

MEDAL OF VALOR



AP Photo/Carolyn Kaster
President Barack Obama shakes hands with Officer Niel Johnson of the North Miami Police Department after presenting him with the Medal of Valor during a ceremony Monday in the East Room of the White House in Washington.

Obama says U.S. must heed police

By JOSH LEDERMAN
Associated Press

WASHINGTON — President Barack Obama called on the nation Monday to support and listen to its law enforcement officers as he bestowed the Medal of Valor on 13 officers who risked their lives to save others.

In a ceremony in the East Room, Obama draped the purple-and-gold ribbons around the necks of officers who intervened in shooting rampages, hostage situations and an armed robbery. He pledged to keep working toward a bipartisan overhaul to make the criminal justice system fairer, smarter and more effective so that officers are well-equipped to enforce the country's laws.

"We can show our respect by listening to you, learning from you, giving you the resources that you need to do your jobs," Obama said. "Our country needs that right now."

Three Santa Monica, California, officers — Jason Salas, Robert Sparks and Capt. Raymond Bottenfield — were honored for their response to a 2013 rampage on a community college campus that left five people dead. Confronting 23-year-old gunman John Zawahri in the campus library, the officers shot and killed him when he pointed his assault weapon at them.

Obama also honored Gregory Stevens of suburban Dallas, who exchanged gunfire with two armed men outside an exhibit hall holding a provocative contest for caricatures of the Prophet Muhammad. Both gunmen were killed, heading off what investigators suspected was a planned mass shooting.

The Medal of Valor ceremony comes amid a simmering public debate about police tactics and racial disparities in the justice system. Obama has walked a careful line on the issue — expressing support for most law

enforcement officials, while also endorsing protesters' complaints about racial profiling and mistreatment by police.

In his remarks on Monday, Obama steered that conversation toward his push for a sentencing overhaul and other changes to the justice system, an effort that has found backing in both camps.

Obama said he holds out hope that legislation can be passed this year despite the heavily politicized climate ahead of the November election. The need for change has been a rare point of common ground between Democrats and Republicans, and though momentum appeared to have sputtered earlier this year, a new Senate proposal has raised hopes that the issue could be successfully revived.

One of those honored, Police Maj. David Huff of Midwest City, Oklahoma, saved a 2-year-old girl being held at knifepoint after negotiations with her captor deteriorated.

"Obviously, the last few moments were tense. There was a countdown going on," Huff told reporters after the ceremony. "There was just no way I was going to let that little child get hurt."

Attorney General Loretta Lynch, the nation's top law enforcement official, said there were no words or medals that could begin to pay the debt the country owes the officers.

"It has often been said that the price of freedom is constant vigilance," Lynch said. "Know this: they pay that price on our behalf."

One Philadelphia officer died from a gunshot wound and was honored posthumously. Sgt. Robert Wilson III drew fire from assailants during a robbery while saving store employees and customers. Wilson's family accepted the award on his behalf.

"We honor those who didn't come home," the president said.

Bison euthanized after tourists take it from herd

By AMY BETH HANSON
Associated Press

HELENA, Mont. — A bison calf that tourists loaded into their vehicle at Yellowstone National Park because they were concerned for its welfare could not be reunited with its herd and had to be euthanized, park officials said Monday as they reasserted the importance of avoiding wildlife.

The incident last week and several other recent cases led to fresh warnings that park rules require visitors to stay at least 25 yards from all wildlife and 100 yards from bears and wolves.

Visitors brought the newborn calf to a park facility on May 9, which officials called a dangerous move because adult bison are protective and will attack to defend their young. Rangers took the animal back to where it was picked up, but they could not get it back with the herd after several tries.

"The bison calf was later euthanized because it was abandoned and causing a dangerous situation by continually approaching people and cars along the roadway," the park said in a statement.

The visitors were cited for touching park wildlife and fined \$110, Yellowstone spokeswoman Charissa Reid said. She declined to name the visitors or issue a copy of the citation amid the investigation.

In another recent high-profile case, a woman was seen on video trying to pet an adult bison as it rested on the boardwalk around Old Faithful. In another, tourists posed for photos dangerously close to bison that had caused a traffic jam on a road.

Five visitors were seriously injured last year after getting too close to the massive animals.

Approaching wildlife also can affect their well-being and survival, possibly causing mothers to reject their offspring, park officials said.

Such reminders are included on Yellowstone's website, in information handed to visitors as they come in and on signs throughout the park, Reid said.

"This year we've added translations of the safety signage and provide park newspaper translations in a number of different languages," she said in a statement.

Short-handed Supreme Court dodges birth control decision

By MARK SHERMAN
Associated Press

WASHINGTON — A short-handed Supreme Court dodged but kept alive a legal challenge Monday from faith-based groups over the Obama administration's rules for cost-free access to birth control. It was the latest sign of justices struggling to find a majority for cases taken up before Justice Antonin Scalia's death.

The unsigned, unanimous opinion paved a way out of a politically thorny dispute for the eight-member court, which has split twice in 4-4 ties since the conservative jurist's death in February. Yet it hardly settled the matter, even if President Barack Obama said the "practical effect is right now that women will still continue to be able to get contraception."

Deciding nothing but perhaps buying time, the justices asked lower courts to take another look at the issue in search of a compromise. The case concerns the administration's arrangement for sparing faith-based groups from paying the birth control costs of women covered under their health plans.

"The court expresses no view on the merits of the cases," the justices wrote, ending a major confrontation over Obama's health care law with a whimper. The matter almost certainly will not return to the Supreme Court before the 2016 presidential election, and perhaps not until a new justice is confirmed to take Scalia's seat, if at all.

The outcome suggested the court lacked a majority, underscoring the effect of Scalia's absence. And it pointed to the prospect of other cases ending in a tie among the 31 that remain unresolved.

For now, the government will be able to continue ensuring that women



AP Photo/Pablo Martinez Monsivais, File
In this June 30, 2014 file photo, demonstrators react to hearing the Supreme Court's decision on the Hobby Lobby birth control case outside the Supreme Court in Washington. The court asked lower courts to take another look at the issue in a search for a compromise.

Carbon-cutting plan could be on fast-track to Supreme Court

WASHINGTON (AP) — The full appeals court in Washington will hear arguments in the legal fight over President Barack Obama's plan to curtail greenhouse gas emissions, potentially accelerating the case's path to the Supreme Court.

The United States Court of Appeals for the District of Columbia Circuit issued an order Monday scheduling oral arguments on the legality of the Clean Power Plan for September 27.

A three-judge panel had been scheduled to hear the case June 2, but whichever side lost was considered likely to seek a review by the full appeals court. By using its discretion to skip a step, the appeals judges are potentially shaving months off the time before the case could be heard by the high court.

It is rare for an appeals court to hold such an "en banc" review prior to the smaller panel's decision, but procedural rules allow it when the case at issue "involves a question of exceptional importance."

About two dozen mostly GOP-led states sued the Environmental Protection Agency over the new carbon-cutting regulations, which aim to slow climate change by reducing power-plant emissions by one-third by 2030. More than 100 conservative advocacy groups, electric utilities and coal mining companies have also filed suit.

If the Clean Power Plan were to be struck down in court, it would become more difficult for the United States to meet its goals for cutting carbon emissions under the landmark international climate treaty signed in Paris at the end of last year. The U.S. is the world's largest emitter of harmful greenhouse gases.

covered by faith-based colleges and charities, won't face fines for not adhering to administration procedures for objecting to birth control benefits. But the groups, which include not-for-profit

Compliance would violate their religious beliefs, the groups argued, because they would be pushing responsibility for providing birth control onto their insurers or insurance administrators.

The administration said the buffer shielded groups from paying for birth control if they objected on moral grounds. It said a ruling for the groups would disadvantage tens of thousands of women.

"They are getting health insurance, and we are properly accommodating religious institutions who have objections," Obama said in an interview Monday with BuzzFeed.

White House spokesman Josh Earnest reiterated demands for Congress to confirm Scalia's successor. Obama has nominated Judge Merrick Garland.

But opponents claimed victory Monday, too.

The decision is "great news for religious organizations who will now have a chance to make their case to the lower courts," Carrie Severino, Judicial Crisis Network's chief counsel, said. Severino, who opposes Garland's confirmation, said the ruling underscores the stakes in choosing the next justice.

When the justices heard arguments in March, they appeared evenly divided. The court then ordered the two sides to file a new and unusual round of legal briefs in search of a compromise, perhaps by making contraceptive coverage available without requiring a notice of objection.

Eight appeals courts nationwide have sided with the administration; four of those were challenged in the case before the Supreme Court. One court has ruled for the groups so far.

The justices threw out all those rulings Monday. Only groups that have challenged the rules are exempt at the moment. Even with them,

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