

Al-Qaida-Linked Rebels Attack In Syria

DAMASCUS, Syria (AP) — The sound of artillery reverberated Thursday through a predominantly Christian village north of Damascus as government troops and al-Qaida-linked rebels battled for control of the mountain-side sanctuary.

The hit-and-run attacks on the ancient village of Maaloula, one of the few places in the world where residents still speak Aramaic, highlighted fears among Syria's religious minorities about the growing role of extremists among those fighting in the civil war to topple President Bashar Assad's regime.

The fighting came as President Barack Obama's administration pressed the U.S. Congress for its authorization of a military strike against the Assad regime, while the president arrived at a G-20 summit in Russia expected to be overshadowed by Syria.

The fighting in Maaloula, a scenic village of about 3,300 perched high in the mountains, began early Wednesday when militants from Jabhat al-Nusra stormed in after a suicide bomber struck an army checkpoint guarding the entrance.

The group — listed as a terrorist organization by the U.S. State Department — is one of the most effective fighting forces among Syrian rebels. The suicide attack triggered battles that terrorized residents in the village, famous for two of the oldest surviving monasteries in Syria — Mar Sarkis and Mar Takla.

Zimmerman's Wife Filing For Divorce

ORLANDO, Fla. (AP) — George Zimmerman's wife filed for divorce Thursday, less than two months after her husband was acquitted of murdering Trayvon Martin and a week after she pleaded guilty to perjury in his case.

Shellie Zimmerman made the decision because of "disappointment," her attorney, Kelly Sims, wrote Thursday in a short email to The Associated Press.

The 26-year-old Zimmerman told ABC's "Good Morning America" last week that she was having serious doubts about remaining married.

She pleaded guilty last week to a misdemeanor perjury charge for lying during a bail hearing following her husband's arrest for the fatal shooting of 17-year-old Trayvon Martin in February 2012. Her husband, who was acquitted on second-degree murder and other charges in July, wasn't in the Sanford, Fla., courtroom as she was sentenced to a year's probation and 100 hours of community service — even though she supported him and lied about their finances.

ABC first reported the divorce filing. Email messages and phone calls to Zimmerman's attorney, Mark O'Mara, were not immediately returned.

Zimmerman's brother, Robert Zimmerman, wrote on Twitter: "Pray 4 them."

N.H. Hospital Reaches Out To Patients

MANCHESTER, N.H. (AP) — Eight patients who may have been exposed to a fatal brain disease at a New Hampshire hospital have been contacted by the hospital's president, who said Thursday the patients aren't panicking.

Dr. Joseph Pepe called the Catholic Medical Center patients a day after health officials announced that they may have been exposed to Creutzfeldt-Jakob Disease — a brain disease characterized by rapidly progressive dementia which can cause death within months after symptoms first appearing.

It has no treatment or cure.

Officials believe the extremely rare disease caused the August death of a patient who had brain surgery at the hospital in May, and they say there's a remote chance it was transmitted to other brain surgery patients because the abnormal proteins that cause the disease can survive standard sterilization practices.

The patient's cause of death won't be certain until an autopsy is complete but officials believe it was caused by Creutzfeldt-Jakob Disease.

In addition to the eight Catholic Medical Center patients, up to five more in other states also may have been exposed because some of the surgical instruments were rented and passed on to other hospitals.

Study: Bacteria Could Help Fight Fat

WASHINGTON (AP) — Call it a hidden ally: The right germs just might be able to help fight fat.

Different kinds of bacteria that live inside the gut can help spur obesity or protect against it, say scientists at Washington University in St. Louis who transplanted intestinal germs from fat or lean people into mice and watched the rodents change.

And what they ate determined whether the good germs could move in and do their job.

Thursday's report raises the possibility of one day turning gut bacteria into personalized fat-fighting therapies, and it may help explain why some people have a harder time losing weight than others do.

"It's an important player," said Dr. David Relman of Stanford University, who also studies how gut bacteria influence health but wasn't involved in the new research. "This paper says that diet and microbes are necessary companions in all of this. They literally and figuratively feed each other."

Wild Weather Linked To Climate Change

WASHINGTON (AP) — A study of a dozen of last year's wildest weather events finds that in about half the cases, manmade global warming increased the likelihood of their occurrence.

Researchers with the United States and British governments concluded Thursday that the other cases reflected the random freakiness of weather.

They said climate change had made these events more likely: U.S. heat waves, Superstorm Sandy flooding, shrinking Arctic sea ice, drought in Europe's Iberian peninsula, and extreme rainfall in Australia and New Zealand.

They found no connection for the U.S. drought, Europe's summer extremes, a cold spell in the Netherlands' winter, drought in eastern Kenya and Somalia, floods in northern China and heavy rain in southwestern Japan.

The study appears in the Bulletin of the American Meteorological Society.

U.S. Officials:

U.S. Considers Training Syria Rebels

BY LOLITA C. BALDOR

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — The Obama administration is considering a plan to use U.S. military trainers to help increase the capabilities of the Syrian rebels, in a move that would greatly expand the current CIA training being done quietly in Jordan, U.S. officials told The Associated Press on Thursday.

Any training would take place outside Syria, and one possible location would be Jordan.

The officials said no decision had been made, but that discussions were going on at high levels of the government. It comes as the Obama administration prods Congress to authorize limited military strikes against Syrian President Bashar Assad's government in retaliation for a deadly Aug. 21 chemical weapons attack.

The proposal to use the U.S. military to train the rebels — something the administration has resisted through more than two years of civil war — would answer the demands of some lawmakers, including Sen. John McCain, R-Ariz., to do more to train and equip the Syrian opposition. President Barack Obama in June decided to provide lethal aid to the rebels, but so far none of that assistance has gotten to the opposition.

Officials said Thursday that talk about a military training mission has increased but that there have been no specific Pentagon recommendations forwarded to the White House on how big it should be or how many troops it should involve.

The CIA has been training select groups of rebels in Jordan on the use of communications equipment and some

U.S. Says Chemical Attacks Make Syria Top Security Risk

BY LARA JAKES

AP National Security Writer

WASHINGTON — For the first time in more than two years of a bloody civil war, President Barack Obama has declared Syria a national security threat that must be answered with a military strike — and in doing so he is warning Americans as much about the leaders of Iran and North Korea as about Bashar Assad.

America's credibility with those countries will be an immediate casualty if it stands down now on Syria, administration officials say in making their case for U.S. missile strikes.

Following an Aug. 21 chemical weapons attack outside Damascus, the White House declared Syria's 2-year civil war a top risk to American interests. If the U.S. fails to respond, officials said this week, it could encourage other hostile governments to use or develop weapons of mass destruction without fear of being punished.

It's a connection that's not immediately clear to many Americans — especially after the White House refused to send military



Kerry

support earlier in the Syrian war. The recent chemical weapons attack killed 1,429 people, U.S. intelligence officials say. Other estimates are somewhat lower. The wider war has killed more than 100,000.

In House and Senate hearings this week designed to seek congressional approval to strike Assad's government — probably with cruise missiles but not with ground troops — top administration officials pleaded with skeptical lawmakers to consider the risks of doing nothing.

"Iran is hoping you look the other way," Secretary of State John Kerry told the Senate Foreign Relations Committee. "Our inaction would surely give them a permission slip for them to at least misinterpret our intention, if not to put it to the test. Hezbollah is hoping that isolationism will prevail. North Korea is hoping that ambivalence carries the day."

"They are all listening for our silence," Kerry said.

weapons provided by Gulf states. The new discussions center on whether the U.S. military should take over the mission so that hundreds or thousands can be trained, rather than just dozens.

The officials spoke on condition of anonymity because they were not authorized to discuss the plan publicly.

Any new training program conducted by the U.S. military would take time to put in place and likely would not begin until after any potential military action had been taken in response to the recent chemical weapons attack. It would require getting approvals from the host country, finding appropriate locations, getting the right

number of personnel in place to conduct the training and setting up a vetting system to insure that instruction was not provided to any rebel groups that may not be friendly to the U.S.

The Pentagon already has at least 1,000 troops in Jordan, including trainers working with Jordanian forces. The U.S. left about a dozen fighter jets and a Patriot missile battery there after a recent training exercise.

Gen. Martin Dempsey, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, has told Congress that the U.S. military would be prepared to do more training for the Syria opposition if needed.

In response to questioning Wednesday during a House

Foreign Affairs Committee hearing on Syria, Dempsey said he was "mostly supportive of helping the opposition by their development, by their training and equipping, not by becoming their military arm."

He provided more details in a July letter to Sen. Carl Levin, D-Mich., the chairman of the Senate Armed Services, in which he laid out military options in response to the chemical weapons attack. That letter was sent before Obama announced plans to go to Congress to seek authorization for military strikes in Syria that would be limited in time and scope and would involve no U.S. troops on the ground there.

Health Law May Track Workplace Shift

BY RICARDO

ALONSO-ZALDIVAR

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — President Barack Obama's health care law appears to mirror a trend in job-based insurance, where employees are being nudged into cost-saving plans that require them to pay a bigger share of their medical expenses.

Two independent studies out this week highlighted attractive prices for less-generous "bronze" plans that will offer low monthly premiums but require patients to pick up more of the cost if they get sick.

Consumers might avoid "rate shock" over premiums, but some could end up struggling with bigger bills for the care they receive.

The Obama plans will be available starting Oct. 1 for people who don't have access to coverage on the job.

Studies by the nonpartisan Kaiser Family Foundation and Avalere Health provided the first look at rates filed by insurers around the country, ahead of the Oct. 1 opening of new state insurance markets under the law.

Consumers will use the markets to find out whether they qualify for tax credits to help pay their premiums and to pick a private insurance plan from a range of coverage levels: bronze, silver, gold and platinum.

Come Jan. 1, virtually everyone in the United States will be required to have coverage, or face fines if they don't. At the same time, insurance companies no longer can turn away people in poor health.

"What was really striking as we dug into the numbers is how inexpensive the bronze plans are," said Larry Levitt, a Kaiser vice president.

Avalere, a private data analysis firm, found the average monthly premium for a bronze plan is \$274, compared with \$336 for the next level of coverage, a silver plan. The savings from going with bronze adds up to \$744 annually, and that's off the sticker price, before federal tax credits that will reduce pre-

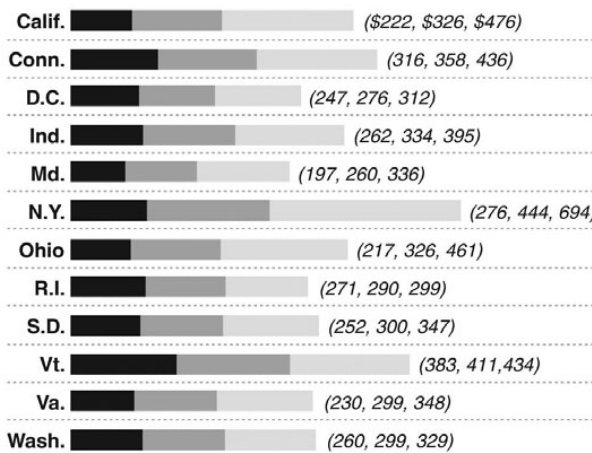
Health insurance costs

Projected monthly premiums for individual health coverage on the new state insurance marketplaces, which begin open enrollment for 2014 coverage in October under the Affordable Care Act:

Average monthly Silver plan* premiums for a nonsmoking 40-year-old

■ Minimum premium cost ■ Average ■ Maximum

(Premium amounts in parentheses)



Help with costs About 80 percent of those who use the marketplaces will qualify for subsidies to reduce coverage costs

*The ACA requires plans to provide the same set of minimum essential health benefits at four tier levels: Bronze, Silver, Gold and Platinum; the bronze level has the least generous coverage, platinum the most generous

Source: Avalere Health

Graphic: Judy Treible

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miums for an estimated 4 out of 5 customers in the new markets.

It's "likely to entice healthier enrollees to opt for a less generous benefit package," said Caroline Pearson, a lead author of the study.

The law's tax credits will make low-cost plans even more appealing. The tax credits work by limiting what you pay for premiums to a given percentage of your income.

By pairing their tax credit with a bronze policy, some younger consumers can bring their premiums down to the range of \$100 to \$140 a month, the Kaiser study found. Older

people can drive their monthly cost even lower — well below \$100, and zero in some cases — if they are willing to take a chance with higher deductibles and copays.

It's a trade-off that some consumers unfamiliar with insurance might not fully grasp.

"A bronze plan is a very basic plan," explained Levitt. It "will enable consumers to pay very low premiums up front, zero in some cases. But when they actually need medical care, they will pay higher costs out of their own pockets." For the most part, you're stuck with the plan you pick until the next an-

nual open enrollment season.

Job-based plans have been shifting costs to employees for some time. In 2009, when Obama took office, 22 percent of workers were in plans with an annual deductible of \$1,000 or more for single coverage, according to Kaiser. By this year, the share had nearly doubled, to 38 percent, including 3 out of 5 employees of small companies.

Obama's law largely reflects what's already going on in the marketplace, but Pearson said over time it may accelerate the shift to plans with higher out-of-pocket costs.

Administration officials are pleased with the large number of low-cost options. Health and Human Services Department spokeswoman Joanne Peters said the administration is confident that consumers will be able to compare plans side by side in the new markets and make the right choices for themselves.

Avalere crunched the numbers on premiums filed by insurers in 11 states and Washington, D.C. Kaiser added another 6 states. Both studies included a mix of states running their own insurance markets and ones in which the federal government will take charge.

Under Obama's law, all plans on the new insurance markets must cover the same benefits, including preventive care at no charge to patients. Another similarity is a cap on total out-of-pocket costs at \$6,350 for individuals, \$12,700 for a family policy.

The main difference between plans is cost-sharing. Bronze plans cover 60 percent of expected medical costs, silver plans will cover 70 percent, gold will cover 80 percent and platinum 90 percent.

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