

Obama and Netanyahu stress strength of U.S.-Israel ties



WASHINGTON-- Israel Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and President Barack Obama are once again pals.

Netanyahu and Obama happily posed for photographers Tuesday, vigorously shaking hands and smiling. A far cry from the chilly reception the PM received when he visited the White House in March.

During the talks that lasted more than an hour, Netanyahu won praise for his recent easing of Israel's embargo on the Gaza Strip and reaffirmation of the strong ties between the country and the United States.

Obama and Netanyahu called for direct talks between Israel and the Palestinians while agreeing that the international community is strengthening efforts to isolate Iran over its nuclear ambitions. Netanyahu predicted that direct peace negotiations could begin this summer and vowed "concrete steps" to move the process along in a "very robust way."

Presently, Netanyahu and Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas aren't talking directly, but communicating through U.S. Middle East envoy George Mitchell, who serves as go-between for negotiations. Abbas has refused to meet with Netanyahu until Israel promises to stop building settlements, but said last month after meeting with Obama that direct talks were

the goal. The two did not mention the deadly Israeli raid in May on a Gaza-bound aid flotilla, or Israel's rebuff of international demands for an apology for the incident. They also avoided the potentially explosive issue of Jewish settlements. A freeze on settlements expires in September, and neither Obama nor Netanyahu said whether they thought it should remain in place.

Obama said the bond between the United States and Israel is "unbreakable" and added that his country remains "unwavering in our commitment to Israel's security." Netanyahu chose to paraphrase American humorist Mark Twain by noting that reports of the demise of U.S.-Israeli relations "aren't just premature, they're just wrong."

Still tensions exist and numerous differences remain. Netanyahu endorsed the idea of a Palestinian state for the first time last summer, for example, but only on the conditions that any independent entity will not be militarized and that Palestinians recognize Israel as the state of the Jewish people.

After spending Tuesday night in the Blair House, the presidential guest residence next to the White House, Netanyahu flew to New York Wednesday where he met with United Nations Secretary-General Ban Ki-Moon, former President Bill Clinton and American Jewish leaders.

Judge rules Peterson to remain in jail



JOLIET, IL-- Drew Peterson's chances of leaving his prison cell all but vanished Thursday morning.

Peterson's defense team's motion to get the former Bolingbrook police sergeant out of jail was denied by Will County Judge Stephen White. His attorneys filed the motion after a prosecution appeal delayed Peterson's trial.

Peterson is charged with drowning his third wife, Kathleen Savio and must remain behind bars while the pretrial appeal by prosecutors is heard, White ruled. On Wednesday, a day before the long-awaited and very high-profile trial was

set to begin, Will County State's Attorney James Glasgow asked for a trial delay while he appeals an earlier ruling by White that barred prosecutors from introducing certain hearsay evidence against Peterson.

Glasgow's appeal was based on a recent Illinois Supreme Court ruling that upheld a DuPage County death-penalty case in which hearsay evidence played a key role in the defendant's conviction.

Peterson, 56, grimaced slightly in court when White announced his decision. He was dressed in a suit and tie and looked ready to walk out and go home. Instead White ruled he would stay locked-up.

Peterson's attorney, Joel Brodsky, said his team would appeal the judge's decision to keep the ex-cop behind bars, arguing he should be freed because he poses no threat to witnesses or others in the community and isn't a high risk of fleeing to avoid prosecution.

Peterson, who has spent 14 years behind bars, also has been named a suspect in the 2007 disappearance of his fourth wife, Stacy Peterson.

Arrest 'Grim Sleeper' serial killer

LOS ANGELES, Calif.--The long search of the "Grim Sleeper" ended with the arrest of a Lonnie David Franklin Jr. in Los Angeles Wednesday.

Franklin, 57, was arraigned Thursday afternoon on murder and attempted murder charges. Investigators believe the former garbageman was responsible with at least 11 deaths in south Los Angeles since 1985.

Franklin targeted black women, some working as prostitutes, and used the same small-caliber gun. He shot one woman, a lone survivor, before pushing her out of his car. Nicknamed for taking a long break between attacks, the killer had left DNA and fingerprints, but police couldn't find a name to match...until now.

"For 25 years, one man preyed on the innocent and stole the lives of women living in some of our toughest neighborhoods." Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa said at a press conference. "Today I'm proud to announce that this terror has come to an end."

Franklin is a former city trash collector who at one time worked as a garbage attendant at an LAPD station.

Neighbors described Franklin as friendly and quiet. They said he was often seen working on his car in his front yard and would sometimes stop



to chat with passers-by.

The "Grim Sleeper" case has puzzled police even though they had the killer's DNA, a description from a survivor, and offered a \$500,000 reward. The break in the case came after Franklin's son was arrested and swabbed for DNA.

Los Angeles District Attorney Steve Cooley said investigators used a tool known as familial searching that allowed them to look for close DNA matches through relatives. Critics have said the approach violates the privacy of family members and can place them under lifetime surveillance. Cooley believes the "Grim Sleeper" case was the first time the method has been used successfully in California.

Cooley said that Franklin may be eligible for the death penalty if convicted.

2 missing after barge hits tourist boat in Philadelphia

PHILADELPHIA, Pa.-- Two people were missing after a barge collided with a tour boat carrying 37 passengers in the Delaware River Wednesday afternoon.

The two missing people are a 16-year-old female and 20-year-old male, Lt. Frank Vanore of the Philadelphia Police Department told reporters. He said that nine people have been hospitalized with what was described as minor injuries.

The six-wheeled duck boat suffered a mechanical problem and small fire shortly after it had driven into the water. Ten minutes later it was struck by a barge used to transport sludge and sank, officials said. Divers found the boat in water about 50 feet deep.

Screams were heard from bystanders as the barge hit the boat. Television footage showed at least five people being pulled from the water wearing life vests in an area of the river near the Old City neighborhood, popular with tourists. Helicopter footage showed people in life vests being helped from the boats on to a dock and at least one person on a gurney.

One of the two crew members from the duck boat was rescued by the ferry that the Delaware River Port Authority was operating on its scheduled route between Philadelphia and Camden.



At a waterfront news conference Wednesday, Mayor Michael Nutter said authorities were trying to figure out exactly what happened.

The city Water Department uses the barge to transport sludge from a sewage plant in northeast Philadelphia to a recycling plant down river, said Maura Kennedy, a Nutter spokeswoman. The city has a contract with K-Sea which operates the tugboat that pulled the unmanned and underpowered barge.

The duck boat was operated by Ride the Ducks, which also operates tours in San Francisco, Seattle, Atlanta, Newport R.I., and Branson, Mo. A spokeswoman at the Norcross, Ga.-based company said a statement would be issued when it had more information.

Arrest 3 in Norway al-Qaeda bomb plot; feds charge 4 others in NYC subway plot



OSLO-- Three people have been arrested in connection with a plot to bomb targets similar to plans to bomb New York's subway and blow up a shopping mall in England.

Two of the plotters were arrested in Norway and one in Germany, said Janne Kristiansen, head of the Norwegian security police.

She said one of the men was a 39-year-old Norwegian of Ughur origin, who had lived in Norway since 1999. The other suspects included a 37-year-old Iraqi and a 31-year-old citizen of Uzbekistan, both of whom have permanent residency permits in Norway.

Officials believe the men were planning attacks with portable but powerful bombs, like the ones at the heart of last year's failed suicide attack in the New York City subway. On Wednesday, U.S. prosecutors revealed the existence of a related plot in Manchester, England.

Norwegian and U.S. officials believe the Norway plan was organized by the late Salah al-Somali who was killed in a CIA drone airstrike last year. Al-Somali was former chief of plotting attacks worldwide for al-Qaeda.

Officials said it was not clear the men had

selected a target for the attacks but they were attempting to make peroxide bombs, the powerful homemade explosives that prosecutors say were attempted in New York and England.

This latest episode means that Norwegians have to come to terms with the fact that their country can no longer be considered a neutral peace facilitator, immune to international terror threats.

U.S. prosecutors charge 4 men with NYC subway plot

In Washington, prosecutors Wednesday said a failed plot to set off bombs in the New York subway system last year was part of a larger al-Qaeda terrorist conspiracy that planned a similar attack in England.

In a superceding document unsealed Wednesday, prosecutors added several al-Qaeda figures to the case., including Adan Shukrijumah, an FBI most wanted terrorist.

Shukrijumah, 34, one of the al-Qaeda leaders in charge of planning attacks worldwide, was directly involved in recruiting for and planning the New York attack, prosecutors said.

In that case, three U.S. citizens were arrested in September 2009 before they could carry out a trio of suicide bombings in Manhattan. Najibullah Zazi and Zarein Ahmedzay have pleaded guilty and admitted planning to detonate homemade bombs on the subway during rush hour.

A third man, Adis Medunjanin, awaits trial. Prosecutors added new terrorism charges against him Wednesday.

There is a \$5 million reward on Shukrijumah's head. He is believed hiding along the Pakistan-Afghanistan border.

Church says Cuba to release 52 political prisoners
Largest mass liberation of dissidents in more than a decade

HAVANA, Cuba--Cuba's Roman Catholic Church said Wednesday the government has agreed to release 52 political prisoners and that five would be allowed to leave for Spain immediately.

The archbishop of Havana, Jaime Ortega, released a statement saying the remaining 47 would be freed in the coming months.

The deal was announced in Havana after Spanish Foreign Minister Miguel Angel Moratinos met with Ortega, President Raul Castro and other officials. Moratinos has been in Cuba this week to discuss human rights and other topics.

"We feel enormous satisfaction," Moratinos said in a statement released by the Spanish Embassy. "This opens a new era in Cuba with hope of putting aside differences once and for all on matters of prisoners."

Ortega's office said that those to be released were all members of a group of 75 leading political opposition activists, community organizers and journalists. They were rounded up in a crackdown on dissent in March 2003.

Movement on the prisoner issue also comes at a time of growing concern over the health of Guillermo Farinas, a dissident who launched a hunger strike in late February to demand release of the detainees. Farinas was moved to a hospital March 11 and is being fed intravenously. His



doctor, Armando Caballero, told the official Cuban newspaper Granma this week that a blood clot and other complications could kill him.

Another hunger striker, Oralndo Zapata Tamayo, died in February, which helped spark a wave of protests by the so-called Ladies in White, prisoners' mothers and wives who march in Havana every Sunday.

Cuba's communist government has routinely insisted that the prisoners are common criminals or troublemakers paid by Washington, which the dissidents deny.

In early 1998, then-President Fidel Castro ordered the release of more than 200 prisoners-about half of them considered by human rights groups to be political- in a response from a plea from the late Pope John Paul II during his historic visit to the island.