

Nation & World

Friday, October 18, 2013 »

Around the World

WASHINGTON

New charges in Blackwater case

The U.S. Justice Department on Thursday brought fresh charges against four former Blackwater Worldwide security contractors, resurrecting an internationally charged case over a deadly 2007 shooting on the streets of Baghdad.

The guards are accused of opening fire in busy Nisoor Square on Sept. 16, 2007. Seventeen Iraqi civilians died, including women and children.

The guards were charged with manslaughter and weapons violations in 2008, but a federal judge the following year dismissed the case, ruling the Justice Department withheld evidence from a grand jury and violated the guards' constitutional rights.

A federal appeals court reinstated the case in 2011, saying now-retired Judge Ricardo Urbina had wrongly interpreted the law.

SAN FRANCISCO

Union Square evacuated

San Francisco police say there was "no merit" to a suspicious device that led to the evacuation of Union Square.

Police spokesman Gordon Shyy earlier said the report came in about 11:50 a.m. Thursday. In addition to the evacuation, a one-block radius around Union Square was shut down to vehicles and pedestrians and businesses were ordered to shelter in place.

The San Francisco Chronicle reported that the bomb squad was examining the package at 1 p.m. and cable car service was also shut down. Police later tweeted that the streets had reopened.

BEIRUT

Top Syrian general killed in battle

One of Syria's most powerful military officers was killed in fighting with al-Qaida-linked Islamic extremists in an oil-rich eastern province largely controlled by the rebels, Syrian state-run television said Thursday.

The fighting came amid a new push to hold an elusive peace conference for Syria's civil war, with the government proposing the talks start late next month, though there was no sign the opposition would attend.

Maj. Gen. Jameh Jameh was killed in the provincial capital of Deir el-Zour, where he was the head of military intelligence, state-run TV said.

LAOS

Bodies recovered after plane crash

PAKSE — Rescuers in fishing boats pulled bodies from the muddy Mekong River on Thursday as officials in Laos ruled out finding survivors from a plane that crashed in stormy weather, killing 49 people from 10 countries.

Backpacks, two broken propellers and passports were among the debris scattered on the riverbank where the Lao Airlines turboprop plane left deep skid marks in the ground before disappearing into the water Wednesday.

Thai Foreign Ministry spokesman Sek Wannamethee said search teams had recovered the bodies of 15 crash victims by the time their operations ended Thursday because of darkness and the strong current.

Wire reports



BACK IN BUSINESS



ABOVE: Visitors enter the Smithsonian's Air and Space Museum after it reopens Thursday in Washington. **AT TOP:** (Left) National Park Service Ranger Wendy Solis welcomes visitors to Alcatraz Island in San Francisco. (Center) Vice President Joe Biden greets Environmental Protection Agency workers as they return to work in Washington. (Right) Cindy VanDerwerker, a maintenance worker at Saratoga National Historical Park, clears leaves in Stillwater, N.Y.

Parks reopen, workers back after shutdown

By David Crary
Associated Press

From the Liberty Bell to Alcatraz, federal landmarks and offices reopened Thursday. Furloughed employees were relieved to get back to work — even if faced with email backlogs — but many worried about another such disruption in a matter of months.

"We'd hate to have to live through this all over again," Richard Marcus, a 29-year employee of the National Archives in Washington, said after the government shutdown finally ended.

Nationwide, from big-city office buildings to wilderness outposts, innumerable federal services and operations shifted back into gear after 16 days.

The U.S. Forest Service started lifting a logging ban on national forests. U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services restarted the computerized system used to verify the legal status of workers. Boat trips resumed to Alcatraz, the former federal prison in San Francisco Bay, with 1,600 tickets snapped up by tourists in the first hour of business.

More than 20,000 National Park Service employees had been among the 800,000 federal workers sent home at the peak of the shutdown.

Federal workers who were furloughed or worked without pay during the shutdown will get back

SHUTDOWN: FLORIDA VOTES

U.S. SENATE

The 81-18 roll call Wednesday by which the Senate passed and sent to the House legislation to avoid a threatened federal default and end the 16-day partial government shutdown. A "yes" vote was a vote to pass the measure.

DEMOCRAT

Nelson, Yes

REPUBLICAN

Rubio, No.

U.S. HOUSE

The 285-144 roll call by which the House passed and sent to President Barack Obama legislation to avoid default and end the shutdown. Voting yes were 198 Democrats and 87 Republicans. Voting no were 0 Democrats and 144 Republicans.

DEMOCRATS (10 YES, 0 NO)

Brown, Yes; Castor, Yes; Deutch, Yes; Frankel, Yes; Garcia, Yes; Grayson, Yes; Hastings, Yes; Murphy, Yes; Wasserman Schultz, Yes; Wilson, Yes.

REPUBLICANS (5 YES, 10 NO, 1 DID NOT VOTE)

Bilirakis, Yes; Buchanan, Yes; Crenshaw, Yes; DeSantis, No; Diaz-Balart, Yes; Mica, No; Miller, No; Nugent, No; Posey, No; Radel, No; Rooney, No; Ros-Lehtinen, Yes; Ross, No; Southerland, No; Webster, Yes; Yoho, No; Young, Did not vote.

— The Associated Press

pay in their next paychecks, which for most employees come Oct. 29.

Labor Secretary Thomas Perez greeted returning workers with a sympathetic email.

"Unfortunately, as President Obama correctly noted, you are occasionally called on to perform your remarkably important work in a climate that too often treats federal employees and contractors as a punching bag," Perez said.

The Defense Department called back about 7,000 furloughed civilians. In an open letter to the workforce, Defense Secretary Chuck Hagel said the department still faces budget uncertainty as Congress struggles to pass a 2014 spending bill and deal with automatic budget cuts. Pentagon Comptroller Robert Hale said the department lost at least \$600 million worth of productivity.

Apps help put brakes on texting while driving

By Vince Horiuchi
Salt Lake Tribune

Every time I'm in my car, I'll notice at least two or three drivers texting on the road. It's become a serious epidemic.

More than 100,000 road accidents a year involve texting, according to the National Safety Council. Studies conducted at the University of Utah show that texting while driving can result in an eight-times greater chance of getting in a crash. That's twice more likely than if you were legally drunk.

Phone carriers are taking positive steps to tell motorists about the dangers of using digital devices while driving. They've even

produced a heart-wrenching short film by acclaimed documentarian Werner Herzog that brings home the tragic consequences of texting and driving. (To learn more about their campaign, go to www.itcanwait.com.)

So technology got us into this mess. Can it help us get out? Sort of.

If you don't have the wherewithal to not pick up your phone while driving, then there are features and apps that you should know about that can motivate you or a loved one.

For Windows Phone users, an upgrade to the Windows Phone 8 operating system is coming soon that will include a new "Driving Mode" feature.

When you turn this on, it silences all incoming calls and texts so you won't be tempted to pick it up while driving. It can automatically turn itself on when your phone's Bluetooth connectivity is activated with a headset or stereo system in the car. It won't stop you from making outgoing calls and texts, but at least it can prevent you from getting distracted by incoming messages.

For iPhone users, there's a similar function called "Do Not Disturb." When activated, it will silence all calls and alerts (including text messages) when the phone is locked, which presumably is the case while you're driving. You can even set it to permanently silence calls

and alerts. You also can schedule a time when the feature turns on (for when you're sleeping, for example), and you can create exceptions for certain types of calls.

For Android phone users, there are a number of free apps that do what "Do Not Disturb" does for the iPhone. They include apps such as "Do Not Disturb Ringer Silencer," "Do Not Disturb," "Do Not Disturb Me" or "Silencify."

These apps, like the iPhone's "Do Not Disturb," were really designed for people to turn off their ringers whenever they go into a meeting or a movie, but they also keep the phone from ringing — and therefore, don't tempt you to answer it — while on the road.

Johnson tapped for Homeland secretary

By Nedra Pickler
Associated Press

WASHINGTON — President Barack Obama is calling back a trusted counterterrorism adviser from his first term by nominating former top Pentagon lawyer Jeh Johnson as secretary of Homeland Security.

Obama plans to announce Johnson's nomination Friday. He must be confirmed by the Senate before taking over the post most recently held by Janet Napolitano, who stepped down in August to become president of the University of California system.

As general counsel at the Defense Department during the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, Johnson was an aggressive advocate on a number of complex and contentious legal issues. He oversaw the escalation of the use of unmanned drone strikes, the revamping of military commissions to try terrorism suspects rather than using civilian courts and the repeal of the military's ban on openly gay service members. He also mapped out the legal defense for the American cross-border raid into Pakistan that killed Osama bin Laden.

A senior Obama administration official on Thursday confirmed Johnson's selection, first reported by The Daily Beast. The official was not authorized to speak about the nomination on the record and spoke on condition of anonymity. The official said Obama chose Johnson because of his experience as a national security leader. The official noted that Johnson oversaw the work of more than 10,000 lawyers and was responsible for reviewing every military operation approved by the president and defense secretary.

Johnson is not as well versed in the immigration and disaster response side of the Homeland Security Department, although the administration official pointed out the Pentagon also coordinates federal relief to respond quickly to disasters.

At the Pentagon, Johnson was involved in the decision to move Army Pfc. Chelsea Manning from a military jail in Quantico, Va. to Fort Leavenworth, Kan. Supporters of Manning, the young soldier who leaked thousands of classified documents to WikiLeaks, said conditions at the military jail in Virginia were too harsh.



Jeh Johnson