

Obama Weighs Egypt Aid Suspension

BY MATTHEW LEE
AP Diplomatic Writer

WASHINGTON — President Barack Obama's top national security aides have recommended that the U.S. suspend hundreds of millions of dollars in military and economic assistance to Egypt in response to the Egyptian military's ouster of the country's first democratically elected leader, U.S. officials said Wednesday.

Such a step would be a dramatic shift for an administration that has declined to label Egyptian President Mohamed Morsi's July 3 ouster a coup and has argued that it is in U.S. national security interests to keep the aid flowing. It would also likely have profound implications for decades of close U.S.-Egyptian ties that have served as a bulwark of security and stability in the Middle East.

The officials say the recommendation has been with Obama for at least a week



Obama

but they don't expect him to make a decision until after the full Congress votes on his request for authorization for military strikes on Syria, which is not expected before Monday. The officials spoke on condition of anonymity because they were not authorized to publicly discuss internal deliberations.

The U.S. provides Egypt with \$1.5 billion a year in aid, \$1.3 billion of which is military assistance. The rest is economic assistance. Some of it goes to the government and some to other groups. Only the money that goes to the government would be suspended, but the officials said the recommendation calls for a significant amount to be withheld. The

money could be restored once a democratically elected government is returned.

While leaving the exact amount to be suspended up to the president, the principals have recommended that it include all foreign military financing to Egypt's army except for money that supports security in the increasingly volatile Sinai Peninsula and along Egypt's border with the Gaza Strip, the officials said.

Assistance that is used to pay American companies that sell Egypt military equipment would be suspended if Obama accepts the recommendation but those firms would be compensated with so-called "wind up" payments that could amount to hundreds of millions of dollars, according to the officials.

The White House and State Department declined to comment on the recommendation, but congressional aides said national security

adviser Susan Rice has outlined the possible strategy in closed-door consultations with lawmakers.

Any decision on suspending assistance to Egypt would follow months of internal deliberation over how to respond to Morsi's ouster during which the administration has struggled to enunciate a coherent policy.

The administration determined that it was not in the U.S. national interest to determine whether a coup had taken place, as such a designation would have required it to suspend all but humanitarian assistance to Egypt. It did delay the delivery of some fighter planes, but, as Egypt's military began a heavy-handed crackdown on Morsi supporters — despite U.S. appeals for restraint — the president's advisers started to consider more muscular action. Obama then cancelled a joint military exercise and announced a new review of assistance.

Suicide Of Castro Brings Little Sympathy

CLEVELAND (AP) — Residents in the tough Cleveland neighborhood where three women were secretly imprisoned for a decade reacted with scorn and grim satisfaction Wednesday after Ariel Castro hanged himself in his cell barely a month into a life sentence.

Even the prosecutor joined in.

"This man couldn't take, for even a month, a small portion of what he had dished out for more than a decade," said Cuyahoga County Prosecutor Tim McGinty.

Castro, 53, was found hanging from a bedsheet Tuesday night at the state prison in Orient, corrections spokeswoman JoEllen Smith said. Prison medical staff performed CPR before Castro was taken to a hospital, where he was pronounced dead.

The coroner's office said it was suicide.

Proposal Leaves Settlements Intact

RAMALLAH, West Bank (AP) — Israel has proposed leaving intact dozens of Jewish settlements and military bases in the West Bank as part of a package to establish a Palestinian state in provisional borders, a Palestinian official told The Associated Press on Wednesday, in the first detailed glimpse at recently relaunched peace talks.

The official said the proposal is unacceptable to the Palestinians, underscoring the tough road ahead as the sides try to reach an agreement ending decades of conflict.

The official spoke on condition of anonymity because Israel and the Palestinians have pledged to U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry not to discuss the content of their talks with the media — a pledge that has largely held up until now.

For their future state, the Palestinians seek the West Bank, east Jerusalem and Gaza Strip, territories captured by Israel in the 1967 Mideast war.

With Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu opposed to a return to the pre-1967 lines, the idea of a Palestinian state in temporary borders has gained appeal with the Israelis.

Feds To Stop Enforcing Same-Sex Veterans Law

BY PETE YOST
Associated Press

WASHINGTON — The Obama administration said Wednesday it will stop enforcing a law that blocks benefits to partners of military veterans in same-sex marriages.

In a letter to congressional leaders, Attorney General Eric Holder said that a provision in federal law on benefits to veterans and their families defines "spouse" to mean a person of the opposite sex. He says that definition leaves out legally married same-sex couples, and runs afoul of a June Supreme Court ruling.

The court declared unconstitutional a provision in the Defense of Marriage Act restricting the words marriage and spouse to apply only to heterosexual unions. Holder says that like the Defense of Marriage Act, the provision in the veterans benefits law has the effect of placing lawfully married same-sex couples in a second-tier marriage.

"Decisions by the Executive not to enforce federal laws are appropriately rare," Holder told Congress. "Nevertheless, the unique circumstances presented here warrant non-enforcement."

He said the Supreme Court's conclusion that DOMA imposes a stigma on everyone in same-sex marriages "would seem to apply equally" to the veterans benefits law. Holder noted that after the Supreme Court's decision, the Bipartisan Legal Advisory Group of the House of Representatives withdrew from a pending lawsuit challenging the constitutionality of the veterans benefits provisions.

President Barack Obama directed the executive branch to cease enforcement of the provision, Holder wrote.

Last week, a federal judge in Los Angeles ruled that a lesbian Army veteran and her spouse should be entitled to disability benefits, given the Supreme Court's recent ruling.

U.S. District Judge Consuelo Marshall said that federal law defining a spouse as a person of the opposite sex is unconstitutional since the high court's decision allowing legally married gay couples the right to health care benefits.

Although the Supreme Court did not directly address the constitutionality of the veterans benefits provisions, the reasoning of the opinion "strongly supports the conclusion that those provisions are unconstitutional," Holder wrote.

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