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World News Briefs

Death Toll Hits 15 in California Mudslides; Search Goes On

MONTECITO, Calif. (AP) — The death toll from the mudslides that struck Southern California climbed to 15 on Wednesday as rescue crews searched for anyone trapped, injured or dead in the onslaught that smashed homes and swept away cars.

The drenching rainstorm that triggered the disaster cleared out and was no longer a hindrance as searchers made their way across a landscape strewn with boulders and covered shoulder-high in places with mud the consistency of wet cement.

“Right now our assets are focused on determining if anyone is still alive in any of those structures that have been damaged,” Santa Barbara County Sheriff Bill Brown said.

He said that several dozen homes were destroyed or severely damaged, and that there are probably many more in similar condition in areas still inaccessible.

At least 15 people were confirmed dead, Santa Barbara County spokeswoman Yanneris Muniz said early Wednesday as the search continued through the night.

7-Eleven Probe Opens New Front on Immigration

LOS ANGELES (AP) — U.S. immigration agents descended on dozens of 7-Eleven stores before dawn Wednesday to open employment audits and interview workers in what officials described as the largest operation against an employer under Donald Trump’s presidency.

Agents targeted about 100 stores nationwide, broadening an investigation that began with a 4-year-old case against a franchisee on New York’s Long Island. The audits could lead to criminal charges or fines over the stores’ hiring practices.

The action appears to open a new front in Trump’s sharp expansion of immigration enforcement, which has already brought a 40 percent increase in deportation arrests and plans to spend billions of dollars on a border wall with Mexico. Hardliners have been pressing for a tougher stance on employers.

Derek Benner, a top official at U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement, told The Associated Press that Wednesday’s operation was “the first of many” and “a harbinger of what’s to come” for employers. He said there would be more employment audits and investigations, though there is no numerical goal.

“This is what we’re gearing up for this year and what you’re going to see more and more of is these large-scale compliance inspections, just for starters. From there, we will look at whether these cases warrant an administrative posture or criminal investigation,” said Benner, acting head of ICE’s Homeland Security Investigations, which oversees cases against employers.

“It’s not going to be limited to large companies or any particular industry, big medium and small,” he said. “It’s going to be inclusive of everything that we see out there.”

Democratic Report Warns of Russian Meddling Across Europe

WASHINGTON (AP) — A new report by



AP PHOTO/DANIEL DREIFUSS

A member of the Long Beach Search and Rescue team looks for survivors in a car in Montecito, Calif., Tuesday, Jan. 9, 2018. Several homes were swept away before dawn Tuesday when mud and debris roared into neighborhoods in Montecito from hillsides stripped of vegetation during a recent wildfire.

Senate Democrats warns of deepening Russian interference throughout Europe and concludes that even as some Western democracies have responded with aggressive countermeasures, President Donald Trump has offered no strategic plan to bolster their efforts or safeguard the U.S. from again falling victim to the Kremlin’s systematic meddling.

The report commissioned by the top Democrat on the Senate Foreign Relations Committee is the first from Congress to comprehensively detail Russian efforts to undermine democracies since the 2016 presidential election. It wastes no time in calling out Trump personally for what it describes as a failure to respond to Russia’s mounting destabilization activities in the U.S. and worldwide. The report was obtained by The Associated Press in advance of its public release Wednesday.

“Never before has a U.S. president so clearly ignored such a grave and growing threat to U.S. national security,” the report warns.

No Republicans on the committee signed on to the 200-plus page report released by Sen. Ben Cardin of Maryland. But even without GOP backing, the report’s recounting of Russian operations in 19 European nations foreshadows the still-unpublished Senate Intelligence Committee’s bipartisan inquiry into Russia’s role during the 2016 U.S. presidential election.

Cardin said in a statement that he commissioned the report so Americans can see the “true scope and scale” of Russian President Vladimir Putin’s efforts to undermine democracy.

Trump Lashes Out at Feinstein for Releasing Transcript

WASHINGTON (AP) — President Donald Trump is lashing out at Sen. Dianne Feinstein for releasing the transcript of an interview with the co-founder of a political opposition firm that commissioned a dossier of allegations about Trump’s presidential campaign and Russia.

Trump calls the California Democrat “Sneaky Dianne Feinstein” on Twitter Wednesday. He says she released the testimony “totally without authorization.”

Adds Trump: “Must have tough Primary!”

Feinstein on Tuesday released transcript from the Senate Judiciary Committee’s August interview with Glenn Simpson, of Fusion GPS. Feinstein had the ability to release the transcripts as the top Democrat on the committee, and her staff helped conduct the interview with Simpson.

Trump also repeated that the investigation into Russian interference in the 2016 U.S. election is a “Witch Hunt” and says “Republicans should finally take control!”

Deaths Threats Cause Lockdown After Teacher Handcuffed Video

NEW ORLEANS (AP) — A Louisiana school

board’s office went on temporary lockdown after getting death threats from around the world in response to widely viewed video of a teacher screaming while being handcuffed at a school board meeting.

The threats have come from as far away as South America, Australia and England, as well as other U.S. states, Vermilion Parish School Board President Anthony Fontana told *The Advertiser* newspaper Tuesday. He said they’ve been reported to the FBI and local police.

Middle-school English teacher Deyshia Hargrave was removed from Monday night’s meeting, forcibly handcuffed and jailed after questioning pay policies during a public comment period. The teacher’s union and the ACLU are investigating and two board members are complaining that the board treats women unfairly.

A video posted by KATC-TV shows Hargrave complying with a city marshal’s orders to leave the Vermilion Parish School Board meeting in Abbeville, west of New Orleans. Next, she is seen on the hallway floor, screaming as the marshal handcuffs her hands behind her back.

“Stop resisting,” the marshal says, hustling Hargrave toward an exit after lifting her to her feet.

Russia Urges Turkey to Help Stop Rebel Raids in Syria

MOSCOW (AP) — The Russian military has urged its Turkish counterparts to tighten monitoring of opposition in northern Syria in the wake of a drone attack on Russian military bases in the country.

Russia’s Defense Ministry said its forces repelled a series of drone attacks Saturday, adding that out of the 13 drones involved, seven were shot down and six were forced to land without causing any damage.

The official military daily Krasnaya Zvezda said the ministry sent letters to the Turkish military, asking it to deploy observers to Syria’s northern province of Idlib to ensure that rebels don’t launch more attacks.

Russia has backed Syrian President Bashar Assad while Turkey has supported his foes, but they struck a deal last year to set up de-escalation zones in Syria, helping reduce fighting.

Cold Snap Exposes Cracks in Upkeep of Timeworn Schools

BALTIMORE (AP) — The recent spell of cold weather exposed the poor state of school buildings in many big-city districts, including Baltimore, where the failure of heating systems closed dozens of institutions after children were left shivering in frigid classrooms.

Schools were challenged in other cities affected by the cold snap, including Philadelphia and Bridgeport, Connecticut’s largest city, as pipes burst, heating units froze and other pieces of decades-old infrastructure gave out under the strain of record-breaking cold.

It’s no wonder; investment in school construction and maintenance has been falling steadily since the recession, according to an analysis by The Associated Press.

Experts who have been sounding alarms about the state of many public school buildings say the problems that struck last week are a direct result of years of inadequate funding for basic upkeep. The need is especially great in urban centers where older buildings serve poorer children and maintenance is often put off until it becomes an exponentially more costly emergency repair, said Mary Filardo, executive director of the nonprofit 21st Century School Fund, which advocates for better facilities.

“The systems are vulnerable because they’re old and they’re well beyond their useful life, and so they fail,” Filardo said.

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