

STARS AND STRIPES®

Friday, August 5, 2016

A news digest for U.S. forces serving overseas

stripes.com

Obama: Militants weakening, still a threat

By TARA COPP

Stars and Stripes

WASHINGTON — A shift in tactics by the Islamic State group to include attacks on American soil will not stop the United States from fighting the terrorist group on every front across the globe, President Barack Obama said Thursday at the Pentagon.

Obama was there to meet with his national security council to discuss ongoing strategies in the campaign against the Islamic State group.

Since the president's last Pentagon visit, U.S.-backed Iraqi and Syrian forces have recaptured significant portions of their countries from the Islamic State, attempting to isolate the terrorist group in its strongholds of Mosul and Raqqa. But at the same time, the Islamic State and militants affiliated with the terrorist group have executed multiple high-profile attacks in western Europe and the United States.

"In terms of the threat that [the Islamic State] poses to the homeland, I think it is serious," Obama said Thursday during a news conference. "The possibility of either a lone actor or a small cell carrying out an attack that kills people is real."

In response, Obama said his administration has ramped up U.S. efforts, including starting sensitive negotiations with Russia to potentially coordinate a strategy to speed the defeat of the Islamic State group in Syria, and expanding the air campaign against the group to Libya.

"The decline of (the Islamic State group) in Syria and Iraq appears to be causing it to shift to tactics that we've seen before, an even greater emphasis on encouraging high-profile terrorist attacks, including in

President says \$400M paid to Iran not ransom

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — President Barack Obama vigorously denies that a \$400 million cash payment to Iran was ransom to secure the release of four Americans jailed in Tehran. He defended the transaction as evidence that the nuclear accord with Iran has allowed for progress on other matters.

"This wasn't some nefarious deal," Obama said during a news conference Thursday at the Pentagon.

The money was delivered to the Iranian government in January, at the same time the nuclear deal was settled and the Americans were released. The payment was part of a decades-old dispute over a failed military equipment deal dating to the 1970s, before the Islamic revolution in 1979.

Obama also pushed back at Republican presidential nominee Donald Trump's

suggestions that the November election might be rigged, calling the assertion "ridiculous."

On Iran, Obama pointed out that the payment, along with an additional \$1.3 billion in interest to be paid later, was announced by the administration when it was concluded in January, a day after the implementation of a landmark nuclear agreement with Iran. "It wasn't a secret. We were completely open about it," he said.

Obama allowed that the one piece of new information, first reported this week by The Wall Street Journal, was that the \$400 million was paid in cash.

"The only bit of news is that we paid cash," he said. "The reason is because we couldn't send them a check, and we couldn't wire the money. We don't have a banking relationship with Iran which is part of the pressure we applied on them."

the United States," the president said. "We'll keep working with allies and partners to go after (the Islamic State group) wherever it tries to spread."

One partner could be Russia.

Obama took questions Thursday on whether the United States should negotiate with the Russians to help end the fighting in Syria.

"I'm not confident we can trust the Russians and Vladimir Putin," he said. "Which is why we have to test whether

we can get an actual cessation of hostilities. ... We go into this without any blinders on."

The United States has had no formal military relations with Russia since its takeover of Crimea in 2014. But Obama said Thursday that negotiations are critical in achieving a political solution in Syria, and speed the demise of the Islamic State group there.

"We have to try," he said. "The alternative is the perpetuation of civil war."

The hourlong news conference followed Obama's meeting with his national security team, which is comprised of the vice president, the secretaries of state, defense and the treasury, the chairman of the joint chiefs, the director of national intelligence, and other national security advisers.

The meeting follows a string of policy decisions by the White House to expand U.S. military involvement against the Islamic State group. Since operations were first launched in 2014, the United States and its coalition partners have conducted 14,000 airstrikes against the terrorist group, Obama said.

His appearance at the Pentagon comes just a week after he approved a new front in Libya in the air war against Islamic State group. Since Monday, U.S. manned and unmanned warplanes have launched three airstrikes against Islamic State targets in the coastal city of Sirte, under the banner of Operation Odyssey Lighting.

The strikes in Libya come as Obama also recently approved expanded airstrikes to counter the threat of the Islamic State group in Afghanistan and inserted U.S. forces closer to the front lines in Iraq and Syria.

The fights against the Islamic State group in Iraq and Syria were first limited to airstrikes, but both have expanded to include U.S. troops as the White House tries to prevent getting entangled in another ground war.

But Pentagon officials have said no U.S. ground forces are in Sirte assisting in the battle, though American troops have entered Libya in the past few months to meet with allied fighters for training and assistance missions.

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Syria's Aleppo sees no letup as UN urges pause

Associated Press

BEIRUT — A senior U.N. humanitarian official urged Thursday an immediate pause to the fighting around Syria's contested city of Aleppo as government forces pounded opposition areas with airstrikes and rebels kept up their attempts to break a government siege.

In Geneva, Jan Egeland, adviser to the U.N.'s special envoy to Syria, said the world body was ready to send relief to the city, divided between government- and opposition-controlled areas, once the fighting pauses. The last delivery to reach those trapped in rebel-held parts of Aleppo — where the U.N. estimates some 300,000 residents remain — was in June, he said.

Russia had declared it is offering humanitarian corridors for residents in the area, but rights groups said such passages are not neutral and don't offer guarantees to civilians wishing to use them.

In Damascus, a visiting top Iranian lawmaker said the Syrian government and its allies seek to "liberate" tens of thousands of Aleppo's residents from the grip of what he called terrorist groups.

Alaeddin Boroujerdi, chairman of the National Security and Foreign Policy Commit-

US poised to reach Obama refugee goal

WASHINGTON — After a slow start, it appears increasingly likely that the Obama administration will hit its goal of admitting 10,000 Syrian refugees into the United States before the end of September.

State Department figures show that 2,340 Syrian refugees arrived last month in the United States.

That's more than what occurred during the entire seven months after President Barack Obama directed his team to prepare for 10,000 admissions from the war-torn country. Total admissions for the current budget year, which ends Sept. 30, now come to about 7,900, and the vast majority of them are Sunni Muslims, records show.

From The Associated Press

tee of Iran's parliament, urged the U.N. to help in letting those people get out of Aleppo's rebel-held areas through already identified crossing points.

School nearing loss of its GI Bill certification

BY ALEX HORTON
Stars and Stripes

SAN ANTONIO — Ashford University withdrew its request to receive GI Bill certification in California, further endangering benefits for more than 6,000 veterans attending their mostly online program, according to a report filed Tuesday.

Bridgepoint Education, the university's parent company, withdrew its request for certification from the state of California on June 30, according to a Securities and Exchange Commission report.

The school's request withdrawal comes after Iowa postponed a decision to pull GI Bill certification on June 20, giving Ashford until September to seek and receive approval in California. Iowa pulled Ashford's approval for GI Bill funding when the university announced their operations would leave the state and move west.

Now, Iowa could be Ashford's only option for certification.

"It may be more likely that they will lose the ability to accept GI Bill benefits," said James Schmeling, executive vice president of strategic engagement at Student Veterans of America, a national veterans' advocacy group.

Marianne Perez, a spokeswoman for Bridgepoint Education, declined to explain why the company withdrew their request in California.

However, in 2013, the attorney general in California subpoenaed Bridgepoint to investigate alleged violations of financial aid and enrollment rules.

This episode leaves student veterans in the middle of a complicated issue of states granting academic institutions the ability to enroll students using the GI Bill. More than 6,000 troops, veterans and family members attend Ashford, almost exclusively online, according to court documents filed in June.

Students could be left paying tuition out of pocket and foregoing housing stipends after Sept. 18 if Iowa does not postpone or reverse their decision. Staci Hupp, Iowa Department of Education spokeswoman, said the discussion between the state and Ashford is ongoing but no decisions have been made yet.

"Uncertainty for student veterans about their college's ability to accept GI Bill benefits is disruptive to their future," Schmeling said, adding he would recommend students attending Ashford to consider transferring to other schools to avoid further difficulties.

Turkey's ruling party purges followers of US-based cleric

Associated Press

ANKARA, Turkey — Turkey's ruling party on Friday instructed its local branches and party-led municipalities to purge themselves of suspected supporters of U.S.-based Muslim cleric Fethullah Gulen, who is accused by the government of instigating the country's failed July 15 coup.

Gulen has denied involvement or prior knowledge of the violent coup attempt that left more than 270 people dead.

Still, the Justice and Development Party, founded by President Recep Tayyip Erdogan, issued a circular ordering its members to "immediately start efforts to purge those linked to the [Gulen movement] or who gave support to the reprehensible coup," the state-run Anadolu Agency reported.

The circular also called on local branches to avoid "agitation and gossip" during the purges.

Turkey accuses Gulen — a former Erdogan ally who lives

in self-imposed exile in Pennsylvania — of masterminding the failed coup attempt by renegade officers in Turkey's military and wants him extradited to Turkey. It has designated his movement, which runs charities, schools and businesses across the world, as a terrorist organization and has launched a widespread crackdown on suspected members since the failed coup.

The circular was issued hours before Kazakh President Nursultan Nazarbayev was to

arrive in Turkey, becoming the first foreign head of state to visit since the failed coup. Turkey is also pressing its allies to crack down on Gulen-linked schools and charities and was expected to ask the Kazakh leader to shut down Gulen-run establishments in his Central Asian nation.

Since the coup attempt, nearly 70,000 people suspected of links to Gulen have been suspended or dismissed from jobs in civil service, the judiciary, education, health care and the military.

Could the Olympics be too big to fail?

Associated Press

RIO DE JANEIRO — On a corner outside the athlete's village, a soldier carrying an automatic weapon tried his best to keep from smiling as he posed for a cameraman trying to put a face on security at the Olympics.

All is not quite fun and games just yet in Rio, though beleaguered organizers are hoping that changes soon. Most competitions begin Saturday and, barring a potential disaster, the discussion may actually turn from the problems of Rio to sports from badminton to basketball in an extravaganza that only the world's biggest sporting event can bring.

It will happen in a city of astonishing beauty and incredible poverty. It will happen despite worries about everything from Zika virus-carrying mosquitoes to gun-toting criminals.

And it will happen with some athletes eyeing each other carefully, not knowing if the playing field is truly level.

The Rio Olympics open with a lot more at stake than gold medals and national pride. Not since Los Angeles rescued the troubled movement with a stripped-down version of the games in 1984 has there been more trepidation about the future of the massive sporting event.

Some issues, like the Zika mosquitoes, were out of the control of the International Olympic Committee. Others were things they simply failed to control, like the rampant dopers who have made a mockery of the Olympic movement itself.

Bowing down to Vladimir Putin and allowing Russian athletes to remain in the games may have prevented a full-blown Cold War from breaking out among Olympic nations. But it also highlighted a schism between Olympic officials and those running the World Anti-Doping Agency, bringing into question their commitment to clean sport.

It also exposed the IOC as a spineless organization more

bent on self-preservation than on ensuring cheaters are not allowed in any Olympic sport.

Disappointing, but hardly surprising.

These are the same people, you might remember, who awarded the first Olympics in South America to Rio in 2009, buying without question the promise that in seven years Rio would somehow clean up waters long polluted by raw sewage and build mass transportation systems to whisk people around town.

Instead, the city's highways are a logjam and on Saturday athletes will row their way through the slimy and dangerous waters of Rodrigo de Freitas lagoon, where hastily erected barricades and garbage collection boats will be on duty so that television viewers from around the world won't have to see just how filthy the water really is.

It's enough to make some of the stuffed shirts at the IOC a bit unsettled.

"How worried should we be?" Prince Albert of Monaco

asked his fellow IOC members this week.

Plenty worried, though about seven years too late. Every Olympics has its issues — few thought Athens would ever be able to pull off the 2004 Games — but there are so many facing Rio that there will be a collective sigh of relief if everything has gone off mostly as planned when the Olympics end in just over two weeks.

Indeed, IOC President Thomas Bach envisions clear sailing for the Olympic movement if that happens.

"If this model stands such a stress test like it had to here in Brazil, then you can see that this model is more than robust," Bach said.

It may turn out that Bach is right. Barring a terrorist attack or mass illness of rowers and sailors, Rio — for all its myriad of problems — may be remembered as a success.

Proof that no matter how incompetently they're managed, the Olympics are simply too big to fail.

Olympic women's boxing may be platform to pros

Associated Press

LOS ANGELES — Many of the 40 men leaving Rio de Janeiro with Olympic boxing medals around their necks in three weeks will have their pick of professional promoters eager to reward them with riches and fame.

For the 12 women who claim medals in the second Olympic women's boxing tournament, the pro options still aren't glittery.

Several years after the International Boxing Association (AIBA) won its fight to get women's boxing into the Olympics, the Games still represent

the apex of the sport. While women's boxing has grown in prestige and popularity since the inaugural London tournament, female pros still languish behind their male counterparts in money, exposure and opportunities.

Claressa Shields and Katie Taylor could be in position to change that if the two biggest Western names in the amateur game can claim a second gold.

"Whichever promoter takes on women's boxing is going to be a very wealthy man, especially if he takes up me," said Shields, the 21-year-old American middleweight. "If he wants some money, he knows what to

do."

Taylor, the 2012 lightweight gold medalist and a five-time world champion, is arguably the most accomplished female athlete in her native Ireland's history. Taylor also has spoken about her interest in going pro, and it's not tough to imagine her fame translating into professional riches.

But Shields and Taylor are still waiting for a promoter or a television network to step up with enough of a commitment to make them bankable stars.

"I've never been able to make women's boxing pay," said Top Rank boss Bob Arum, who promoted former WBC champion

Mia St. John. "I might still do it again, but I wasn't successful."

But women's combat sports have evolved dramatically in the past four years. The UFC has turned women's MMA into a vibrant, money-making sport, and Ronda Rousey — who signed with the UFC in November 2012 — became the sport's most prominent fighter of any gender.

"You have to notice what UFC did," Arum said. "They've built their female fighters into stars. They made Rousey into the big superstar of that sport. I don't know whether that could happen in boxing. I don't see why not, but it's never happened."



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Mets secure split of Subway Series

Associated Press

NEW YORK — Jay Bruce launched a three-run homer for his first hit since being traded, Bartolo Colon took a shutout into the seventh inning and the New York Mets beat the Yankees 4-1 on Thursday night for a split of the Subway Series.

After each team won once at Citi Field earlier this week, the Mets took the wrapup of the two-game set at Yankee Stadium.

Bruce had been 0-for-10 since being acquired from Cincinnati on Monday before his drive into the Yankees' bullpen in right-center field made it 4-0 in the fifth inning against Nathan Eovaldi (9-8).

Kelly Johnson also led off with a homer in the inning.

Bruce's 26th homer gave him the NL RBIs lead with 83, ended an 0-for-19 rut overall and made him 5-for-56 against the Yankees. He cracked a

smile on the way back to the dugout, where Colon and his new teammates greeted him with hearty high-fives.

Colon (10-6) gave up six hits in 6¹/₃ innings in earning his 228th victory, most among active pitchers. The 43-year-old righty, who spent 2011 with the Yankees, became the first pitcher to win a Subway Series game for each New York team, the Elias Sports Bureau said.

Jeurys Familia worked around a pair of one-out singles for his 38th save in 40 chances.

Giants 3, Phillies 2 (10): Denard Span homered leading off the 10th inning, and San Francisco beat host Philadelphia for just its fifth victory in 14 games since the All-Star break.

Dodgers 4, Rockies 2: Kenta Maeda allowed two runs over 5²/₃ innings, rookie Corey Seager tied a Dodgers record for shortstops with his 19th home run and Los Angeles beat host Colorado to avoid a three-

game sweep.

Reds 7, Cardinals 0: Brandon Phillips had three hits and left-hander Brandon Finnegan limited the visitors to two hits in six innings, leading Cincinnati to a rare series win over St. Louis.

Red Sox 3, Mariners 2 (11): Brock Holt's RBI single in the 11th inning lifted visiting Boston past Seattle.

Rangers 5, Orioles 3: Jonathan Lucroy hit his first homer with Texas, Ian Desmond drove in two runs and Texas beat Wade Miley and host Baltimore to avoid a three-game sweep.

Indians 9, Twins 2: Carlos Santana hit a three-run homer, Francisco Lindor added a two-run shot and host Cleveland salvaged the finale of a four-game series with Minnesota.

White Sox 6, Tigers 3: Jose Abreu and Avisail Garcia homered in a five-run second inning, and visiting Chicago chased Jordan Zimmermann

in his return from the disabled list, snapping Detroit's eight-game winning streak.

Athletics 8, Angels 6 (10): At Anaheim, Yonder Alonso hit a tiebreaking RBI double in the 10th inning and Oakland beat Los Angeles to avoid a three-game sweep and snap a five-game losing streak.

Braves 5, Pirates 2: Adonis Garcia scored from second on an improbable stolen base attempt in the seventh inning and host Atlanta beat Pittsburgh despite Ryan Vogelsong's strong start.

Blue Jays 4, Astros 1: J.A. Happ won his ninth consecutive decision, Edwin Encarnacion reached 30 home runs for the fifth straight season and visiting Toronto beat Houston for its eighth victory in 11 games.

Rays 3, Royals 2: Brad Miller hit a three-run homer in the eighth inning to help Tampa Bay beat visiting Kansas City for a series split.

Source: Teixeira retiring at end of season

Associated Press

NEW YORK — Yankees first baseman Mark Teixeira plans to retire at the end of the season, a person familiar with the situation told The Associated Press.

New York scheduled a news conference with Teixeira for Friday afternoon, before its series opener against Cleveland. The person, speaking on condition of anonymity because no statement was authorized, said the purpose of the news conference was for Teixeira to announce 2016 is his final season.

Slowed by injuries, the 36-year-old switch-hitting first baseman is batting .198 with 10 homers and 27 RBIs. A three-time All-Star and five-time Gold Glove winner, he is in the final season of a \$180 million, eight-year contract. His 404 home runs are fifth among switch-hitters, trailing only Mickey Mantle (536), Eddie

Murray (504), Chipper Jones (468) and Carlos Beltran (415).

Teixeira's plans were first reported by ESPN.

Greg Bird, a 23-year-old who missed this season following shoulder surgery, is projected by the Yankees as Teixeira's successor.

When he arrived at spring training in February, Teixeira said "I'd love to play five more years. My body feels so good. Why not play until 40?"

But he was slowed early this season by a bulging disk in his neck and was on the disabled list from June 4-25 with a right knee cartilage tear, an injury that has caused manager Joe Girardi to schedule repeated off days since his return.

Teixeira was taken by Texas with the fifth overall pick in the 2001 amateur draft and made his big league debut with the Rangers two years later. He was traded to his hometown At-

lanta Braves in July 2007, dealt to the Los Angeles Angels the following year and signed with the Yankees in January 2009.

He helped New York win a World Series title in his first season, hitting .292 with 39 homers and 122 RBIs and finishing second behind Minnesota's Joe Mauer in AL MVP voting.

Teixeira was limited to 15 games and a .151 average in 2013 after tearing the tendon sheath in his right hand while with the U.S. team at the World Baseball Classic. He had surgery that July 1 and missed the remainder of the season, then hit .216 with 22 homers and 62 RBIs the following year, when the hand was still regaining strength and he was slowed by a hamstring injury.

Fully recovered, he made the All-Star team again in 2015 but fouled a pitch off his right leg Aug. 17, played two more

games in pain and then found out he had fractured his shin. He finished the season with a .255 average, 31 homers and 79 RBIs

USOC leader defends IOC's Russia stance

RIO DE JANEIRO — The chairman of the U.S. Olympic Committee defended his support of the decision not to ban Russia's entire team from the Rio Games.

Chairman Larry Probst also is an International Olympic Committee member. He was among the 84 members who approved the IOC executive committee's call to allow individual sports to determine which Russians could compete.

At a USOC news conference Friday, Probst said that decision was not going to change, so there was no use voting against it.