

No end to Afghan war: Obama slows U.S. withdrawal

By JOSH LEDERMAN
Associated Press

WASHINGTON — President Barack Obama scrapped plans Wednesday to cut American forces in Afghanistan by half before leaving office, a dispiriting blow to his hopes of extricating the U.S. after 15 years of fighting. He said he'll leave 8,400 troops to address the country's "precarious" security situation.

Obama's new drawdown plan, announced alongside top military leaders, reinforced the likelihood that the U.S. will remain entangled in Afghanistan for years to come as America works to suppress a resurgent Taliban and train a still-struggling Afghan military. Indeed, Obama said his goal was to ensure the next president has the foundation and flexibility to fight terrorism there "as it evolves."

Obama acknowledged that few Americans might have expected U.S. troops would still be in Afghanistan this long after the 2001 invasion following the 9/11 attacks. But he said perseverance was needed to prevent al-Qaida from regrouping and the Islamic State group from spreading. He said if terrorists regain control of territory, they'll try to attack the U.S. again.

"We cannot allow that to happen. I will not allow that to happen," he declared.

Obama, who had revised the exit plan several times before, had most recently expected to leave 5,500 troops when his term ends in January, down from roughly 9,800



AP Photo/Susan Walsh
President Barack Obama makes a statement Wednesday on Afghanistan from the Roosevelt Room of the White House in Washington.

there currently. His move to slow that withdrawal reflected the Afghan military's continuing inability to secure the nation independently, demonstrated by escalating Taliban attacks that have killed scores in recent weeks.

The new plan, announced the day before Obama attends a NATO summit in Poland, marked the culmination of a delicate debate within his administration about how many troops to pull out — if any.

Though U.S. officials said Obama had accepted the Pentagon's formal recommendation of 8,400 troops, top military leaders had urged the White House to stay closer to the current 9,800. In an unusually public lobbying campaign, last month more than a dozen former

ambassadors and commanders urged him to "freeze" the current level for the rest of his term.

In the end, Obama appeared to settle on a number that would show continued progress toward drawing down without jeopardizing the mission.

Elected after vowing to end the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, Obama has struggled to deliver a legacy of leaving the U.S. less encumbered by foreign conflicts than he found it. Although he's declared U.S. combat operations over in both countries, the U.S. is still deep in conflict in both, plus major new fighting that has emerged in Syria and Libya since he took office.

In Congress, Republican leaders who favor a larger force said

Obama's new plan was preferable to the old one, but they criticized him for not keeping the full 9,800. Sen. Lindsey Graham, R-S.C., said the partial drawdown would increase the dangers for remaining troops, calling it "more a political decision by President Obama than a military one."

Yet some Democrats, frustrated by the inability to fully end the war, said they were disappointed — for the opposite reason.

"Today, the longest war in American history just got longer," said Rep. Jim McGovern, D-Mass.

Ultimately, it will be up to the next president to decide the level of U.S. involvement. Democrat Hillary Clinton has aligned herself with Obama's handling of Afghanistan, while Republican Donald Trump has remained vague and has criticized Obama for revealing too much publicly about deployment decisions.

In Kabul, Afghan President Ashraf Ghani applauded Obama's decision. A brief statement from his spokesman called it "a sign of continued partnership between our nations to fight our common enemy and strengthen regional stability."

But the Taliban said the U.S. action would only prolong the war.

"What Obama could not do with 149,000 troops, he will not be able to do with 8,400 troops," Taliban spokesman Zabiullah Mujahid said on Twitter.

At the peak, in 2010, U.S. troop levels surged to 100,000, fighting alongside forces from U.S.-allied countries.

Lynch ends email probe on Clinton

WASHINGTON (AP) — The Justice Department's investigation into Hillary Clinton's email setup has been formally closed without any criminal charges, Attorney General Loretta Lynch said Wednesday.

The decision had been expected and was largely a formality given FBI Director James Comey's recommendation a day earlier against any prosecution. Even before Comey's public statement, Lynch had said she intended to accept the recommendations of the FBI director and of her career prosecutors.

Even so, it officially closes out an FBI investigation that had dogged Clinton for the last year and proved a major distraction on the campaign trail as she emerged as the Democratic presidential front-runner.

Lynch said she met with Comey and prosecutors Wednesday and agreed that the investigation, which looked into the potential mishandling of classified information, should be concluded.

"I received and accepted their unanimous recommendation that the thorough, year-long investigation be closed and that no charges be brought against any individuals within the scope of the investigation," Lynch said in a statement.

Comey, in an unusually detailed and public accounting of the investigation Tuesday, said "no reasonable prosecutor" would pursue a criminal case and said he was advising the Justice Department against bringing any charges.

But he also rebuked Clinton, who relied exclusively on a private email server as secretary of state, and her aides for being "extremely careless" with their handling of classified information.

"There is evidence to support a conclusion that any reasonable person in Secretary Clinton's position ... should have known that an unclassified system was no place" for sensitive conversations, Comey said.

Clinton's likely general election opponent, Donald Trump, unleashed a methodical attack during a rally Wednesday in Cincinnati, contrasting her statements about the email server with what Comey said and labeling the former secretary of state "a dirty, rotten liar."

Court orders release of detained immigrant kids, not parents

By PAUL ELIAS
Associated Press

SAN FRANCISCO — A federal appeals court ruled Wednesday that Homeland Security officials must quickly release immigrant children — but not their parents — from family detention centers after being picked up crossing the border without documentation.

The San Francisco-based 9th Circuit U.S. Court of Appeals said that lengthy detentions of migrant children violated a 19-year-old legal settlement ordering their quick release after processing. Government lawyers had argued that the settlement covered only immigrant children who crossed the border unaccompanied by adult relatives. But the three-judge panel ruled that immigration officials aren't required to release the parents detained along with the children, reversing U.S. District Judge Dolly Gee's ruling last year.

Advocates seeking stricter immigration controls said they hoped

the ruling would discourage adults crossing the border illegally from exploiting children as a way to stay out of custody in the United States.

Mark Krikorian, Center for Immigration Studies executive director and an advocate for stricter border controls, said allowing the parents to be released may have encouraged illegal immigration of adults traveling with children.

"It makes using children way less attractive," he said of the most recent ruling.

The Department of Homeland reported that more than 23,000 families have been apprehended in the first five months of the year compared to about 13,400 in 2015 and around 30,600 in 2014. Most are from Honduras, El Salvador or Guatemala.

Melissa Crow, legal director of the American Immigration Council, said she was "somewhat disappointed" with the ruling because the goal of the litigation was to shield the children from unfair and inhumane treatment.

Separating children and parents still treats the children unfairly.

"The court misses the point," Crow said.

Since Gee's ruling, immigration officials have released hundreds of families and have been holding newly arriving families for only short durations. Following that earlier ruling, the number of immigrant families has again been on the rise.

At issue are two detention centers in Texas that were built after a flood of immigrants in summer 2014 overwhelmed border authorities. The government poured millions of dollars into the two large detention centers after tens of thousands of immigrant families, mostly mothers with children from Central America, crossed the Rio Grande into the U.S. that year. Many have petitioned for asylum after fleeing gang and domestic violence back home.

A Homeland Security official told a group of immigration advocates in September 2014 that the jails were

opened in part because roughly 70 percent of immigrant families released after being caught at the border didn't report to immigration authorities as ordered.

Critics of the jails complained that they were not suited for children and later went to federal court to argue that the government was violating a decades old agreement about how immigrant children would be treated.

The Department of Homeland Security didn't return phone and email inquiries over how it planned to proceed.

If the government decides to start detaining parents after releasing their children, the children would be treated as unaccompanied minors. That means they would be turned over to the Department of Health and Human Services and placed either with relatives or possibly a foster family in the United States while they wait for DHS or a judge to decide if they will be allowed to stay in the United States.

Navy SEAL instructor dunked trainee before death

SAN DIEGO (AP) — His lips turning blue and his face purple, the Navy SEAL trainee dressed in full gear was struggling to tread water in a giant pool when his instructor pushed him underwater at least twice — actions a medical examiner ruled Wednesday made his death a homicide, not an accident.

The homicide ruling on the May 6 drowning of 21-year-old Seaman James Derek Lovelace raises questions about the safety of the grueling training that produces the U.S. military's most elite warfighters. It also raises questions about where the line is drawn between what is considered to be rigorous training designed to weed out the weakest and what is abuse that leads to a homicide.

Lovelace, of Crestview, Florida, was in his first week of a six-month program in Coronado, near San Diego. An autopsy found he drowned. The report noted he also had a heart abnormality but said the problem was only a contributing factor.

The homicide ruling does not necessarily mean a crime occurred, and the instructor has not been charged.

The medical examiner said some may consider the death an accident, especially in a "rigorous training program that was meant to simulate an 'adverse' environment."

But "it is our opinion that the actions, and inactions, of the instructors and other individuals involved were excessive and directly contributed to the death," the report said.

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