



RON SACHS/SIPA USA/TNS
U.S. President Barack Obama announces he will keep 5,500 U.S. troops in Afghanistan when he leaves office in 2017 as U.S. Vice President Joe Biden looks on in the Roosevelt Room of the White House on Thursday.

Obama Extends US Military Mission In Afghanistan Into 2017

BY JULIE PACE

AP White House Correspondent

WASHINGTON — When President Barack Obama leaves office in 15 months, he'll hand his successor military conflicts in the two countries where he promised to end prolonged war: Afghanistan and Iraq.

There will be far fewer troops in each, and the American forces won't have a direct combat role. But for Obama, it's nevertheless a frustrating end to a quest that was central to his political rise.

"As you are all well aware, I do not support the idea of endless war," Obama said Thursday as he announced he was dropping plans to withdraw nearly all U.S. forces from Afghanistan by the end of next year. Instead, he'll leave office with at least 5,500 on the ground to help protect gains made during 14 years of war.

As a result, the winner of the 2016 presidential election will become the third American commander in chief to oversee the Afghan war.

The president's goal of ending the wars he inherited had already been tarnished by the return of U.S. forces to Iraq last year, 2½ years after they left. The troops are there to help Iraq fight the Islamic State, a mission Obama has said will likely outlast his presidency.

Obama never mentioned Iraq Thursday, but the tenuous situation there has no doubt hung over his decision-making on Afghanistan. Obama's critics contend the decision to withdraw from Iraq created the vacuum that allowed the Islamic State to thrive and warned leaving Afghanistan next year could have the

same consequences.

Military commanders have argued for months that Afghans needed additional assistance and support from the U.S. to beat back a resurgent Taliban and keep the Islamic State from using the country as a haven.

The president had originally planned to withdraw all but a small embassy-based force from Afghanistan in late 2016, shortly before leaving office. Under the new \$15 billion-a-year plan, the U.S. will maintain its current force of 9,800 through most of 2016, then begin drawing down to 5,500 late in the year or in early 2017.

Obama's decision thrusts the war into the middle of a presidential campaign that so far has barely touched on Afghanistan. Candidates now will be pressed to say how they will try to do what Obama could not — end a conflict that has killed more than 2,230 American service members and cost more than \$1 trillion.

On Thursday, leading Democratic candidates — including Hillary Rodham Clinton, who served as Obama's secretary of state — were silent about the president's decision. Last year, after Obama announced his original 2016 withdrawal timeline, Clinton said she would be open to extending the U.S. presence if Afghan leaders made that request.

The president's revamped plan was welcomed by several Republican presidential candidates, but some said 5,500 troops would not be enough.

"If he is truly committed to fighting terrorism and securing a stable Afghanistan, he shouldn't shortchange what our military commanders have said they need to complete the mission," said

Jeb Bush. The former Florida governor did not say how many troops he thought would be sufficient.

According to a defense official, the president approved the highest number requested by commanders, with the greatest amount of flexibility.

Former technology executive Carly Fiorina called Obama's decision a "recognition of reality" in Afghanistan. And New Jersey Gov. Chris Christie said the president was "waking up to the fact that disengaging America from the world and allowing there to be safe havens for terrorists is not the right way to protect American homeland security and national security."

Kentucky Sen. Rand Paul was an outlier among Republican candidates. He vowed to remove U.S. troops from Afghanistan immediately if elected president.

U.S. officials say Afghan President Ashraf Ghani asked Obama to keep the troops in his country when they met in Washington earlier this year. Obama sees Ghani as a more reliable partner than former President Hamid Karzai, a mercurial leader who deeply frustrated the White House.

Obama's meeting with Ghani set off a months-long re-evaluation of the U.S. role in Afghanistan.

The president's decision was reinforced when Taliban fighters took control of the key northern city of Kunduz late last month, leading to a protracted battle with Afghan forces supported by U.S. airstrikes. During the fighting, a U.S. air attack hit a hospital, killing 12 Doctors Without Borders staff and 10 patients.

The Associated Press reported Thursday that

American special operations analysts were gathering intelligence on the hospital days before it was destroyed because they believed it was being used by a Pakistani operative to coordinate Taliban activity.

The U.S. forces that Obama spoke of Thursday will continue with their current two-track mission: counterterrorism operations and training and assisting Afghan security forces. The troops will be based in Kabul and at Bagram Air Field, as well as bases in Jalalabad and Kandahar.

Ghani welcomed the decision, saying it sent a message to the Taliban and terrorist groups that their actions "will produce no result other than defeat."

Officials said the drawdown to 5,500 would begin late next year or in early 2017, with the pace determined by military commanders. They said NATO allies had expressed support for extending the troop presence in Afghanistan, but they did not outline any specific commitments from other nations.

White House officials said they were still pleased with the progress Obama had made in drastically reducing the number of U.S. troops from a high of about 100,000 in 2010 and ending America's direct combat role.

Still, there's no doubt the situation he'll leave behind is far different from what he envisioned last year, when he announced it was time to "turn the page" and withdraw from Afghanistan.

"Americans have learned that it's harder to end wars than it is to begin them," he said at the time.

US Special Ops Knew Site Was Hospital

WASHINGTON (AP) — American special operations analysts were gathering intelligence on an Afghan hospital days before it was destroyed by a U.S. military attack because they believed it was being used by a Pakistani operative to coordinate Taliban activity, The Associated Press has learned.

It's unclear whether commanders who unleashed the AC-130 gunship on the hospital — killing at least 22 patients and hospital staff — were aware that the site was a hospital or knew about the allegations of possible enemy activity. The Pentagon initially said the attack was to protect U.S. troops engaged in a firefight and has since said it was a mistake.

The special operations analysts had assembled a dossier that included maps with the hospital circled, along with indications that intelligence agencies were tracking the location of the Pakistani operative and activity reports based on overhead surveillance, according to a former intelligence official who is familiar with some of the documents describing the site. The intelligence suggested the hospital was being used as a Taliban command and control center and may have housed heavy weapons.

After the attack — which came amidst a battle to retake the northern Afghan city of Kunduz from the Taliban — some U.S. analysts assessed that the strike had been justified, the former officer says. They concluded that the Pakistani, believed to have been working for his country's Inter-Service Intelligence directorate, had been killed.

No evidence has surfaced publicly suggesting a Pakistani died in the attack, and Doctors without Borders, the international organization that ran the hospital, says none of its staff was Pakistani. The former intelligence official was not authorized to comment publicly and spoke only on condition of anonymity.

Israelis And Palestinians Are On Guard

JERUSALEM (AP) — A wave of stabbing attacks has spread fear in Jerusalem and much of Israel, shattering the brittle sense of security Israelis had managed to restore a decade after Palestinian suicide bombings terrified the nation.

The public panic has also exposed an ugly side, with some enraged residents calling for Arabs to be kicked out of their apartment buildings and many Palestinians afraid to venture out of their homes for fear of getting mixed up with vigilante mobs.

The monthlong violence has mostly been confined to sporadic stabbings and clashes between Palestinian protesters and police. It has claimed the lives of eight Israelis and some 30 Palestinians, a far cry from the years of near daily shooting and bombing attacks that killed more than 1,000 Israelis and thousands of Palestinians in the early 2000s. But already, a siege mentality has taken hold.

"The sense is that the entire country is the front line, and that everyone is a candidate for stabbing," Nahum Barnea, a columnist for the daily Yediot Ahronot wrote recently.

Municipalities have increased security patrols, the government has eased gun licensing procedures and public officials, including Jerusalem Mayor Nir Barkat, are openly carrying personal weapons and encouraging the public to do the same.

Hastert Lawyer Says He Will Plead Guilty

CHICAGO (AP) — Former House Speaker Dennis Hastert intends to plead guilty in a hush-money case linked to allegations of sexual misconduct, a defense attorney said Thursday, a move that could ensure that any secrets from his days as a high school wrestling coach are never revealed in public.

A written plea agreement should be completed by Monday, attorney John Gallo told a federal judge during a brief status hearing. At the attorney's request, the judge set Oct. 28 as the date for the 73-year-old Illinois Republican to change his plea.

Defendants typically agree to plead guilty in hopes of a more lenient sentence. A plea deal would also avert a trial that could divulge more about the alleged misconduct behind the criminal charges.

Neither Gallo nor prosecutors offered details about any possible deal, including which counts Hastert would plead guilty to or whether the man who was once second in the line of succession for the presidency would go to prison. Hastert did not attend Thursday's hearing.

He faces one count of breaking banking laws and one count of lying to the FBI about agreeing to pay \$3.5 million to someone referred to in the indictment only as "Individual A." The money was supposedly to hide claims of unspecified past misconduct.

Poor Nations Investing In Cyber Tools

LONDON (AP) — Researchers say some smaller, poorer nations are now using spy software, suggesting that recent data leaks and lawsuits have not deterred governments from investing in off-the-shelf cyberespionage products.

Internet watchdog group Citizen Lab said in a report Thursday that it had found 33 "likely government users" of FinFisher, one of the world's best-known purveyors of spyware. A report released separately by London-based Privacy International on Thursday said the same spyware had been used in Uganda to hack, intimidate and blackmail members of the opposition.

Business appears good for FinFisher, despite a damaging hack last year which exposed reams of client information and other confidential data.

"They seem to have a healthy client base, despite the fact that they were hacked and customer data was exposed," Citizen Lab's Bill Marczak wrote in an email. "Far from observing a drop in FinFisher servers, we're detecting more than ever before."

Ex-Lawmakers Find Uses For Leftover Cash

TALLAHASSEE, Fla. (AP) — No matter how they exited — a loss, a resignation, a retirement — former members of Congress can pretty much do whatever they want with leftover campaign cash as long as it's political or charitable.

Evan Bayh has kept \$10 million in campaign contributions since leaving the Senate in 2011, raising plenty of questions about the Indiana Democrat's political future or perhaps his children's.

Mary Landrieu has more than \$146,000 since her Senate loss last year and the Louisiana Democrat is talking about giving some of it to former Republican colleagues, much to the chagrin of Democrats.

Mark Foley, the Florida Republican who resigned in disgrace in 2006 after the revelation that he had sent sexually suggestive electronic messages to former male pages, is holding onto \$1 million — and hoping for a political miracle.

EU To Bolster Border Agency As Refugee Emergency Deepens

BY LORNE COOK
AND RAF CASERT

Associated Press

BRUSSELS — European Union leaders agreed Thursday to boost the protection of its outer frontiers to help contain the refugee emergency and gave its border agency more clout to deport people who do not qualify for asylum.

But the 28 leaders struggled to persuade a reluctant Turkey to do more to stop tens of thousands of refugees entering the bloc — despite new plans for increased financial support, the easing visa restrictions for Turkish citizens and accelerating the country's EU membership talks.

Indeed the summit in Brussels — the fourth this year focused on the refugee crisis — bore little fruit, amid infighting between countries like Germany and Sweden who have taken a larger role in the refugee crisis and several eastern nations who have done less.

Senior EU officials also complained that many member states had failed to live up to pledges to provide

more funds, and experts to help fingerprint and screen people.

The meeting came as the International Organization for Migration said that more than 600,000 people had arrived by sea into Europe this year and more than 3,000 of them died trying to reach Europe to escape war or poverty. Many entered through Greece from Turkey — home to some 2 million Syrian refugees who have overwhelmed the country's coast guard and meager reception facilities.

The one positive note on Thursday was the agreement to boost the Frontex border agency, as the EU mulls whether to set up a European border guard, which could help patrol Greece's patchwork island border with Turkey.

"In the coming months, the agency will develop into a more operational body," EU Council President Donald Tusk said. "Our aim is to give Frontex the right to return irregular migrants on its own initiative and to make it more proactive in protecting external borders." Estimates based on EU figures suggest that possibly a third of the people

arriving in Europe might not qualify for asylum.

But no fresh pledges of money were made, despite a promise by the leaders last month to stump up hundreds of millions of euros for Syrian refugees and to help Africa better manage its borders.

"We are lacking 2.3 billion euros to be provided by member states," European Commission Jean-Claude Juncker told reporters after the summit. However, he said, the leaders promised this time that they would come up with the funds "in the next couple of weeks."

The Commission has complained that only three of 28 nations have pledged a total of just 12 million euros (\$13.7 million) to a fund to help African nations better manage their borders. The pot is meant to total 1.8 billion euros (about \$2 billion) over two years.

Frontex and the EU asylum office have appealed for a total of around 1,000 officers to help fingerprint people and decide whether they are eligible for asylum. So far, about a dozen of the 28 EU nations have offered around 130 personnel.

"We can, and must, do much better," Tusk said, adding that the influx of migrants could get much worse.

In their final statement, the leaders gave "political support" for an action plan for Turkey to help it manage its own refugee emergency, but a final agreement proved elusive and discussions in Ankara will continue in coming days.



AM 1450
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Friday, October 16
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