

NM NEWS & VIEWS FOR TUESDAY, AUGUST 31, 2010
THIS IS THE WORLD WE LIVE IN!

BREAKING NEWS:

Obama declares 'combat mission in Iraq has ended':

Washington -- President Obama declared that "the American combat mission in Iraq has ended" in his primetime address Tuesday, according to excerpts released before the speech.

"Operation Iraqi Freedom is over, and the Iraqi people now have lead responsibility for the security of their country," he said, according to the excerpts.

The president addressed the economic crisis in America by talking about how restoring prosperity at home is critical to maintaining the nation's strength abroad. Obama said getting the economy back on track is his "central responsibility as president," according to the excerpts.

"Today, our most urgent task is to restore our economy, and put the millions of Americans who have lost their jobs back to work," the president said.

Obama said ending the war in Iraq is in the United States' best interest and "now, it is time to turn the page."

"Through this remarkable chapter in the history of the United States and Iraq, we have met our responsibility," the excerpts said.

Obama also planned to ignore Republican suggestions that he acknowledge a personal mistake and give credit to former President George W. Bush for executing the 2007 troop surge, according to two senior administration officials familiar with the speech.

Obama, then a senator, and other Democratic senators at the time opposed the surge.

Senior administration officials said the president wanted his Iraq address to be more forward-looking and thus was not planning to spend any time in the 15- to 20-minute speech looking backward at the divisive 2007 congressional debate over whether Bush should surge more troops into Iraq.

Ignoring a replay of that 2007 debate could be politically advantageous for Obama, given the fact that top Republicans like House Minority Leader John

Boehner earlier blasted the president for opposing the surge.

"One lawmaker rejected the idea that the surge would reduce violence in Iraq, saying -- and again I'm quoting -- 'in fact, I think it will do the reverse,'" Boehner, R-Ohio, said in reference to Obama during a speech to the American Legion convention in Milwaukee.

GOP claims Iraq success despite Obama

Meanwhile, Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell, R-Kentucky, delivered a speech suggesting Bush deserves more credit for reaching this milestone.

"You might recall that the surge wasn't very popular when it was announced," McConnell said. "You might also recall that one of its biggest critics was the current president. So it makes it easier to talk about fulfilling a campaign promise to wind down our operations in Iraq when the previous administration signs the security agreement with Iraq to end our overall presence there."

Asked about the Republican attacks on Obama, one senior administration official said flatly: "Who cares?"

This official explained the president was more interested in focusing on acknowledging the combat mission is coming to end and thanking U.S. troops for their hard work to "show the world America has the determination to finish the job" after a long conflict.

A second senior administration official added the president wanted to use the address in part to turn the nation's attention to ratcheting up combat operations in Afghanistan. This official noted Obama spent a lot of time during the 2008 campaign vowing not only to bring home combat troops in Iraq within 16 months of taking office, but also said he wanted to finally give Afghanistan the resources it needed.

"This is what he promised in the campaign: responsibly ending the war in Iraq, and then using our resources to bring the fight directly to al Qaeda and the Taliban in Afghanistan," said the senior official.

During a visit with U.S. troops at Fort Bliss, Texas, earlier on Tuesday, Obama signaled he would spend a good chunk of his speech preparing the nation for heavier casualties and "heartbreak" in Afghanistan in the days ahead as new commanding Gen. David Petraeus takes the fight directly to the enemy.

"We also have a very tough fight in Afghanistan," Obama said. "It's going to be a tough slog."

Obama told the troops at Fort Bliss that his address will not be anything close to the "Mission Accomplished" moment his predecessor had.

"It is not going to be a victory lap," Obama said. "We still have a lot of work to do."

Fort Bliss has supplied soldiers to Iraq at all stages of the seven-year war and is still sending troops to the region as part of the 50,000-troop contingent that is staying in Iraq.

The president, who opposed the start of the war while he was serving as a state senator in Illinois, acknowledged there has long been debate about the merits of the conflict, but he said the focus now should be on the sacrifice of U.S. troops.

Al-Maliki marks U.S. end to Iraq combat mission in national address

"The one thing we don't argue about is we have the finest fighting force in the history of the world," Obama said. "America is more secure" because of their service.

Obama said the nation cannot forget about the war in Afghanistan, and it will be a heavy focus of Tuesday night's speech, his second from the Oval Office. The first was about the Gulf oil disaster in early June.

Oval Office setting is message behind the message

"We also have a very tough fight in Afghanistan," Obama said. "It's going to be a tough slog."

White House aides said Obama called Bush from aboard Air Force One on his way to Texas, but they declined to provide specifics about the call.

The August 31 drawdown and end to the U.S. combat phase is a new page in what has been a controversial seven-year conflict. Weapons of mass destruction, a major justification by the Bush administration for going to war, were never found. Saddam Hussein was toppled along with his massive Baghdad statue, but sectarian violence soon erupted.

The war in Iraq has so far claimed the lives of more than 4,400 U.S. troops.

Mobile meth lab forces lockdown of buildings:

The discovery of a mobile methamphetamine lab forced the lockdown of two buildings near Albuquerque's Coronado Mall Tuesday morning.

Police say they pulled over a van along the 2400 block of Louisiana Boulevard NE just before 4 a.m. They say that's when the driver made a dangerous confession.

"The driver of the vehicle admitted there was a methamphetamine lab inside the vehicle," said Albuquerque police Sergeant Patrick Fickel.

Realizing the immediate risk to police and the public, police blocked off the entire area around the First Bank Building, including Lewis University next door.

"We called everybody this morning and let them know, don't come to work until they get more information," Mark Butcher, the property manager for the First Bank Building.

Barbara Aragon was among the 200 First Bank employees on her way to work when she saw police blocking her way.

"What if they hadn't discovered it before we went in? What could have happened?" asked Aragon.

Police say the risk was especially high for anybody in the area because of the type of chemicals used in the mobile meth lab.

"It is an anhydrous lab, which is a very dangerous lab because it can be very explosive if mixed with moisture," said Sergeant Fickel.

A special hazardous materials team was called in to help safely dispose of the chemicals.

The area remained closed off for several hours. The buildings were reopened by mid-morning.

The two people in the van were detained for questioning and subsequently one was arrested. Peter Loiacono, 38, is charged with drug manufacturing and trafficking. A gun was also found during the search of the van and if the suspect is found to be a felon he could additionally face charges of firearm possession.

Former lab employee jailed for stolen gold:

A former Los Alamos National Lab employee has been sentenced after pleading guilty to federal charges for stealing radioactive gold from his workplace.

Alex Maestas could have faced up to 30 years in prison for the crime but instead received a sentence of 366 days by Albuquerque District Court Judge C. Hansen on Tuesday.

Maestas, who worked at the lab's plutonium-processing facility in March of 2009, was caught while trying to smuggle a two ounce piece of gold in a plastic sandwich bag hidden in his fist.

Lab officials say the gold, worth \$2000, was contaminated by small amounts of radioactive material which was detected by sensors and triggered an alarm.

Maestas, 46, pleaded guilty to theft of government property in January.

Arrest made in threats against Santa Fe judge:

Santa Fe County Sheriff's investigators have arrested the person they believe made some threats to shoot a District Court judge Monday in Santa Fe.

Investigators say they found 22-year-old Steven Anthony Martinez hiding in some bushes near his home in Chimayo.

A tip led deputies to Martinez.

Martinez is suspected of making threatening calls to 911 and to Judge Michael Vigil's office.

Sheriff Greg Solano says in the 911 call, the caller stated that someone was heading down to court to shoot a judge.

Authorities then locked down District and Federal Court, along with the nearby Carlos Gilbert Elementary School.

Solano tells Eyewitness News 4 he suspects Martinez might have made the threats to avoid being sentenced Monday for drug possession and burglary.

Martinez was charged on Tuesday with misdemeanor counts of using a telephone to intimidate and also resisting an officer. He is being held on \$1 million bond.

Lawsuits cost ABQ taxpayers \$8M:

The City of Albuquerque paid about \$8 million in lawsuit claims in the past year.

Claims include people who sued for falling on faulty sidewalks, injuries at skate parks, and a city employee who pinched a minor.

After reviewing legal reports detailing settlement pay-outs, Eyewitness News 4 also found Mayor Richard Berry's administration reversed the controversial no-settlement policy on claims filed against the police department set under previous mayor Martin Chavez.

The Chavez administration believed the no-settlement policy involving claims against police cut down on frivolous lawsuits.

City Attorney Rob Perry told Eyewitness News 4 settling some cases involving police actually saves taxpayers money, because juries tend to award huge monetary damages.

"The judges didn't like it because it clogged up the court system. The city got dinged for a lot of cases that went trial and had massive judgments, and it really didn't acknowledge when the city was wrong on a moral perspective," Perry said of the no-settlement policy.

In one case the city recently settled that was filed against the police department was from a man who claimed police never returned his jewelry after an arrest. Court documents show the man claimed the jewelry was worth \$43,000. The city settled with a \$30,000 pay-out, according to legal reports.

Perry cited the case of Albuquerque police officer Sam Costales as an example of a damaging jury award the city refused to settle. In that case, Officer Costales was awarded more than \$600,000 claiming he was retaliated against for testifying against deputies in a case in which they arrested Al Unser Sr.

Other cases the city settled:

A woman fell on a faulty sidewalk. -- Settlement: \$65,000.00

A "minor" fell at a skate park and received a head injury. -- Settlement: \$81,000.00

A city employee pinched a minor. -- Settlement: \$30,000.00

APD wrongful death of unborn child -- Settlement: \$685,000.00

A man fell over a "wire" in a city parking lot. -- Settlement: \$100,000.00

Other claims include cases of failing traffic signals, and fatal car crashes involving

city employees.

Perry says a committee of city attorneys and other city leaders review each case to determine if a settlement is in the best interests of the taxpayer.

Court says gay couples can't divorce in Texas:

DALLAS - A Texas appeals court said Tuesday that gay couples legally married in other states cannot get a divorce in Texas, where same-sex marriage is banned.

The 5th Texas Court of Appeals ruled that a Dallas district court judge didn't have the authority to hear a divorce case involving two Dallas men who married in Massachusetts in 2006.

The state had appealed after Judge Tena Callahan said she did have jurisdiction and dismissed its attempt to intervene.

Callahan also ruled that the state couldn't limit marriage to a man and a woman, and the appeals court overturned that ruling as well, saying Texas' ban on same-sex marriage was constitutional.

"A person does not and cannot seek a divorce without simultaneously asserting the existence and validity of a lawful marriage," Justice Kerry P. Fitzgerald wrote on behalf of the appeals court. "Texas law, as embodied in our constitution and statutes, requires that a valid marriage must be a union of one man and one woman, and only when a union comprises one man and one woman can there be a divorce under Texas law."

The appeals court ordered the case be sent back to Callahan, who must vacate her order.

The men, known only as J.B. and H.B. in court filings, separated amicably two years after getting married.

J.B.'s attorney, Peter Schulte, has said the two men had no children and weren't arguing over how to divide their property, they simply wanted an official divorce.

Schulte said Tuesday they had not yet decided whether to appeal the ruling to the Texas Supreme Court.

"We obviously disagree with the justices' ruling, but we respect the process and respect the court," Schulte said.

The Texas Attorney General's Office had argued before the three-judge appeals court in April that the couple was not eligible for a divorce in Texas because the state didn't recognize their marriage. Jody Scheske, another lawyer for J.B., argued that his client was entitled to a divorce because he had a valid marriage.

The appeals court agreed with Attorney General Greg Abbott that such unions could be dissolved by having the marriage declared void.

Among reasons J.B. argued for a divorce instead of a voidance were that spousal support and community property laws only apply in divorce cases. The appeals court said those issues are policy arguments that must be addressed by the Legislature.

Very Funny Church Signs:

Who said the Catholic Church does not have a sense of humor? Check out these funny roadside church signs.

How do we make holy water? We boil the hell out of it!

Cars are not the only thing recalled by their maker

Swallowing pride will never give you indigestion

How will you spend eternity — Smoking or non-smoking?

Come in and let us prepare you for your finals

There are some questions that can't be answered by Google

Staying in bed shouting Oh God! does not constitute going to church

FRANK HALEY'S KKIM NEWS:

>>Education Department Employees Told To Attend Sharpton Rally

(Washington, DC) -- Education Secretary Arne Duncan sent an e-mail urging government employees to attend last weekend's Washington, DC rally organized by the Reverend Al Sharpton. The "Washington Examiner" reports the e-mail went out to more than four-thousand employees of the Department of Education. Sharpton organized Saturday's "Reclaim the Dream" rally as a

rebuttal to conservative TV commentator Glenn Beck's "Restoring Honor" event. Both fell on the anniversary of Martin Luther King, Jr.'s "I Have A Dream" speech.

>>Roddick Celebrates Birthday With Day One U.S. Open Win

(Flushing Meadows, NY) -- Ninth-seeded American Andy Roddick celebrated his 28th birthday with an opening-day win at the U.S. Open yesterday. Roddick was a 6-3, 6-2, 6-2 winner over Frenchman Stephane Robert at Flushing Meadows on Day One of the final Grand Slam of the season. Five-time U.S. Open champ Roger Federer dispatched Argentina's Brian Dabul 6-1, 6-4, 6-2. For the women, Belgian Kim Clijsters [[CLY-sters]] opened her defense run at Flushing Meadows with a 6-0, 7-5 win over Greta Arn of Hungary. Third-seeded Venus Williams was a 6-4, 6-1 winner over Roberta Vinci.

>>Heavy Drinkers Live Longer Than Nondrinkers

(Austin, TX) -- There may be a surprising upside to drinking a lot of alcohol. A two-decade study involving more than 18-hundred participants between the ages of 55 and 65 found higher mortality rates among nondrinkers than among heavy drinkers. The University of Texas at Austin researchers who conducted the study said its not clear why abstaining from alcohol increases the risk of dying prematurely. Moderate drinkers had the lowest overall mortality rates. The findings are published in the journal "Alcoholism: Clinical and Experimental Research."

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(Washington, DC) -- The U.S. Secretary of Education asked government employees to attend last weekend's Washington, DC rally organized by the Reverend Al Sharpton. The "Washington Examiner" reports Secretary Arne Duncan sent an e-mail to more than four-thousand employees of the Department of Education, encouraging them to attend the event. The "Examiner" found out about the e-mail from a Department of Education employee who didn't feel comfortable with Duncan's request. Sharpton organized Saturday's "Reclaim the Dream" rally as a rebuttal to conservative TV commentator Glenn Beck's "Restoring Honor" event. Both events fell on the 47th anniversary of Martin Luther King, Jr.'s "I Have A Dream" speech.

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>>Mexican Officials Fire Hundreds Of Police Officers

(Mexico City) -- In a move to curb widespread corruption, Mexican officials fire nearly ten-percent of its federal police force. The country's deputy police chief says hundreds of officers were fired because they didn't do what's expected of them by federal police law. A police spokesman stated that failed drug, lie detector or vision tests were the reasons behind some of the firings. However, the spokesman would not say if any of the officers who were let go were suspected of corruption. Before the massive firings Monday, there were 34-thousand-500 federal police officers in Mexico. About 32-hundred of them were fired.

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(Washington, DC) -- A lawsuit seeks to stop the Obama administration from assassinating U.S. citizens who have ties to terror groups. The American Civil Liberties Union and the Center for Constitutional Rights filed a federal lawsuit Monday seeking an injunction against so-called targeted killings. The civil rights groups also want the administration to reveal what criteria it uses to pick its targets. They allege the program violates both the U.S. Constitution and international law.

The two groups are suing on behalf of Nasser al-Awlaki, the father of a Muslim cleric who fled the U.S. for Yemen in 2001. Anwar al-Maliki has been linked to the attempted bombing of a commercial jetliner on Christmas Day and the shooting rampage at Fort Hood, Texas last November. The Central Intelligence Agency received the go-ahead to assassinate the younger al-Maliki earlier this year. A CIA spokesman said that all the agency's operations "comply with applicable laws."

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>>Man Calls 911, Threatens To Kill Judge

(Santa Fe, NM) -- Authorities have arrested a man they say threatened to kill a Santa Fe judge yesterday. Investigators said Steven Anthony Martinez called 9-1-1 yesterday for a second time and claimed he was going to kill a judge. Police then surrounded the Santa Fe District Courthouse and forced the building's evacuation and a lockdown of a nearby school. Police say they have evidence that Martinez actually showed up at the courthouse after making the calls but authorities already had the building closed down.

>>Woman Changes Stabbing Story

(Albuquerque, NM) -- A woman who claimed she stabbed a man in self defense yesterday later recanted her story to police. Police officials said 25-year-old

Tasia Paz reported that a man named Ben Heartleigh showed up at her home in South Valley, New Mexico and attempted to attack her. Authorities said Paz admitted she had been drinking with Heartleigh and an unidentified male and that she stabbed Heartleigh to protect her boyfriend who is on probation. Paz has been charged with aggravated battery with a deadly weapon.

>>Ever Ready Oil Stations Re-Open In New Mexico

(Albuquerque, NM) -- Twenty-nine Ever Ready Oil gas stations in New Mexico have reopened after they were shut down in May. A family that owns about ten of the former Ever Ready stations in Albuquerque has signed contracts to take over most of the stations. According to television station KOAT, the stations were being liquidated after former owner Charles Ochs filed for bankruptcy.

>>Help Sought In Finding Hit-And-Run Suspect

(Albuquerque, NM) -- The family of a 17-year-old who was killed in a weekend hit-and-run has asked the public for help in finding the person responsible. Kenneth Rutherford died early Sunday morning when he was knocked off the scooter he was riding on Eubank Boulevard in Albuquerque. The driver who hit him remains at-large. Rutherford was a student at El Dorado High School and was working on his GED.

>>Rio Grande Classrooms Overcrowded

(Albuquerque, NM) -- Rio Grande High School may have another problem to fix in addition to its students going without class schedules. The city's fire marshal reported last week overcrowding and unsafe classrooms at Rio Grande during its second visit there. Authorities had already informed school officials it had to move some students to the auditorium because classes were overcrowded. The Public Education Department said in a statement that Albuquerque Public Schools must provide a plan to address the ongoing issues at Rio Grande High School.

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SANTA FE, N.M. - New Mexico has reported 57 cases of whooping cough so far this year, 13 more than last year at this time. The total cases of whooping cough, also known as pertussis, include confirmed and probable cases. Pertussis is a highly infectious respiratory-tract illness that is more likely to kill children under 4 months of age.

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>>Chilean Miners Remembered By The Pope

(Vatican City) -- Pope Benedict has promised to remember the 33 Chilean miners trapped for weeks in his prayers. The Pope used Spanish-language greetings to crowds gathered at Castel Gandolfo to pray the midday "Angelus" to remember the miners. Benedict expressed "particular affection" for the men trapped in the mine and commends them and their families to the intercession of St. Lawrence, patron of miners.

>>Faith-Based Hospitals Provide Better Care

(Undated) -- Catholic and other church-owned hospital systems are significantly more likely to provide higher quality care. A Thomson-Reuters analysis of the quality performance of more than 250 health systems in the U.S. studied both faith-based systems and investor-owned systems. The study also discovered Catholic health systems are significantly more likely to give higher quality performance than other mainstream not-for-profit health systems.

>>Becket Fund Threatens Suit Against HHS Over Abortion Issue

(Undated) -- The Becket Fund for Religious Liberty has threatened to sue the Department of Health & Human Services over abortions. The Becket Fund says it would sue if HHS tried to force religiously affiliated hospitals to perform abortions against the conscientious objections of their doctors and nurses. The Becket Fund wrote a letter to HHS following an ACLU letter pressuring HHS into forcing religiously affiliated hospitals across the country to perform abortions. A statement from the Becket Fund says it will represent, pro bono, any religious hospital or its personnel that HHS threatens over their conscientious objection to abortion.

>>Teen Church Involvement Still Flat

(Undated) -- The number of teens involved in church youth groups have been dropping since 1999. According to "USA Today," the Barna Group says approximately 25 percent of teens are involved in religion, including prayer, Bible reading and going to church. David Kinnaman, president of Barna, says, quote, "Talking to God may be losing out to Facebook."

Hurricane Earl could take aim at Carolinas by Friday:

Miami, Florida -- Hurricane Earl may prompt evacuations along the U.S. Atlantic

Coast even if it does not make landfall, because it may come close enough to trigger storm surge flooding and high winds, officials said Tuesday.

The National Hurricane Center issued a hurricane watch for most of the North Carolina coast, from Surf City, North Carolina, to the state's northern border with Virginia, including the Pamlico and Albemarle Sounds. It called Hurricane Earl "large and intense."

Earl, which quickly morphed into a Category 4 hurricane on Monday, dealt a glancing blow to Puerto Rico and the Virgin Islands, downing trees and knocking out power lines. Tuesday, Earl was passing the Turks and Caicos. Those islands and the southeastern Bahamas were forecast to experience tropical storm conditions.

Based on the forecast track from the National Hurricane Center, Earl will pass within 60 miles of Cape Hatteras, North Carolina, early Friday morning, according to CNN meteorologist Sean Morris. Hurricane-force winds will be possible along the Outer Banks of North Carolina beginning very early on Friday morning and lasting until at least midday, he said.

Morris forecast Earl will pass within 60 miles of Nantucket, Massachusetts, as a strong Category 1 or Category 2 hurricane overnight Friday. However, sustained hurricane-force winds should not affect coastal Massachusetts as the majority of winds will be tropical-storm force beginning Friday afternoon and lasting until midday on Saturday, he said.

As of 5 p.m. ET, the center of Earl was about 150 miles (245 kilometers) east-northeast of Grand Turk Island and about 1,000 miles (1,605 kilometers) south-southeast of Cape Hatteras, North Carolina, according to the National Hurricane Center. It was heading northwest at about 14 mph (22 kph).

The hurricane's core was "passing well east of the Turks and Caicos Islands," the hurricane center said. "Tropical storm conditions are probably affecting the vicinity of the Turks and Caicos Islands. Weather conditions will likely improve in these islands on Wednesday."

Earl's maximum sustained winds are at 135 mph (215 kph). It is a large storm, with hurricane-force winds stretching 90 miles (150 km) from its center and tropical storm-force winds extending outward some 200 miles (325 kilometers).

"Some fluctuations in intensity are likely, but Earl is forecast to retain Category 4 status for the next day or two," the hurricane center said.

The U.S. Navy in Norfolk, Virginia, has ordered ships in its area to prepare to

head to sea within 24 hours if conditions worsen, according to Beth Baker, a spokeswoman for the Navy. A separate order will be given if it's decided that various Naval aircraft in the region need to be moved, she said.

The Navy also issued on Tuesday a "Hurricane Condition 4," which tells people living and working around the Norfolk area to be prepared for "destructive winds" within 72 hours and to take the proper precautions.

A FEMA team is already in North Carolina to provide support if necessary, Craig Fugate, Federal Emergency Management Agency administrator, told reporters on a conference call. Additional teams have been designated for each state on the coast if needed.

He urged those living in the region to prepare for the storm, stock up on supplies and have a plan if it becomes necessary. Besides FEMA's Ready.gov website, people can use FEMA's mobile application, which links to the National Hurricane Center, to stay up to date on information. Tips include developing a family communications plan, putting together a kit with 72 hours of food and water and staying informed of risks in the area.

FEMA officials urged residents to heed any evacuation orders that their state and local governments might make. The federal group stressed it does not make evacuation decisions.

Even without making landfall, hurricanes can trigger dangerous rip currents -- a narrow channel of water that flows seaward from beaches. The currents can be strong enough to carry even experienced swimmers into deeper water.

On Tuesday, a National Weather Service coastal advisory was in effect for the eastern coast of Florida, mostly due to Earl's presence in the Caribbean. The advisory warned that dangerous rip currents and rough surf are possible. "Dozens of rescues along with one surf-related fatality were reported over the past few days in very hazardous ocean conditions," the advisory said.

Over the weekend, hundreds of rescues took place in Maryland and elsewhere because of rip currents spawned by then-Hurricane Danielle, which stayed well offshore. Danielle has since lost its tropical characteristics and moved out into the open Atlantic.

A tropical storm warning remained in effect for the Turks and Caicos Islands, and a tropical storm watch was in effect for the southeastern Bahamas. Those areas could experience above-normal tides, along with "large and dangerous battering waves" on Tuesday, forecasters said.

A tropical storm watch is also in effect for the North Carolina coast between Cape Fear, North Carolina and Surf City, North Carolina, the hurricane center said.

Earl could dump between 1 and 3 inches of rain on the Turks and Caicos and the Bahamas, with up to 6 inches possible in some areas, the hurricane center said.

But forecasters said conditions on Puerto Rico and the Virgin Islands, including gusty winds, were expected to improve as Earl departed, and storm surge flooding and waves will diminish.

"We were quite fortunate because there was no direct hit in this case," Puerto Rico Gov. Luis Fortuno told CNN's "American Morning." But, he said, the island experienced "lots of rain" and some high winds. As of Tuesday morning, 174,000 customers were without power, he said, and 33,000 lacked water service.

"There are some roads that are blocked because trees have fallen," Fortuno said. "Those are being removed as we speak, and hopefully we'll be able to get back to normal during the course of the day and tomorrow will be a regular working day."

Tito Hernandez, FEMA federal coordinating official, told reporters Tuesday that close to 200,000 were without power on Puerto Rico, and officials were focusing on restoration. About 160 people spent Monday night in 18 shelters on the island, he said, and 57 people took refuge in four shelters in the U.S. Virgin Islands.

However, both locations "fared very well," Hernandez said. Schools were expected to reopen Wednesday, he said. Transportation from Puerto Rico to the outlying islands of Culebra and Vieques had resumed, and ports in the Virgin Islands and Puerto Rico were reopening Tuesday.

A CNN iReport showed sheets of torrential rain on Puerto Rico, along with gusty winds. Other iReports showed downed trees and flooding on Montserrat and St. John in the Virgin Islands.

Residents were being asked to stay home so that downed trees and power lines could be removed, Fortuno said.

Puerto Rico and the U.S. Virgin Islands could see an additional 1 to 2 inches of rain as Earl pulls away, the Hurricane Center said on Tuesday.

Another storm could be poised to deliver a one-two punch to Puerto Rico and other areas of the Caribbean. Tropical Storm Fiona developed on Monday and appeared to be following in Earl's footsteps.

It remained a weak tropical storm as of Tuesday, the Hurricane Center said. However, it was enough to prompt a tropical storm warning for St. Martin and St. Barthelemy and a tropical storm watch for Antigua, Barbuda, Montserrat, St. Kitts, Nevis, Anguilla, St. Maarten, Saba and St. Eustatius.

A tropical storm warning means that tropical storm conditions, including winds of at least 39 mph, are forecast within 36 hours. A tropical storm watch means that tropical storm conditions are possible within 48 hours.

Read said Fiona is not projected to affect Puerto Rico and the Virgin Islands, but could affect Bermuda by the weekend.

"Interests elsewhere in the northern Leeward Islands should monitor the progress of Fiona," forecasters said. "Additional watches or warnings may be required for a portion of the area."

As of 5 p.m., the center of Fiona was located about 270 miles (440 kilometers) east of the Leeward Islands. It had winds of about 40 mph (65 kph) and was moving west-northwest at about 24 mph (39 kph). Some slow strengthening is possible over the next day or two, forecasters said.

"We are following what the National Weather Service is telling us" on Fiona, Fortuno told CNN. "They're telling us that it is not as organized as Earl. However, it could bring about some rain, and that's what concerns me. So we'll just keep a very close eye on it and see what happens."

Cancun, Mexico, bar bombed; 8 dead:

-- Eight people died early Tuesday after attackers hurled several Molotov cocktails into a Cancun, Mexico, bar, the state attorney general said.

Six women and two men, all Mexican nationals and employees of the tavern, were killed in the 1:30 a.m. strike, now under investigation by judicial police, according to a release from Francisco Alor Quezada, attorney general for the state of Quintana Roo.

Eight men hurled the explosives at the bar and fled in vehicles, the release said. No shots were fired. Although the tavern is just 5 kilometers from the city's tourist stretch, it sits apart from the area frequented by tourists, and the clientele is composed of locals, it said.

Four of those slain died of burns and the others of asphyxiation, the release said.

Men held in Netherlands suspected of plotting terror, Dutch say:

Amsterdam, Netherlands -- Two men arrested at Schiphol International Airport in the Netherlands are being held on suspicion of plotting a terrorist act, Dutch authorities said Tuesday.

They are Yemeni citizens who were en route to the Yemeni capital, Sanaa, from Chicago, Illinois, officials said.

They were arrested Monday morning and authorities continued to question them Tuesday, Dutch prosecutors said.

A U.S. law enforcement source said Monday the men may have been trying to test U.S. airport security by putting bottles attached to electronic devices in their checked baggage.

But two U.S. government officials said Tuesday an initial U.S. investigation into the men shows no evidence of terrorism and no indication the men even knew each other.

"This looks like nothing," said one of the officials, saying both men missed flights in Chicago because of a gate change and their airline rebooked them onto the same plane.

"We see no evidence of a dry run or a connection to terrorism," said the source, who is not authorized to discuss the case with the media and asked not to be named.

The Department of Homeland Security noted that the two men "have not been charged with any crime in the United States" and cautioned "against jumping to any conclusions." Appropriate airport security protocols were followed, the department said.

"In this instance, sound judgment led to suspicious items being identified, which triggered automatic security responses by U.S. security personnel," the department said. " ... When the investigation tells us more, we will let you know, but we don't have anything else at this time."

An announcement about whether the men will be charged will be made "in a few days," Dutch authorities said in a statement.

The men were still being held at Schiphol Airport on Tuesday, said Martijn Boelhouwer, a spokesman for Dutch prosecutors.

Another U.S. official said the Dutch are being cautious and checking everything.

That official, who also asked not to be named, said the United States is doing the same and is continuing to investigate.

The U.S. Department of Homeland Security said Monday the two were arrested after "suspicious items" in their luggage raised concern.

"The items were not deemed to be dangerous in and of themselves, and as we share information with our international partners, Dutch authorities were notified of the suspicious items," the U.S. agency said. "This matter continues to be under investigation."

Those items were an empty shampoo bottle with watches attached to it and an empty bottle of a stomach medicine with mobile phones attached, according to the U.S. law enforcement source, who has been briefed on the investigation.

Dutch authorities confirmed that one phone was found taped to a bottle and seized in the United States. Nothing else suspicious was found in the men's luggage, the Dutch said.

The items have raised concern that the men may have been testing a future terrorist plot, the source said.

Attempts to sneak liquid explosives aboard jetliners were at the heart of a 2006 plot broken up by British authorities. That case led U.S. authorities to ban all but small quantities of liquids from aircraft cabins.

U.S. law enforcement officials told CNN that the checked bags contained knives and box cutters as well.

Passengers have been banned from carrying those items on aircraft since the September 11, 2001, attacks on New York and Washington, but they are allowed in checked bags.

The source identified the men aboard United Airlines Flight 908, from Chicago, Illinois, to Amsterdam, as Ahmed Mohamed Nasser al-Soofi and Hezem al-Murisi.

Al-Soofi began his trip by boarding a flight in Birmingham, Alabama, and al-Murisi originally flew from Memphis, Tennessee, the law enforcement source said.

A co-worker of al-Soofi said he was not known to express anti-American opinions and was "not a very good Muslim" because he drinks beer.

Al-Soofi had been back to Yemen at least twice before to deliver money and gifts, and bought watches and cell phones as gifts for family members on this trip, said co-worker Ali Moqbel in Tuscaloosa, Alabama.

Al-Murisi was scheduled to fly from Chicago to Yemen, with connections in Washington and Dubai, a U.S. government official said, but his flight was changed to go from Chicago to Amsterdam.

Another U.S. law enforcement official said both men were in the United States legally.

That official said neither of the passengers was carrying items that are barred from aircraft, and federal air marshals were aboard the Chicago-to-Amsterdam flight.

Al-Soofi's luggage went aboard the Chicago-to-Washington flight without him, the source said, in what amounted to another violation of U.S. safety protocols.

A U.S. government official said items in at least one of the bags were being examined by law enforcement authorities at Washington Dulles International Airport on Monday night.

The official said al-Soofi and al-Murisi were seated near each other on the Chicago-to-Amsterdam flight, but were not seated next to each other.

NEW MEXICO WATCHDOG <http://newmexico.watchdog.org> :

NM ran up \$97.8 million in unemployment overpayments in 2009; third-highest rate in the US and sixth-highest in fraud:

By Rob Nikolewski

The crummy economy has sent a lot of New Mexicans to the unemployment office in the past year but after analyzing the numbers from the US Department of Labor, some state residents are getting more benefits than they should — a lot more.

Last month, the Labor Department released national figures estimating that the country overpaid by \$7.1 billion in unemployment benefits for the calendar year 2009. That caused me to wonder how New Mexico fared in relation to other states. The Labor Department needed a couple weeks to complete its state-by-state breakdown and now the numbers have been released.

The results? New Mexico ranks third in the country in the percentage of

unemployment overpayments, with some 28.68 percent (\$97.8 million) of the total benefits sent to New Mexico unemployment recipients should not have been delivered. Only Louisiana and Indiana had a worse percentage.

And New Mexico sixth in the nation in the rate of fraud for unemployment payments, with \$16.8 — or 4.93 percent — stripped from the state unemployment insurance fund in 2009.

Why are the numbers so bad?

Carrie Moritomo, the public information officer for the agency that handles state unemployment claims – the Department of Workforce Solutions (DWS) – says, “I would need to do further research but I would caution you by saying that this not a straight, apples to apples comparison. One state’s laws in this regard are not comparable to another ... I don’t think this is a fair assessment. State laws are different across the board.”

And in fairness to the DWS, the Labor Department’s statistical chart states that “Readers are strongly cautioned that it may be misleading to compare one state’s payment accuracy rates with another ... No two states’ ... are identical and differences in these conditions influence the potential for error.”

But at the same time, nearly \$98 million in overpayments and nearly \$17 million in fraud does not look good.

One of the primary reasons for fraud comes from people who keep accepting unemployment checks once they land a job. Many recipients think they can keep receiving benefits until they get their first paycheck at their new job.

Sorry, but the moment you start a new job, you become ineligible for unemployment benefits.

Charles Mather of DWS said, “Some people will even go 10-15 weeks (collecting unemployment as well as paychecks from a new job). Some of the excuses we get is that they feel they just have to catch up (on bills and such).”

So are some New Mexicans simply more dishonest than most Americans? Who knows, but Mather and Moritomo said that the tough economy may tempt some to cut corners. After all, Moritomo points out that in September of 2008, the state’s unemployment rate was at 4.0 percent. Last month, it more than doubled to 8.2 percent.

On top of that, the Labor Department numbers look even worse for New Mexico when you compare the 2008 statistics with 2009.

Take a look:

Total unemployment benefits paid out for New Mexico:

2008 \$159,630,965 2009 \$340,941,021

Estimated Overpaid:

2008 \$29,621,122 2009 \$97,788,755

Fraud Rate: 2008 4.03% 2009 4.93%

Note that the total amount of benefits more than doubled, showing how much the weakening economy hurt people in the state.

But the total of overpayments more than tripled. Does that indicate that more New Mexicans were cheating the government? Not really because while the sheer number of dollars that were accounted by fraud jumped from \$6.4 million to \$16.8 million, the percentage of fraud increased from 4.03 percent to just 4.93 percent.

What gives? Does this indicate that DWS is overwhelmed by the sheer number of claims it is receiving? Is it making too many mistakes? Or does New Mexico compile its numbers more carefully than other states, thus leading to a higher rate of detection of overpayments? Moritomo and Mather said they aren't sure.

One bit of good news: Mather points to a figure called the "Operational Rate," which the Department of Labor cites as the amount of "what we can reasonably expect to recover," Mather says. The operational rate for New Mexico is \$22.5 million, which the state hopes to bring back to its coffers.

After going through the Department of Labor's numbers, here's a breakdown of 10 states (including the District of Columbia and Puerto Rico) that had the best and worst rates of overpayments:

The 10 states with the worst percentage of overpayments:

1. Louisiana 41.55%
2. Indiana 33.26%
3. New Mexico 28.68%

4. Arizona	18.99%
5. South Carolina	17.59%
6. Colorado	16.73%
7. Washington	15.98%
8. Nebraska	15.12%
9. Virginia	14.59%
10. Mississippi	14.21%

And the 10 states with the lowest percentage of overpayments:

1. New Hampshire	2.52%
2. Kentucky	2.54%
3. Massachusetts	2.94%
4. Vermont	3.57%
5. Connecticut	3.81%
6. Georgia	4.01%
7. Oklahoma	4.28%
8. California	5.27%
9. Florida	5.37%
10. Hawaii	5.40%

As for rates of fraud, here at the 10 highest in percentage:

1. Arizona	5.96%
2. Arkansas	5.86%
3. Louisiana	5.71%

4. Puerto Rico	5.36%
5. Mississippi	5.15%
6. New Mexico	4.93%
7. Oregon	4.73%
8. DC	4.70%
9. Pennsylvania	4.68%
10. Nevada	4.16%

The 10 with the lowest rates of fraud are:

1. New Jersey	0.30%
2. Hawaii	0.36%
3. Iowa	0.42%
Vermont	0.42%
Florida	0.42%
6. Colorado	0.48%
7. Maine	0.59%
8. Georgia	0.61%
9. Minnesota	0.63%
10. Michigan	0.74%

If you're a numbers nerd, you can see the raw state-by-state data here for 2008: http://www.ows.doleta.gov/unemploy/bam/2008/Integrity_Rates-CY_2008-all_states.xls

And here for 2009:

<http://www.unemploymentinsurance.doleta.gov/unemploy/bam/2009/bam-cy2009.pdf>

Once you get the spreadsheet data on each link, look at the tabs on the bottom of the page and go to Integrity Rates Est \$ and 95% CI to get the numbers cited.

Cash-strapped Iceland to host “private army” – and Russian jets:

Iceland is set to give a private army contractor the green light in what critics are calling the most ambitious move by a corporation to perform tasks once reserved for national militaries.

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Few countries have suffered worse from the global crisis than Iceland, an island of 320,000 in the northern extremes of the Atlantic Ocean that was once hailed – due to its commitment to sophisticated, albeit highly risky financial services – as one of the wealthiest and most developed nations in the world. Those halcyon days are over.

Today, the debt-ridden NATO country is struggling to contain the fallout from a massive exodus of talent as highly educated residents flee the island for employment opportunities elsewhere. These dire economic conditions, observers say, paved the way for a mysterious “private army” to assume control of an airbase in the country.

The private military training company, ECA Program Ltd., reportedly paid \$160 million to fill the security void left in the country after the US military abruptly yanked its forces from the Keflavik airbase in March 2006.

According to military analysts, the company will purchase up to 30 Russian-built Sukhoi-27 fighter jets from Belarus and base them at Keflavik where air forces worldwide may pay to use them for mock “dogfights” in aerial war games.

The planned purchase of the fighter jets, which are heavily employed by the air forces of Russia and China amongst others, represents the largest single order for military aircraft by a private investor. The first shipment of aircraft is expected in October.

Despite the economic boost it will provide to the cash-strapped country, the project is facing harsh opposition.

One group, called the Campaign Against Militarism (CAM), has expressed its condemnation of the ECA Program, claiming the company is a front for a mercenary group that was denied permission to operate in Canada. CAM is also known for its efforts to force Iceland out of NATO.

Mercenaries or market players?

According to information available on its website, ECA "answers the training needs of armed forces around the globe. This is possible thanks to the fielding of an integrated system that is composed of individual assets such as aircraft, drones, cruise missile simulators, ground based air defenses, radars, passive ELINT components and jamming complexes. The integration is obtained thanks to the resilient, fully off-road mobile, Command and Control, Communications, Counter-measures (C3CM) backbone."

At the same time, ECA Program Ltd. stresses that it is "fully independent from any specific government and thus more open to international cooperation" and is not "representing, or influenced, by any military-industrial complex." Despite these words of assurance, the project is facing increasing hostility as well as suspicion as not all of its claims are adding up.

Melville ten Cate, ECA's Dutch co-founder, told the Financial Times that ECA has agreed to buy 15 Sukhoi Su-27 "Flanker" jets from BelTechExport, a Belarusian arms export company, with the option to purchase another 18 of the aircraft.

The Financial Times report, quoting an anonymous company official, said the government was "close to giving conditional approval to ECA," while adding that Reykjavik would "consult its NATO allies" before a final decision was made, he added. So far, so good. But upon further investigation, there appears to be some loose threads in the official story.

The FT article went to say that "much about the deal is shrouded in mystery and several defence industry officials have questioned its credibility – including some that Mr. ten Cate says are involved."

BelTechExport, for example, denied knowledge of the deal on Monday, after having "previously confirmed it to the Financial Times." Meanwhile, an official at the Belarusian agency responsible for approving arms exports said he was not aware of the negotiations and Rosoboronexport, the Russian state arms exporter, denied any involvement.

Finally, the sheer overhead costs involved in the purchase and upkeep of 30 sophisticated fighter jets, not to mention the cost of paying for pilots, mechanics and control tower personnel, are causing many observers to question if the company has received the financial blessing of some foreign government. Indeed, any talk of a "private military contractor" these days immediately drags up bad memories of Blackwater (now known as Xe Services), the US company that attracted significant controversy due to its contractual work in Iraq.

Although no connection to outside military contractors or sovereign nations has been revealed, according to a report in The Reykjavik Grapevine, "much is unknown about the source of the company's (ECA Program, Ltd.) finances, and their activities remain obscure – few sources apart from the ECA's own website even mention the work the company has done."

ECA had originally been hoping to base its operations at Goose Bay airbase in Canada, but turned to Iceland after Canadian authorities went cold on the proposal.

According to military sources, the Russian fighter jets would not carry live ammunition and no training would take place in Icelandic airspace. The extent of the company's "ground based air defenses, radars, passive ELINT components and jamming complexes," however, remains largely unknown at this time, yet may be of future interest to Russia, especially given the recent move by the White House to build an anti-missile system in Eastern Europe.

One senior company official at ECA, who spoke on the condition of anonymity, denied that the two complexes would be interoperable.

Several Moscow officials, meanwhile, have expressed their surprise at the revelation that Belarus is willing to sell so many state-of-the-art Russian jet fighters to a NATO country. Although such a sale does not represent a security threat for Russia, they say, it does underscore just how severe the global financial crisis has been to many countries that are now willing to undermine their national security to make a quick buck.

Russia first invited to Iceland's airbase

In December 2008, Icelandic President Olafur Ragnar Grimsson shocked neighboring Nordic countries when he invited Russia to make use of the strategic airbase.

"Foreign diplomats hardly believed what they heard when the Icelandic president said that his country needs 'new friends'," according to a report in The Barents Observer, "and that Russia should be invited to make use of the old US airbase of Keflavik."

Grimsson reportedly accused neighboring countries of "failing to support crisis-ridden Iceland," adding that "Iceland should rather make new friends."

According to Dagbladet, the Norwegian daily, the Russian ambassador present at the lunch was "rather perplexed by the invitation," saying that "Russia does not really need the airport."

Iceland does not have its own armed forces, and has been solely dependent on

military cooperation with NATO allies instead. The United States, which had assured Iceland's defense for decades, stunned the country in March 2006 when it announced it would shut down its bases on the island, yanking its F-15 fighters and servicemen in the space of just six months.

City Councilor Matthew Ortiz accused of ethics violation
Fellow city councilor files complaint:

A Santa Fe city councilor on Monday formally leveled charges of unethical conduct against another councilor.

Councilor Miguel Chavez delivered documents to the city clerk alleging that Councilor Matthew Ortiz failed to disclose a conflict of interest.

Ortiz, an attorney by occupation, has been publicly criticized for not telling other members of the City Council or the general public that one of his clients contracted to do work for city.

Although the complaint doesn't spell out that situation, Ortiz issued a statement Monday afternoon saying he presumes the complaint is related to his representation of Advantage Asphalt and Seal Coating.

The company has been the subject of a Santa Fe County Sheriff's Office investigation regarding its dealings with the county, but the city hasn't uncovered any problems with Advantage, and officials just last week awarded the company a new contract for city work.

During the more than two years since he took on the company as a client, Ortiz presided over meetings of the city Finance Committee at which the company was discussed and other times voted on a list of items that included contracts with Advantage. Ortiz has maintained that he didn't violate any rules.

Chavez's complaint was filed at the same time as an identical complaint by Alfred Flatt. Both complaint forms appear to have been handwritten by Flatt, although they contain a typed attachment that lists nine instances in which Advantage contracts were discussed at public meetings and Ortiz was not forthcoming about his relationship to the company.

Chavez said he filed the complaint along with Flatt so that "he wouldn't be out there on his own by himself."

Chavez said much of the public discourse about the issue has revolved around the question of whether a city committee needs a formal complaint in order to begin an investigation of a potential ethics violation.

"People were asking when someone would file a complaint and who would file it," Chavez said.

One issue has been whether Ortiz had a duty to announce that he was recusing himself from discussions about the company or whether by not actively participating in discussions he effectively recused himself. The councilor has represented the firm since 2007.

Following newspaper reports about the issue, several policymakers proposed amendments to the city ethics code that would specify that recusals must be made in an affirmative manner, in writing or orally at the time of the meeting.

"As I have stated before, I have not participated in any meaningful manner in any contract awarded to Advantage by the city," Ortiz wrote in a statement issued to news media Monday afternoon. "I have actually removed myself from every discussion of every contract that was properly and lawfully awarded to my client. I will continue to actually recuse myself, by not being present during discussion or vote on matter, unless and until the ethics ordinance is amended."

Ortiz also jabbed at Chavez, questioning whether Chavez should vote on matters regarding his wife's employer, Christus St. Vincent Regional Medical Center, and writing that he believes Chavez took the action regarding the complaint "for no other reason than to gain publicity for himself by disparaging me."

"I feel sorry for Miguel Chavez that he feels he has to take this action in order to remain relevant," Ortiz wrote. "Miguel is politically isolated on the governing body, he has been absent from committee meetings, when in attendance at meetings he has been increasingly shrill and bitter, and he has been ineffective in introducing and passing any initiatives over the past four years."

Chavez, who ran unsuccessfully for mayor earlier this year, doesn't deny that he's been a loner on the City Council lately. At last week's City Council meeting, for example, he cast the sole vote against the new Advantage contract. He said he's isolated not because he's irrelevant, but because he is "not part of the clique."

In an earlier interview, Chavez said that even the perception that there could be a conflict of interest on the council is bad for elected officials.

"I think it would have been right and fair for him to have disclosed months or years ago that this was his client," Chavez said of Ortiz in June. "In the name of open government and being transparent, I think it would have been really the right thing for Councilor Ortiz to do."

Chavez also noted that he is not the only member of the council to miss committee hearings; Ortiz was absent from Monday's Finance Committee meeting. Chavez also said that he had informed other councilors that his wife worked for the hospital before voting on any matters related to the hospital.

City rules allow the subject of a complaint 10 business days to offer a written response. A meeting of the Ethics and Campaign Review Board will be scheduled in about two weeks to review both the complaint and any response, said Fred Rowe, board chairman.

Palestinian kills 4 Israelis on eve of peace talks:

JERUSALEM — The Israeli military says a Palestinian gunman has killed four Israelis in an attack in the West Bank.

The shooting comes just a day ahead of a White House summit relaunching Mideast peace talks.

Police say the gunman opened fire at a vehicle near Hebron — a volatile city that has experienced heavy violence in the past.

There has been no claim of responsibility. But Israeli authorities are concerned that militants might try to sabotage the U.S.-led peace efforts with violence.

THIS IS A BREAKING NEWS UPDATE. Check back soon for further information.

RAMALLAH, West Bank (AP) — Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas said Tuesday the success of talks aimed at forging a peace deal with Israel within a year will depend on how hard U.S. mediators push to break any deadlocks.

In one major challenge to the first direct talks between the sides in two years, Abbas warned it would be difficult to continue negotiating if Israel fails to extend a 10-month curb on West Bank settlement construction that ends in late September. Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has not made a final decision.

President Barack Obama is hosting Abbas and Netanyahu at the White House on Wednesday, followed a day later by a first negotiating session, to be headed by U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton.

Obama hopes to see a peace deal within a year. Expectations are low, given that Abbas and Netanyahu are far apart on key issues and face internal opposition.

The Palestinians want a state in the West Bank, Gaza and east Jerusalem — territories Israel captured in the 1967 Mideast War.

In previous negotiations with Netanyahu's predecessor, Abbas agreed to minor border adjustments and a land swap that would enable Israel to keep some of its largest West Bank settlements but refused to share control over Jerusalem holy sites.

Netanyahu says he will not relinquish east Jerusalem and has not spelled out his vision for the future border between Israel and a Palestinian state.

Abbas told reporters accompanying him to Washington that he hopes for an active U.S. role in the talks. He said that if the two sides reach a deadlock, the Obama administration should "present bridging proposals to bridge the gap between the two positions."

The Palestinian president said the one-year deadline is reasonable because many of the issues have already been discussed in previous rounds. "If there is goodwill, then it (one year) is more than enough," he said. "Everything is clear."

Netanyahu refuses to pick up where negotiations left off in December 2008 between Abbas and then-Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert, who was more moderate than Netanyahu.

The most immediate threat to negotiations is the renewed impasse over Israeli settlement construction.

Netanyahu is under pressure from his right-wing Likud Party and hawkish coalition partners to resume building inside West Bank settlements when the 10-month freeze on housing starts ends Sept. 26.

Abbas argues that there is no point in negotiating the borders of a Palestinian state if expanding settlements pre-empt the outcome. About half a million Israelis now live in settlements in the West Bank and east Jerusalem, making partition increasingly difficult. The settlements are deemed illegal by the international community.

"If they (the Israelis) refuse to extend the stopping of settlement activities, then it will be difficult for us to continue the negotiations," Abbas said Tuesday. Earlier this week, he said he would quit the talks for certain if the freeze isn't extended.

On Tuesday, 35 Israeli authors, including Amos Oz, expressed support for a group of actors and playwrights who announced this week they would not perform in a West Bank settlement. About 150 academics also declared their

refusal to teach in the settlements.

Netanyahu has rejected the boycott calls, saying they play into the hands of what he called international efforts to "delegitimize" Israel's existence.

NM INDEPENDENT <http://newmexicoindependent.com> :

Former SOS employee AJ Salazar backs off attorney's words:
By Trip Jennings

Former state elections director A.J. Salazar tells Heath Haussamen over at NMpolitics.net today that he doesn't share his attorney's sentiment that New Mexico Attorney General Gary King is playing election-year politics.

On Thursday, Salazar's attorney, Rudy Martin of Española, told The Independent that Salazar spoke to the FBI two weeks ago after turning over telephone numbers and potential witnesses to state Attorney General (AG) investigators five months ago, about the time he quit as Herrera's state elections director and alleged wrongdoing in a resignation letter.

"Gary tried to play politics and swept everything under the rug" to help Secretary of State Mary Herrera and other Democrats in an election year, Martin told The Independent on Thursday.

On Monday Salazar told Haussamen, "That was not a statement I made and it was not a sentiment I had expressed."

Salazar said he had "simply been trying – unsuccessfully – to get an update on the status of the investigation" after going to King's office with allegations of criminal activity in Herrera's office five months ago. "He said he just wants to know that his complaint is being thoroughly investigated," Haussamen writes of Salazar.

Salazar quit as elections director under Herrera months ago, creating a a brief maelstrom of negative press for Herrera when he alleged wrongdoing in the agency in a lengthy resignation letter.

Despite Salazar's kinder, gentler words about King, a spokesman for King "lashed out in a very personal way" against Salazar on Monday, Haussamen tells us.

Phil Sisneros, a spokesman for the Attorney General, is quoted as saying:

"Salazar has run unsuccessfully for district attorney in Santa Fe and, while

Salazar was working for House Speaker Ben Lujan, Sisneros said Salazar 'repeatedly asked Gary for a job at the Attorney General's Office, which he didn't get for reasons that I really don't need to go into, but apparently Gary did not feel he met the criteria for an AGO attorney.'"

Then Sisneros does something he rarely has done with this reporter. He opened a window into how the AG's investigation of Salazar's allegations are proceeding.

Sisneros acknowledges the length of time the AG has been investigating Salazar's allegations and then tells Haussamen "Oftentimes when it takes a little bit longer I think experience tells me that we're having a hard time corroborating things."

Sisneros's statement appears in contrast to Salazar's contention that the AG's office has not updated him on the investigations' progress or lack thereof.

Sisneros is pretty consistent in telling reporters he can't discuss an active investigation, at least in this reporter's experience.

Stay tuned, folks. I've got a feeling that this controversy is likely to get hotter before it cools down.

Obama calls former President George W. Bush ahead of Iraq speech:

President Barack Obama called former President George W. Bush Tuesday hours before he was set to deliver an Oval Office speech on the drawdown of U.S. troops from Iraq, the White House said.

Obama made the call aboard Air Force One on his way to Ft. Bliss, Tex., where he will visit U.S. troops.

White House Deputy Press Secretary Bill Burton said the "private" call lasted "a few minutes," but declined to give further detail.

Obama telephoned Bush in February 2009 before announcing his plans for withdrawing troops from Iraq.

White House Press Secretary Robert Gibbs refused Monday to say whether Obama's speech would give credit to the former president for his decision to send a surge of U.S. troops to Iraq. The surge is widely acknowledged to have contributed to a decrease in violence in the country.

Gibbs said there was a "whole host of factors" that contributed to the increased security situation, and said Obama "always believed" security would improve by

increasing the number of troops. Obama opposed the surge strategy as a senator.

The press secretary also cautioned against interpreting Obama's speech as a victory address.

"I think we are used to ... the pictures of some type of ceremony on a battleship at sea," Gibbs said, alluding to Bush's "mission accomplished" address in 2003, which he delivered aboard the aircraft carrier USS Abraham Lincoln.

"I don't think you're likely to see those scenarios. What you'll see tomorrow is the changing of a mission from one of combat to one of support."

Obama will deliver his primetime address from the same desk his predecessor used to announce the beginning of combat missions there more than seven years ago.

Wells Fargo spent \$1.29M lobbying government in 2Q:

NEW YORK — Wells Fargo & Co. spent \$1.29 million during the second quarter to lobby the government on a broad range of financial regulatory reform measures, according to a disclosure report

That's an 87 percent leap from the \$690,000 the San Francisco-based bank spent during the year-ago period. For the first six months of the year, Wells Fargo spent \$2.31 million on lobbying as banking regulations came to the forefront of the national agenda.

Wells Fargo received \$25 billion in federal bailout funds during the financial crisis in late 2008, which it paid back in December. Its lobbying expenditures for the first half of the year were fourth biggest among the top 10 banks that received money under the Troubled Asset Relief Program, or TARP.

Wells Fargo lobbied the government about regulations tied to reform of the banking system following the economic meltdown; fees on credit and debit cards, overdraft regulations, mortgage reform and the creation of a consumer financial protection agency.

Other issues Wells Fargo raised with legislators and regulators included various tax proposals related to banking, small business lending and crop insurance, , according to the report filed on July 20 with the House clerk's office. The bank lobbied Congress and the Treasury and Agriculture Departments during the April-

to-June period.

President Barack Obama signed the financial regulatory overhaul in July, which put in place new rules on a variety of banking operations, after months of debate on the reforms.

NEWS MAKERS OF THE DAY:

KKIM Ministry Representative Ryan Freeman is starting a new program this Saturday at 6:30pm MT, called 'Speak-Easy.' He'll be joining us again tomorrow with more details and former Lt. Gov. Walter Bradley joined us from Clovis, to talk about the New Mexico Watchdog article (see above) and his take on the Biblical World View Conference and more. 'There're no checks and balances today,' he stated, 'you gotta put people in who are going to be accountable. Question candidates, What Church do you go to?' he added. Regarding last Wednesday's Conference in ABQ, 'It recharged my batteries!' he exclaimed, as he commented on the over 1,600 people in attendance. 'Who would have believed?' he asked us and he exhorted us all to, 'stand up for God's Word,' because he says, 'America is going through a moral and cultural war, like never before and you'd have to be deaf, dumb and blind not to acknowledge that. America is under assault! It's time to clean house' and he ended with, 'Everybody keep The Faith - Let's make it happen for The Lord!'

Many Blessings,

Rev. Mark F. Tross

Ekklesia Outreach

<http://ekkleisiaoutreach.com>

<http://ekkleisiaoutreach.weebly.com>

<http://simplechurchfellowship.weebly.com>