

CEO Steps Down, But Shares Rise

BERLIN (AP) — Volkswagen CEO Martin Winterkorn resigned Wednesday, days after admitting that the world's top-selling carmaker had rigged diesel emissions to pass U.S. tests during his tenure.

No replacement was announced, and VW still has no easy exit from a scandal that has suddenly dented a reputation for trustworthiness that took decades to build. The smog-test trickery has wiped out billions in VW's market value and raised the specter of criminal investigations and billions more in fines.

Winterkorn took responsibility for the "irregularities" found by U.S. inspectors in VW's diesel engines, but insisted he had personally done nothing wrong.

"I am doing this in the interests of the company even though I am not aware of any wrongdoing on my part," his statement said. "Volkswagen needs a fresh start ... I am clearing the way for this fresh start with my resignation."

Winterkorn, 68, resigned following a crisis meeting of the Volkswagen supervisory board's executive committee. Its acting chairman, Berthold Huber, said company directors are "resolved to embark with determination on a credible new beginning."

EU Agrees To Pump Euros To Refugees

BRUSSELS (AP) — European Union leaders, faced with a staggering migration crisis and deep divisions over how to tackle it, managed to agree early Thursday to send 1 billion euros (\$1.1 billion) to international agencies helping refugees at camps near their home countries.

The leaders also agreed to set up "hotspots" by the end of November where EU experts can quickly register and identify people eligible for refugee protection, said European Council President Donald Tusk, who chaired an emergency EU summit in Brussels.

The move is intended to also quickly filter out economic migrants who are unlikely to qualify for asylum in Europe.

"The measures we have agreed today will not end the crisis. But they are all necessary steps in the right direction," Tusk said at the conclusion of the more than seven-hour meeting.

He added that European leaders, who have disagreed acrimoniously with one another over how best to tackle the flow of migrants into the continent, finally appeared to reach a common understanding and consensus at the meeting.

Charges Filed Against Man In Shootings

PHOENIX (AP) — Prosecutors announced formal charges Wednesday against a 21-year-old man suspected in some of the freeway shootings that have rattled the Phoenix area.

Leslie Allen Merritt Jr. was charged with 16 counts, including aggravated assault, unlawful discharge of a weapon, disorderly conduct, endangerment and carrying out a drive-by shooting.

But prosecutors did not file terrorism charges that police originally sought against the landscaper arrested Friday night at a suburban Phoenix Wal-Mart.

Maricopa County's top prosecutor, Bill Montgomery, previously said Arizona's terrorism laws enacted after 9/11 focus mostly on protecting public utilities from attack and would not apply to the freeway shootings.

Using ballistics tests, detectives tied Merritt to four of the 11 shootings reported on Phoenix-area freeways, Arizona Department of Public Safety Director Frank Milstead said.

Human Rights Struggles For Attention

WASHINGTON (AP) — Relatives of Chinese dissidents met Wednesday with Secretary of State John Kerry as the Obama administration sought to demonstrate it won't gloss over human rights during this week's state visit of Chinese President Xi Jinping.

But the message was in danger of backfiring after the wife of one prominent dissident, Gao Zhisheng, who says he was tortured with an electric baton during years of solitary confinement, refused the invitation.

"They haven't talked to us in five years, for all the time we've been here, so why should we attend a meeting now?" Geng He told The Associated Press from her home in Cupertino, Calif. Gao himself vows to never leave China despite the hardships and having to live apart from his family.

The United States has warned that the toughest crackdown in years on Chinese activists threatens to cloud the high-profile visit by Xi, who arrives in Washington on Thursday and will meet with President Barack Obama.

Yet the issue of human rights is unlikely to dominate the agenda at their Oval Office meeting Friday, which is followed by a state dinner.

Egypt's President Pardons 2 Al-Jazeera

CAIRO (AP) — President Abdel-Fattah el-Sissi pardoned and released two Al-Jazeera English journalists Wednesday, ending a case that was widely condemned by human rights groups and had raised questions about Egypt's commitment to democracy and free speech.

The move to free Canadian journalist Mohamed Fahmy and Egyptian national Baher Mohammed came days before el-Sissi's appearance at the U.N. General Assembly, as well as on the eve of a major holiday in Islam, Eid al-Adha.

Also receiving presidential pardons were 100 people, including dozens of human rights activists. Most of them were convicted and imprisoned for breaking a disputed law enacted in 2013 that prohibits unapproved demonstrations. The measure has almost entirely ended street activism in Egypt.

Fahmy and Mohammed were arrested in December 2013 and sentenced to three years in prison in a retrial last month for airing what a court described as "false news" and coverage biased in favor of the Muslim Brotherhood. Since the 2013 military overthrow of former President Mohammed Morsi, hundreds of his supporters have been killed in clashes with security forces and thousands were detained, including almost the entire leadership of his group, the now-outlawed Muslim Brotherhood.

The two journalists were released hours after the pardon was announced, and dropped off by police in a Cairo suburb.

Pope Stirs Excitement In DC, Calls For Climate Action

BY JULIE PACE
Associated Press

WASHINGTON — Cheered by jubilant crowds across the nation's capital, Pope Francis forged common cause Wednesday with President Barack Obama on climate change, immigration and inequality, as the popular pontiff signaled he would not sidestep issues that have deeply divided Americans.

On his first full day in the United States, the pope also reached out to America's 450 bishops, many of whom have struggled to come to terms with his new social justice-minded direction for the Catholic Church. He gently prodded the bishops to forgo "harsh and divisive language," while commending their "courage" in the face of the church's sexual abuse scandal — rhetoric that angered victims he may meet with later in his trip.

Late in the day, Francis — the first pope from the Americas — canonized Junipero Serra, the famous 18th century Spanish friar who brought the Catholic faith to California.

The 78-year-old pontiff's whirlwind day in Washington enlivened the often stoic, politically polarized city. Excited crowds lined streets near the White House to catch a glimpse of the smiling and waving Francis as he passed by in his open-air "popemobile." He seemed to draw energy from the cheering spectators, particularly the children his security detail brought to him for a papal kiss and blessing.

In keeping with his reputation as the "people's pope," Francis kept Obama and other dignitaries at the White House waiting so he could spend time greeting schoolchildren gathered outside the Vatican's diplomatic mission where he spent the night.

With flags snapping, color guard at attention and a military band playing, Francis stepped from his modest Fiat onto the South Lawn on a crisp fall morning that felt as optimistic as his own persona. Pope and president stood on a red-carpeted platform bedecked with red, white and blue bunting for the national anthems of the Holy See and the United States.

The pope's remarks were brief, yet pointed.

Speaking in soft, halting English, Francis said that as the son of an immigrant family,



CHERYL DIAZ MEYER/MCCLATCHY DC/TNS
Pope Francis is greeted with cheers as he arrives shortly after 4 p.m. to the Basilica of the National Shrine of the Immaculate Conception in Washington, D.C., on Sept. 23.

he was "happy to be a guest in this country, which was largely built by such families." The Argentine pope was born to Italian parents who left their home country before he was born, and he has been a forceful advocate for humane treatment of migrants.

Francis was enthusiastic in his embrace of Obama's climate change agenda, specifically praising the president for taking steps to reduce air pollution. In a firm message to those who doubt the science of climate change, he said the warming planet "demands on our part a serious and responsible recognition" of the world that will be left to today's children.

"Accepting the urgency, it seems clear to me also that climate change is a problem which can no longer be left to a future generation," said Francis, who has been pressing his environmental message ahead of climate change talks in Paris later this year.

The pope's messages were warmly welcomed by Obama, who has prodded his Republican rivals for action on immigration and climate change with limited success. In his own remarks heralding the pope's arrival at the White House, Obama thanked Francis for reminding the world of the "sacred obligation to protect our planet - God's magnificent gift to us."

The pope and president were also aligned in their call for addressing global poverty

and inequality, with Obama praising Francis' call to put "the least of these at the center of our concern."

The pope had something for conservatives, too, with a clear call to protect religious liberties — "one of America's most precious possessions."

"All are called to be vigilant," he said, "to preserve and defend that freedom from everything that would threaten or compromise it."

U.S. bishops and conservatives who have objected to the Obama administration's health care mandate and the recent Supreme Court legalization of same-sex marriage have made religious freedom a rallying cry, with a largely domestic focus.

After their opening remarks on the lawn, Obama and Francis met one-on-one for 40 minutes in the Oval Office, joined only by an interpreter. White House aides said the discussion was private, and declined to say whether the leaders addressed subjects on which they sharply differ, including abortion and gay marriage.

While the pope's visit was analyzed for political implications in a city already consumed by next year's U.S. presidential election, for Catholics and many other Americans Francis' six-day, three-city trip to the U.S. is an opportunity to connect with a humble church leader who has rejuvenated many of the country's believers.

"He's made the church more of an obtainable thing," said Nigel Stacy, a law student who arrived at the White House in the middle of the night to get a good place to stand for the arrival ceremony. "It's more relatable. You see what he does and you can see yourself emulating that."

Washington resident Theresa Wellman, who brought her mother and five children to watch the pope's parade through the streets of the nation's capital, called Francis "a breath of fresh air."

"He's changed the tone into a loving, merciful church to serve the poor," Wellman said.

The church's leadership in the U.S. has sometimes been more skeptical of the pope, wary of the divide between his focus on a merciful church and the culture wars that America's bishops have been involved in over abortion and gay rights.

In his remarks to U.S. bishops at the Cathedral of St. Matthew the Apostle, Francis emphasized one of the defining messages of his papacy, to focus less on defending church teaching and more on compassion. The pope told the American church leaders that "harsh and divisive language does not befit the tongue of a pastor" and he encouraged them to speak with anyone, no matter their views.

Xi Says 'Without Reform' No Progress For Business In China

SEATTLE (AP) — Chinese President Xi Jinping addressed Amazon.com founder Jeff Bezos, billionaire investor Warren Buffett and other top American and Chinese business leaders Wednesday, vowing that his country would work to remove barriers to foreign investment and improve intellectual property protections.

Xi's conference with the business leaders in Seattle was part of a busy day. He also toured the Boeing production facility in Everett, the sprawling suburban Microsoft campus and visited a high school in Tacoma, where he received a football and a personalized jersey.

Protesters and supporters of Xi holding signs in English and Chinese lined the streets outside Microsoft's Redmond campus and also waited outside the high school.

Apple CEO Tim Cook, Microsoft CEO Satya Nadella and Jack Ma of Chinese e-commerce giant Alibaba also were among the 30 executives who attended a closed-door discussion moderated by former U.S. Treasury Secretary Henry Paulson before Xi's address.

Though he acknowledged difficulties as China shifts its economy from one driven by exports to one driven by a growing middle class, Xi told the group China's economy will maintain a "steady medium and high speed of growth for a long time."

"China will open up still wider to the outside world," Xi said through an interpreter. "Without reform, there will be no driving force; without opening up, there will be no progress. ... There is good news and I believe there will be more good news in the future."

China will "stand firm" to protect intel-

lectual property rights, he added.

Xi attributed the Chinese economy's recent slowdown to three factors — world economic problems, proactive Chinese efforts at regulation and "protracted structural problems" in China.

A big item of concern for the American CEOs is a treaty that would provide a framework for broader investment in the economy of each nation.

All of the American CEOs participating in the forum, organized by the Paulson Institute, signed a letter to Xi and U.S. President Barack Obama urging them to support such a treaty, and they heard encouraging words from Xi on the topic Wednesday.

"Once concluded, the treaty will further ease market access and put in place more open and transparent market rules," he said.

Bilateral investment treaties provide rules for companies doing business in other countries. The agreements can help ensure the rights of foreign investors are protected and that foreign companies operate on a level playing field with domestic ones.

An agreement with China could open up more of that nation's massive market to American companies, provide clearer rules for Chinese investment in the U.S., and create jobs in both countries, supporters say.

"The reason that the U.S. and China have a nearly \$600 billion trading relationship, large amounts of U.S. investment in China, and increasing amounts of Chinese direct investment here, is because there are many areas where our national and business interests align," Paulson told Xi at the forum, according to a copy of his

remarks.

Representatives from Twitter, Facebook and Google were notably missing from the event. China blocks those companies' websites.

Earlier Wednesday, it was announced that Chinese companies have agreed to buy 300 jets from Boeing.

In addition, state-owned Commercial Aircraft Corp. of China signed a cooperation agreement with the aerospace giant to build a 737 aircraft assembly center in China. That move angered Boeing's unions in Washington state, which fear a loss of U.S. jobs.

Xi arrived in Seattle on Tuesday for a three-day visit before he heads to the White House later this week.

In the speech Tuesday, Xi told dignitaries such as former U.S. Secretary of State Henry Kissinger, former Treasury Secretary Hank Paulson and Commerce Secretary Penny Pritzker that reaching agreements to ensure robust international trade was a priority.

Xi also said China and the U.S. could work together to address cybercrimes, a problem that has sparked mutual tension. He said China was a staunch defender of cybersecurity and also had been a victim of hacking.

Acknowledging that the countries don't always see eye to eye, Xi said China is ready to set up a joint effort to fight cybercrimes.

American officials say hacking attacks originating from China are approaching epidemic levels.

A meeting Tuesday with governors from five U.S. states and local Chinese officials produced a deal to work on clean energy.

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