

Suspect held over Obama ricin letter

AFP, Washington

A letter addressed to President Barack Obama tested positive for ricin, and authorities arrested a suspect, stoking alarm in Washington on Wednesday after an earlier scare over poisoned mail.

The FBI said there was no connection between blasts at the Boston marathon that killed three people on Monday and mailings sent to Obama, Republican Senator Roger Wicker and an unidentified Mississippi justice official.

Special agents on Wednesday afternoon arrested Paul Kevin Curtis, "the individual believed to be responsible for the mailings of the three letters sent through the US Postal Service," the bureau said.

The letters "contained a granular substance that preliminarily tested positive for ricin," it added in a statement.

Earlier reports had said that the letters to Obama and Wicker, which never reached them, were signed "I am KC and I approve this message."

Curtis was arrested at his home in Corinth, Mississippi, according to the FBI.

After preliminary tests on the Obama letter showed traces of ricin, further examinations are to be carried out in the next 24 to 48 hours, the FBI said.

The US Secret Service said the letter to Obama had been intercepted at a mail screening site on Tuesday, the same day authorities said a letter sent to Wicker also showed traces of ricin.



PHOTO: REUTERS

A towering mushroom-like plume of smoke is caught on camera by a resident in West, Texas, following an explosion at a fertilizer factory in USA. Inset, a wounded man taking treatment. Rescuers launched a door-to-door search for victims after the massive explosion killed as many as 15 people and leveled much of this small Texas town. More story and photo on page 20.

West to pay for supporting Qaeda

Says Syria's Assad; Israel PM threatens to block weapons to rebels

AFP, Damascus

President Bashar al-Assad warned on Wednesday the West that it will pay a heavy price for its alleged support of al-Qaeda in Syria and said his regime's defeat is not an option.

Assad, whose regime has been battling an uprising since March 2011, reiterated in an interview with official television Al-Ikhbariya his long-held claim that the roots of Syria's conflict lie in a foreign-backed conspiracy.

He also warned the conflict could spill over into Jordan, and that there would be no dialogue with the exiled opposition.

"The West has paid heavily for funding al-Qaeda in its early stages in Afghanistan. Today it is doing the same in Syria, Libya and other places,

and will pay a heavy price in the heart of Europe and the United States," Assad said.

Last week, the jihadist rebel group Al-Nusra Front pledged allegiance to al-Qaeda chief Ayman al-Zawahiri, who had previously urged rebels to establish an Islamic state in Syria.

The UN says more than 70,000 people have been killed in Syria over the past two years in a conflict that broke out after the regime unleashed a brutal crackdown on a popular uprising that later morphed into an insurgency.

Assad did not spell out how he believed the West was supporting al-Qaeda in Syria. The United States and EU countries have been loathe to fulfill rebel requests for arms for fear they might fall into the hands of extremists.

Assad warned that a defeat of his government would spell the demise of Syria. Vowing he will not surrender, he said the Syrian people would decide whether he should stay or go, implying he might run for elections scheduled for 2014.

Meanwhile, Israel's Benjamin Netanyahu has urged caution over international calls to arm Syrian rebels and reserved the right for the Jewish state to block the supply of weapons that could be turned against it.

Speaking to the BBC, the Israeli prime minister said if advanced arms fell into the hands of Islamist militants it could redefine regional security threats.

And Jordan yesterday said it was against military intervention in neighbouring Syria.

Obama in Boston to mourn blast victims

AFP, Boston

President Barack Obama yesterday sought to console Boston after the deadly terror attack on the city's marathon as police focused their hunt on two suspects caught on video cameras.

The president and First Lady Michelle Obama attended a special inter-faith service at Boston's Cathedral of the Holy Cross with victims of Monday's double bomb attack, rescuers, and city and state leaders.

While Obama has vowed a relentless hunt for the attackers, he went to Boston with a message of "healing" to help the city past the devastation of the bombs at the race's finish line, which killed three people and wounded 180.

He also plans to meet with some of the victims of the bombings.

No arrests have been made in connection with the twin bombings that are the worst attack in the United States since the September 11, 2001 attacks.

But media reports said authorities would later release images of two suspects believed to have planted the pressure cooker bombs that sprayed nails, ball bearings and other metal fragments into the thousands-strong crowd.

No claim of responsibility has been made for the attack and the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) says it has launched a "worldwide" hunt.

N Korea lays out tough conditions for talks



PHOTO: AFP

A South Korean activist burns a caricature of North Korean leader Kim Jong-Un during a rally in Seoul yesterday.

AFP, Seoul

North Korea yesterday offered talks with South Korea and the United States, but laid out pre-conditions that Seoul dismissed as "absurd" and analysts said would do little to reduce soaring tensions.

The demands laid out by the North's main military body included the withdrawal of UN sanctions and a permanent end to South Korea-US joint military drills.

But in yesterday's statement, the North stressed it had no intention of bargaining away its nuclear weapons.

The offer followed a month of increasingly hostile exchanges between Pyongyang, Seoul and Washington that have included threats of nuclear war and precision missile strikes.

The North's conditions were swiftly rejected by South Korea which, together with the United States, has made any talks conditional on the North putting its nuclear weapons programme on the table.

"North Korea's demands are totally incomprehensible. It's absurd," foreign ministry spokesman Cho Tai-Young told reporters.

Dialogue has become the new focus of the blistering rhetorical battle that has trapped the Korean peninsula in an escalating cycle of military tensions ever since the North carried out its third nuclear test in February.

Some analysts see the North's engagement in a debate over dialogue -- no matter how unrealistic the conditions -- as a welcome shift from the apocalyptic threats that have been pouring out of Pyongyang.

But others ruled out any softening of Pyongyang's position and said those hoping for dialogue were being wilfully naive.

They argue that the North had bound itself to a course that could only end with its recognition as a nuclear power -- a status that is anathema to the United States and its allies.

The North's statement made no mention of a possible medium-range missile test -- the expectation of which has kept South Korean and US forces on heightened alert for the past week.

NEWS IN brief

Italy holds presidential election

AFP, Rome

Voting to choose Italy's new president began yesterday with a former trade unionist the frontrunner in an election which could herald the end of a two-month impasse over a new government.

If elected by lawmakers, Marini will face the unenviable task of trying to bring the bickering parties together to break a deadlock that has raised fears of instability in the eurozone's third-largest economy.

Mubarak sent back to prison

AFP, Cairo

Former Egyptian president Hosni Mubarak was transferred from a military hospital back to prison yesterday to await a retrial in May over his role in the deaths of protesters in 2011, a security source said.

Mubarak was taken by ambulance to Tora prison under heavy security escort, the source told AFP. Egypt's public prosecutor ordered Mubarak back to prison on Wednesday after his health was deemed stable.

Court upholds WikiLeaks trial secrecy

WASHINGTON

A US military court of appeals on Wednesday dismissed a lawsuit filed by journalists and a rights group seeking greater openness in the upcoming trial of WikiLeaks source Bradley Manning.

The court rejected the suit by a 3-2 vote arguing that because those filing the suit were not

Gitmo hunger strike grows

AFP, Washington

More Guantanamo detainees have joined a growing hunger strike at the reviled US military prison, with nearly a third of the 166 war-on-terror suspects participating, a spokesman said.

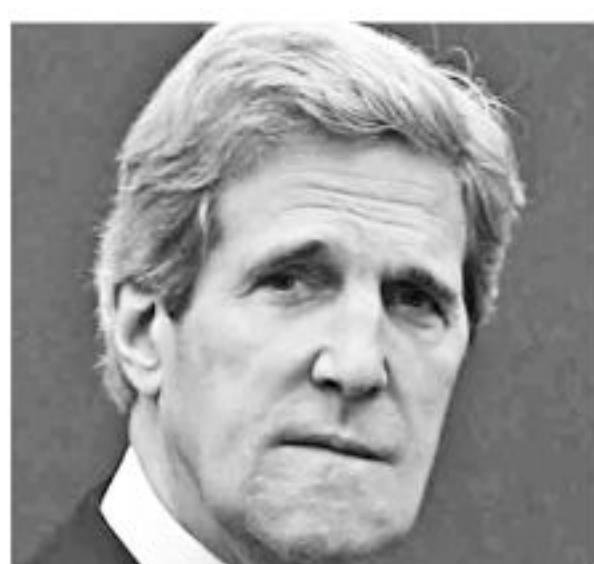
The strike began on February 6, when the men claimed prison officials searched their Korans for contraband. Officials have denied any mishandling.

UAE breaks up 'Qaeda cell' of 7

AFP, Dubai

Authorities in the United Arab Emirates have broken up an al-Qaeda cell comprising seven Arabs who were plotting attacks in the Gulf state, an official statement said yesterday.

The UAE is one of the most stable countries in the Middle East and has so far not seen any



Only 2 yrs left for Mideast deal: Kerry

AFP, Washington

US Secretary of State John Kerry warned Wednesday that time was slipping away to reach a Middle East peace deal, stressing for the first time that there may only be a year or two left.

Appearing before US lawmakers for the first time since becoming America's top diplomat in February, Kerry said his three trips to the region already were proof of his commitment to try to find a way to resume peace talks.

The Obama administration is "trying to find out what is possible," Kerry told the House Foreign Affairs Committee, as he laid out the State Department's priorities for the 2014 budget.

He stressed he had no plan so far to present to Congress "because we're in the process of working that out with the critical parties."

"But I can guarantee you that I am committed to this, because I believe the window for a two-state solution is shutting. I think we have some period of time -- a year to year-and-a-half to two years -- or it's over," Kerry warned.

Iran can destroy Israel 'alone'

AFP, Tehran

Iran's army "alone" is able to destroy Israel, army commander General Ataollah Salehi said yesterday, responding to boasts by the Jewish state that its military that could attack its archfoe on its own.

"Our message to this illegitimate regime (Israel) is the same, we do not need to utilise all of Iran's military forces," Salehi said on the sidelines of the Islamic republic's annual Army Day. "The army ... alone is able to destroy Israel."

His comments come after Israeli chief of staff Lieutenant General Benny Gantz on Tuesday said the Jewish state's military was capable of attacking Iran on its own without foreign support.

Asked in an interview on public radio if the military could wage attacks on Iran "alone" -- without the support of countries such as the United States -- Gantz replied: "Yes, absolutely."

Israel believes the Islamic republic, which has issued many bellicose statements about the Jewish state, is working to achieve a military nuclear capability and has not ruled out a military strike to prevent this happening.

US gun reform bill fails to pass

Obama slams 'shameful' defeat in Senate

AFP, Washington

Bristling with anger, President Barack Obama branded Wednesday's defeat of his gun reform drive in the US Senate as "shameful," and accused lawmakers of caving in to the powerful firearms lobby.

A deeply emotional Obama lashed out after a bid to expand background checks for gun buyers -- the last meaningful piece of his trimmed effort to retool gun laws after the Newtown school massacre -- failed to pass.

The background checks bill did attract a majority vote -- 54-46 -- but 60 senators were needed for passage.

Obama's calls for a reinstated ban on assault weapons and high-capacity magazine clips also crashed in the Senate, as expected.

Ringed by dazed and grief-stricken relatives of some of the 20 children gunned down in Connecticut in December, Obama accused the firearms lobby of lying to



PHOTO: AFP

Barack Obama hugs the mother of a Newtown shooting victim after the bill failed to pass Senate.

significant political defeat of his second term, the president said "the gun lobby and its allies willfully lied about the bill."

"All in all, this was a pretty shameful day for Washington."

Obama was clearly furious about the vote, months after vowing to use all his power to enact gun reform in the tearful aftermath of the Newtown tragedy.

Obama complained that Republicans and some of his own Democrats had simply been scared of the well-financed gun lobby.

FRENCH CORRUPTION PROBE

IMF chief faces court grilling

AFP, Paris

IMF chief Christine Lagarde is to be grilled in court by prosecutors investigating a huge state payout to a disgraced tycoon during her time as French finance minister.

Lagarde has been ordered to appear before the court at the end of May to answer questions over her handling of a dispute that resulted in 400 million euros (\$520m) being paid to Bernard Tapie, her lawyer said yesterday.

Tapie is a former politician and controversial business figure who went to prison for match-fixing during his time as president of France's biggest football club, Olympique Marseille.

Prosecutors working for the Court of Justice of the Republic (CJR), a body established to investigate cases of ministerial misconduct, suspect he received favourable treatment in return for sup-



Christine Lagarde

porting Lagarde's then boss, Nicolas Sarkozy, in the 2007 and 2012 presidential elections.

They have described Lagarde's handling of the case as "questionable" and suggested she was partly responsible for "numerous anomalies and irregularities" which could lead to charges

for complicity in fraud and misappropriation of public funds.

Lagarde's Paris home was raided by CJR officials last month but she has not yet been charged with any crime. The IMF has stood by her and her lawyer insisted she would be cleared of any wrongdoing.

Lagarde has been the head of the International Monetary Fund (IMF) since 2011, having taken over from her compatriot Dominique Strauss-Kahn who resigned after an alleged sexual assault on a New York hotel maid.

Venezuela SC rules out vote recount

AFP, Caracas

Venezuela's Supreme Court on Wednesday ruled out a recount of a disputed presidential vote won by the late Hugo Chavez's political heir Nicolas Maduro, upping the pressure on his rival to concede.

Tensions have been rising in Venezuela since Sunday's contest to replace Chavez, who died last month aged 58 after a long battle with cancer. Maduro was named the winner, narrowly defeating opposition leader Henrique Capriles.

Eight people were killed and dozens more injured in post-election violence in the oil-rich South American country on Monday -- mainly in big cities, where Capriles did well. Each side has accused the other of