcement officials also told The Associated Press that the FBI is investigating the possibility that the fatal shooting of 30-year-old Agent Nicholas Ivie and the wounding of another agent early Tuesday morning five miles from the border was a case of friendly fire.

Calif. Refinery Back Online Amid Soaring Prices

LOS ANGELES (AP) — Californians woke up to a shock Friday as overnight gasoline prices jumped by as much as 20 cents a gallon in some areas, ending a week of soaring costs that saw some stations close and others charge record prices.

The average price of regular gas across the state was nearly \$4.49 a gallon, the highest in the nation, according to AAA’s Daily Fuel Gauge report.

In Southern California, the price jumped 20 cents a gallon overnight to \$4.53 in Ventura. And in the Los Angeles-Long Beach area prices went up 19 cents to nearly \$4.54. It wasn’t any better to the north, as a gallon of regular gas in San Francisco averaged nearly \$4.60.

In many areas, prices have jumped 40 cents in a week as refinery problems have created shortages and helped send wholesale prices soaring. Some stations ran out of gas and shut down Thursday rather than pay those costs.

Even Costco Wholesale Corp., the giant discount store chain that sells large volumes of gas, decided to close some stations.

Docs Say Steroids Usually Safe To Treat Pain

CHICAGO (AP) — Millions of people get steroid shots in their backs to relieve pain. Now they are probably wondering if it’s safe.

In 23 states, hundreds, possibly thousands, of back-pain patients are being warned to watch for symptoms of meningitis because of a custom-mixed steroid solution that may have been contaminated with fungus. Five people have died and more than 40 others have fallen ill.

Doctors who do these injections say they are extremely safe when done correctly with sterile drugs. And many doctors stick to medications approved by the Food and Drug Administration instead of relying on generally less-regulated “compounding pharmacies” like the Massachusetts company implicated in the outbreak.

BY ANDREW TAYLOR

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — A new estimate puts the deficit for the just-completed 2012 budget year at \$1.1 trillion, the fourth straight year of trillion dollar deficits on President Barack Obama’s watch.

The result was a slight, \$207 billion improvement from the 2011 deficit of \$1.3 trillion.

The bleak figures from the Congressional Budget Office, while expected, add fodder for the heated presidential campaign, in which Obama’s handling of the economy and the budget is a main topic. Friday’s release came as the government announced that the unemployment rate dropped to 7.8 percent last month, matching the rate when Obama took office.

The 2012 deficit was 7 percent of the size of the economy, an unsustainably high level. The figure is lower than the first three years of Obama’s presidency, but higher than any other year since 1947.

The administration will release the official deficit numbers

around mid-October, but they should line up closely with the CBO estimate, which showed that the government borrowed 31 cents for every dollar it spent.

The CBO estimate predicts a modest 3 percent increase over 2011 in both income tax and payroll tax receipts, reflecting the sluggish economic recovery. Corporate income tax receipts are way up — almost 34 percent — but most of that is a result of tax rules governing write-offs of business equipment.

Spending fell across a broad array of categories, the CBO said, but not Social Security and Medicare. Social Security payments rose by 6 percent, while Medicare grew by 3 percent, slightly less than in prior years.

Lower war costs meant a 3 percent decline in defense outlays, however, and the cost of unemployment benefits dropped 24 percent because fewer people have been receiving benefits recently. Medicaid costs dropped as well, because the federal government stopped paying a higher share of the program’s costs.

Obama inherited an economy

in recession and a deficit in excess of \$1 trillion. He promised to cut the deficit in half by the end of his first term, but deficits have instead remained at eye-popping levels, including a record \$1.4 trillion deficit in 2009 and deficits of \$1.3 trillion in each of the past two years.

In Wednesday night’s debate, Obama said he has a budget plan to shave \$4 trillion from the deficit over the coming decade, but he counts \$1 trillion from savings already accomplished in budget deals with Republicans last year and \$848 billion from winding down wars in Iraq and Afghanistan.

“Never before have a president and a majority party in the Senate done so little to address challenges as great as the ones our nation faces right now,” Senate GOP Leader Mitch McConnell said after the CBO numbers were released. “Every single year the president has been in office, the nation has racked up a deficit of over \$1 trillion, and now we have an unsustainable \$16 trillion debt.”

Republican presidential nomi-

nee Mitt Romney promises to balance the budget within eight to 10 years, but hasn’t illustrated how he would do so. His budget claims are suspect as well since he promises to cut the overall budget by about \$500 billion in 2016 alone, while also promising to sharply boost military spending and restore more than \$700 billion in Democratic cuts to Medicare over the coming decade. Romney has ruled out increasing taxes.

Congress is looking toward addressing the deficit at the end of the year, but any such effort would actually increase the deficit since lawmakers promise to restore most or all of Bush-era tax cuts that are set to expire Dec. 31. Lawmakers also want to head off \$109 billion worth of automatic spending cuts set to hit the Pentagon and domestic programs in January. Republicans and Democrats disagree on whether part of the effort to replace this so-called sequester should include tax increases on upper-income earners.

Obama, Romney Mix Humor Into Events

BY KEN THOMAS

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — Have you heard the one about the kid who thinks President Barack Obama’s job is to “approve this message?” Or the time Mitt Romney compared another presidential run to giving birth?

At presidential fundraisers and rallies, the jokes are easy applause lines for Obama and Romney, a way to entertain supporters before the talk turns to more weighty subjects like Medicare, taxes and foreign policy.

You certainly won’t hear the sound of a snare drum or Obama or Romney telling their fans, “I’m here all night, folks! Try the veal.” But during tough economic times, the punch lines lighten the mood and let the candidates poke fun at themselves, their opponents and the odd life of motorcades, basement loading docks and countless handshakes that come with running for president.

Obama often shows a self-deprecating sense of humor on the campaign trail, pointing to his “funny name,” the gray hairs that have sprouted on his head and his personal qualities that often find their way into editorial cartoons.

“I confess, I am excited to see Mickey,” Obama said at Florida’s Walt Disney World last January. “It’s always nice to meet a world leader who has bigger ears than me.”

Romney tends to take the dead-pan route, playing the role of the buttoned-up former business executive who can deliver a funny one-liner while keeping a straight face. One of the former Massachusetts governor’s favorites combines Bill Clinton’s comment about his youthful marijuana use with Romney’s extensive private-sector pedigree: “I only spent four years as governor. I didn’t inhale,” Romney says.

Obama’s latest punch line in-

volves Big Bird, Elmo and the fuzzy characters of the long-running children’s show “Sesame Street.”

During Wednesday’s first presidential debate, Romney said he would cut the federal subsidy for PBS because the nation couldn’t afford it. Even though “I love Big Bird,” Romney said.

The next day, Obama accused Romney of being unwilling to uphold tough regulations on Wall Street but being willing to crack down on Big Bird. “He’ll get rid of regulations on Wall Street but he’s going to crack down on Sesame Street,” Obama said in Madison, Wis. “Thank goodness somebody is finally cracking down on Big Bird ... Elmo has got to watch out.”

A good sense of humor has served presidential candidates well in the past. Richard Nixon appeared on “Rowan and Martin’s Laugh-In” in 1968, joining in on a gag called “Sock it to Me.” Ronald Reagan deflected attention about his age in a 1984 debate by vowing not to exploit 56-year-old Walter Mondale’s “youth and inexperience.” And Clinton traded jokes with late night host Arsenio Hall in 1992 (and wore sunglasses while pumping out a rendition of “Heartbreak Hotel” on his saxophone).

Since July, Obama has been telling supporters a story about a 4-year-old boy named Sammy, whose parents met campaign manager Jim Messina on the presidential trail. The couple, as the story goes, points to a picture of Obama and ask the boy what the president does.

“And the boy thinks for a second and he says, ‘He approves this message,’” Obama tells supporters over and over. “So that’s what I do. I approve this message.”

Whenever Obama invokes Romney at a rally, it typically brings a smattering of boos. Obama’s standard response is: “Don’t boo — vote,” a line that brings laughter and applause.

And he likes to refer to his health care reform law by the name “Obamacare,” a word promoted by Republicans. “I don’t mind the term because I do care, that’s why we passed the bill,” Obama says.

Romney always peppers his events with stories about successful entrepreneurs he’s met across the country, from a North Carolina furniture maker to an oilman who helped pioneer the drilling of North Dakota’s Bakken shale. Romney always gets laughs when he brings up the sandwich maker who founded Jimmy John’s. “Jimmy John” Li-ataud, Romney likes to remind his audiences, “graduated second in his class — second from the bottom” but still became a successful businessman.

The former Massachusetts governor occasionally surprises audiences with some “he said what?” moments. During a recent taping of ABC’s “Live with Kelly and Michael,” Romney held hands with his wife, Ann, and traded stories that don’t usually come up in the world of heavily scripted modern presidential campaigns.

Ann Romney, who raised five sons with her husband, repeated a story she typically tells about how, after the 2008 campaign, she told Romney she never wanted him to run for president again. Romney said his response was: “You know, Ann, you say that after every pregnancy!”

But the interview got even more revealing. Mrs. Romney talked about a visit to the White House with Texas first lady Anita Perry that led to them opening a door and finding President George W. Bush in the middle of a massage. Bush later told an em-

barrassed Mrs. Romney, “I look pretty good, don’t I?”

The fun continued when former New York Giants lineman Michael Strahan asked Mrs. Romney, “What does Mitt wear to bed?” prompting her husband to pipe in and say, “I hear the best answer is as little as possible.”

Some comedians and satirists say the campaigns could benefit from more light moments. Actor and stand-up comedian Gilbert Gottfried said in an interview that, from his vantage point, the campaign trail humor has been “almost as bad as the banter that goes on with presenters at awards’ shows.”

Gottfried said he remembered being struck by how Republican Bob Dole showed his sense of humor in commercials and television appearances after his losing 1996 campaign — and how it could have helped him during the campaign.

“I remember watching him, thinking had he done that before, he may have won the election,” Gottfried said. “Because during the election he came across as the grumpy old man who is chasing you away from his lawn.”

Will Durst, a political satirist, said a sense of humor can serve as a humanizing element for presidential contenders. He suggested Romney could benefit from making light of some of his so-called “gaffes,” offering a line such as: “The campaign is so busy right now my wife is driving both Cadillacs.”

“Humor is cathartic. It’s very important to us as American people and to our leaders,” Durst said. “When we see them enjoying it, I think it gives them hope.”

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