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Supreme Court Justices Blast The Corrections System

by Nicole Flatow  Posted on March 24, 2015 at 8:42 am Updated: March 24, 2015 at 11:12 am



Justices Stephen Breyer and Anthony Kennedy during a congressional hearing Monday, March 23.

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The prisons are one of the most misunderstood institutions of government. Solitary confinement drives individuals insane. And mandatory minimum sentences are a bad idea. These were the assertions of U.S. Supreme Court Justices Anthony Kennedy and Stephen Breyer in testimony before a House Appropriations subcommittee Monday afternoon.

Asked by Rep. Steve Womack (R-AR) about United States "capacity to deal with people with our current prison and jail overcrowding," each justice gave an impassioned response in turn, calling on Congress to make things better.

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"In many respects, I think it's broken," Kennedy said of the corrections system. He lamented lawyer ignorance on this phase of the justice system:

I think, Mr. Chairman, that the corrections system is one of the most overlooked, misunderstood institutions we have in our entire government. In law school, I never heard about corrections. Lawyers are fascinated with the guilt/innocence adjudication process. Once the adjudication process is over, we have no interest in corrections. Doctors know more about the corrections system and psychiatrists than we do. Nobody looks at it. California, my home state, had 187,000 people in jail at a cost of over \$30,000 a prisoner. compare the amount they gave to school children, it was about \$3,500 a year. Now, this is 24-hour care and so this is apples and oranges in a way. And this idea of total incarceration just isn't working. and it's not humane.

Kennedy, traditionally considered the swing vote among the current set of justices, recalled a recent case before the U.S. Supreme Court in which the defendant had been in solitary confinement for 25 years, and "lost his mind."

"Solitary confinement literally drives men mad," he said. He pointed out that European countries group difficult prisoners in cells of three or four where they have human contact, which "seems to work much better." He added that "we haven't given nearly the study, nearly enough thought, nearly enough investigative resources to looking at our correction system."

Kennedy's comments come just weeks after a federal review of U.S. solitary confinement policy also found that the United States holds more inmates in solitary confinement than any other developed nation. Confinement typically involves isolation in an often windowless cell with a steel door for 23 hours a day, with almost no human contact. The treatment has been found to have a psychological impact in as many as a few days, though, as Justice Kennedy pointed out, many are held for decades. In the wake of the new report, Sen. Dick Durbin (D-IL) called upon the Federal Bureau of Prisons to alter its practices.

In his response, Breyer honed in on Womack's use of the word "priorities" to suggest that prioritizing long prison sentences was not the best use of resources.

"Do you want to have mandatory minimums? I've said publicly many times that i think that's a terrible idea," Breyer said. "And I've given reasons, which I'll spare you."

"Is it worth your time on earth, or mine, to try to work out ways of prioritizing? I think it is," Breyer said. "I think it is a big problem for the country. and so I can't do anything more in the next minute or 30 seconds other than say i like the word prioritize. I hope you follow it up. And i hope do you examine the variety of ways that there of trying to prioritize and then work out one that's pretty good."

As far back as 1998, Breyer has called for the abolition of mandatory minimum sentences, which mandate minimum prison terms by law according to the crime, amount of drugs, or other factors, and give judges no discretion to lower those sentences. He has said they "set back the cause of justice" because they don't allow for exceptions depending on the circumstances of a given case.

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Particularly for drug crimes, they have sent low-level drug offenders to prison for sentences that start at 5 or 10 years and quickly ratchet up from there.

Kennedy has also been a longtime opponent of mandatory minimum sentences, although he didn't raise that specific issue during the hearing Monday. He blamed them for prison overcrowding in 2003. Since that time, federal prison populations continued to balloon, with U.S. incarceration rates remaining the highest of any country in the world. In his 2003 testimony before the same congressional committee, Kennedy provided an example of a hypothetical 18-year-old who might be subject to mandatory minimum sentences:

You'll have a young man, and he shouldn't be doing this, but he's raising marijuana in the woods. That makes him a distributor. And he's got his dad's hunting rifle in the car, he forgot about it and he wants to do target practice, that makes him armed. He's looking at 15 years.

Reform of criminal justice issues has become an increasingly bipartisan issue, since U.S. Attorney General Eric Holder declared in the spring of 2013 that "Too many people go to too many prisons for far too long for no good law enforcement reason."

And there are several bipartisan proposals in Congress to reform criminal justice policies, including rolling back mandatory minimum sentences for drug offenses. Still, there remain some ardent opponents, including Senate Judiciary Chairman Chuck Grassley (R-IA), who recently referred to criminal justice reformers as part of the "leniency industrial complex," seemingly the newest version of "soft on crime."

BY: LEON IRBY

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NETANYAHU BACKTRACKS ON STATEHOOD; OBAMA CALLS MARCH 27, 2015

There was a 'manifest pattern of attacks' by Islamic State on Yazidis as well as Christians and other minorities as it laid siege to towns and villages in Iraq.

The U.N. investigators also cited allegations that ISIL had used chlorine gas, a prohibited chemical weapon, against Iraqi soldiers in the western province of Anbar in September.

Captured women and children were treated as 'spoils of war', and often subjected to rape or sexual slavery, it said.

The report said that ISIL's Islamic sharia courts in Mosul had also meted out cruel punishments including stoning and amputation. 'Thirteen teenage boys were sentenced to death for watching a football match,' it said.

The U.N. investigators said it was 'widely alleged' that Iraqi government forces had used barrel bombs, an indiscriminate weapon banned by international law, but this required further investigation.

Netanyahu backtracks on statehood; Obama calls

JERUSALEM — In conciliatory moves, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu on Thursday backtracked from a pre-election vow to oppose an independent Palestinian state and reached out to repair damaged relations with President Obama.

"I don't want a one-state solution. I want a sustainable, peaceful two-state solution, but for that, circumstances have to change," Netanyahu said on MSNBC's *Andrea Mitchell Reports* in his first interview since his Likud Party won Tuesday's election. Netanyahu also extended an olive branch to Obama, who called later Thursday to congratulate the prime minister on his victory.

The two leaders have been feuding openly over Netanyahu's earlier hard-line stance against a Palestinian state, as well as any potential U.S. deal with Iran on its nuclear program.

Netanyahu pledged Thursday to work with the president. "America has no greater ally than Israel, and Israel has no greater ally than the United States," he said.

White House spokesman Jose Earnest said Obama reiterated his support for a Palestinian state and talks with Iran on an agreement that would prevent it from obtaining the means to make a nuclear weapons.

Before the phone call, Earnest said the Obama administration will re-evaluate its approach on Palestinian statehood and suggested the U.S. might not automatically support Israel at the United Nations, as it has in the past.

But he added that the president and his aides have not made any final decisions on a new approach or whether there will even be one. "I'm not suggesting that any policy decision has been made at this point," Earnest said. Netanyahu had announced his opposition to a Palestinian state on Monday, saying he would work to prevent one from being established. He reiterated that pledge early Tuesday after casting his ballot in Israel's parliamentary

elections. Pundits attributed the hard-line about-face as an attempt by Netanyahu — whose party was behind in the polls — to convince far right-wing voters of his nationalist credentials.

"I haven't changed my policy," Netanyahu said Thursday, referring to a speech he made in 2009 where he called for a Palestinian state. "What has changed is the reality." Netanyahu said Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas refuses to recognize a Jewish state and has formed a unity government with the militant Hamas, a group that calls for the destruction of Israel. "I was talking about what is achievable and what is not achievable," Netanyahu said, referring to his earlier comments that he didn't support a Palestinian state. "To make it achievable, then you have to have real negotiations with people who are committed to peace. We are. It's time that we saw the pressure on the Palestinians to show that they are committed, too."

After Tuesday's vote, Netanyahu's Likud Party came out on top with 30 seats in the new Knesset, or parliament — six seats more than the opposition Zionist Union, led by Isaac Herzog. Netanyahu still needs to form a coalition government with at least 61 seats in the 120-seat Knesset to start his fourth term as prime minister.

Netanyahu's reversal on statehood — at odds with past statements and much of the international community's support for a two-state solution — marked another flash point with the White House after the Israeli leader spoke before Congress last month without Obama's approval. The administration has been prodding Israel and Palestinians to make progress in peace talks on creating an independent Palestinian state.

"By coming to the U.S., I did not mean any disrespect or attempt at partisanship, but I was merely speaking of something that I view could endanger the survival of Israel," Netanyahu said Thursday, referring to his talk about the U.S. negotiations with Iran. While "we have our differences on Iran," Netanyahu said Israel has no choice but to work with Obama and the United States. "We're allies," he said. "We have to consult each other, not have fiats or unilateral imposition, but negotiated peace with our neighbors and support between allies." Earnest earlier ruled out that Obama would bring up Netanyahu's "divisive" election rhetoric about the high number of Arab voters going to the polls. Earnest described those comments as a "cynical Election Day strategy."

Herzog, the Zionist Union opposition leader, said Thursday that he could not in good conscience join a Likud-led government. He criticized Netanyahu's comments, saying they "touched on racism" and were founded on "lies, hostility and fear-mongering." Netanyahu told MSNBC he was simply trying to get Israelis out to vote.

"I wasn't trying to suppress a vote," he said, adding that quite a few Arab voters were in

favor of Likud. "I was trying to get something to counter a foreign-funded effort to get votes that are intended to topple my party."

Polar bear injures sleeping tourist in Norway's Arctic

COPENHAGEN, Denmark (AP) — A Czech tourist suffered minor injuries when a polar bear attacked the tent he was sleeping in on the remote Arctic archipelago of Svalbard, Norwegian authorities said Thursday.

Police spokesman Vidar Arnesen said the man was among a group of six that was on a combined ski and snow scooter trip on the remote islands more than 500 miles north of the Norwegian mainland. The group was camping north of the main town of Longyearbyen.

The man, Jakub Moravec, told local media he hoped to be out of the hospital later Thursday.

"Now I am fine. I have some scratches in the face, on one arm and on the back. But I feel fine," he told the *Svalbardposten* newspaper. No one else was injured in Thursday's attack. Another person in the group who slept in a separate tent, Zuzana Hakova, told the newspaper her mother shot three times at the bear, prompting the animal to flee. It was eventually found and killed by authorities. Moravec and Hakova told *Svalbardposten* that they also had traveled to Svalbard to see Friday's total solar eclipse.

Lodging on Svalbard has been sold out for years for the eclipse, and visitors are reminded often that polar bears roam.

Authorities say that when moving outside of settlements, people must carry firearms. Moravec said the bear attack hadn't scared him.

"I'd gladly go out to the mountains on Svalbard again," he was quoted as saying.

Thousands of Sinkholes Open at Edge of Dead Sea

You'll find shells on the shores of many bodies of water; on the banks of the Dead Sea, you'll find sinkholes, and more than 3,000 of them at that. Their existence isn't new—ABC News reports the first one opened up three decades ago, and a 2005 *Smithsonian* article tallied more than 1,000—but their number and pace are grabbing notice. An environmental expert puts it plainly: We're to blame. "These sinkholes are a direct result of the inappropriate mismanagement of water resources in the region," says Gidon Bromberg, a director with EcoPeace Middle East. And they're causing real problems. *Haaretz* in late January reported that sinkholes have crept up to Route 90, the road adjacent to the Dead Sea, causing part of the road to sink and triggering a temporary closure that a local official framed as devastating for tourism in the region. "You might as well just wipe it off the map."

Experts have long warned the Dead Sea itself could be wiped off the map: It's dropping four feet per year, and *Smithsonian* explained the science of the shrinkage: "The fresh water

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aquifers along the perimeter of the lake are receding. As this fresh water diffuses into salt deposits beneath the surface of the shoreline, the water slowly dissolves the deposits until the earth above collapses without warning." The sinkholes are not just unpredictable, says Bromberg. They also emerge in groups and open into each other, growing mammoth ones. He sees a path to stabilization, though: diverting more of the Jordan River's fresh water into the Dead Sea. Meanwhile, Israel and Jordan last month signed an agreement that will see water from the Red Sea channeled into the Dead Sea, the *Jerusalem Post* reported, though some have expressed skepticism about the plan.

530 years after death, Richard III gets proper burial

BOSWORTH, England — It's not every day that the medieval skeleton of a long lost king is taken on a tour of the English countryside. It happened Sunday for King Richard III, whose bones were found under a parking lot three years ago.

Even though it's been 530 years since his death, the king's remains were transported in a lead-lined coffin from the University of Leicester, near where he was discovered by archaeologists in 2012, to the field where he died in this heartlands county.

The casket's public route past lush green pasture and stone walls was intended to mirror his last days before he was killed in 1485 fighting Henry Tudor at the Battle of Bosworth.

This weekend marked the start of a week of events and commemorations related to the reburial of Richard III, the last English king to die on a battlefield. His death heralded the end of the War of the Roses — a particularly troubled and gruesome period of English history that saw the royal houses of Lancaster and York wage numerous bloody battles in their quest for the throne.

Around 2,000 people, many wearing period costumes and participating in historical reenactments, were at Bosworth on Sunday to pay their respects to what's left of Richard III. Chief among them was Michael Ibsen, a 17th generation nephew of the king whose DNA was a crucial link in helping prove the identity of the long-dead monarch.

Ibsen, a Canadian cabinetmaker who now lives in London, hand-carved his distant relative's oak coffin and was among a small group of people who placed white roses on the casket during a short ceremony held in brilliant sunshine.

"When I was sitting on the platform at the university, and the coffin was right there, I was thinking: 'How on earth did I come to be sitting just a few feet away from the coffin of Richard III, having made it myself.' It's just been amazing," Ibsen said.

Richard III will be formally laid to rest on Thursday at Leicester Cathedral, in an elaborate ceremony described by local church organizers as intimate, thoughtful and harking back to pre-Reformation times.

It will be attended by members of the royal family and other dignitaries. It will be the first ceremonial burial of a British monarch since 1952.

"We need to honor that this was a crowned and anointed king of England and that he was not treated with dignity and respect when he fell in battle," said Tim Stevens, the bishop of Leicester, who presided over Sunday's ceremony in Bosworth that included local cadets from Britain's armed forces, as well as soldiers from the King's Guard.

For Joe Bristoll, 18, a factory worker from the nearby town of Tamworth who was dressed up as a knight, celebrating the occasion was important because Richard III's death was one of the great turning points in English history that ushered in a dramatic change in the line of succession.

But there was a lighter side, too, Bristoll said. "It's the kind of thing that every boy likes doing, playing dress-up, really," he said, referring to his sword, armor and other knight's articles.

Richard III was effectively lost to history until a few years ago, when researchers discovered he was actually buried under a parking lot in central Leicester, a city of about 800,000 people north of London. The king was dramatized by William Shakespeare in his play *Richard III* as a child killer with a hunched back, but that portrayal is now challenged by many historians who argue he was a good king whose reputation was unfairly tarnished.

For years archaeologists suspected that Richard III had been hastily buried in a nearby church, but Henry VIII had ordered the demolition of the Greyfriars Friary in 1538 and over the centuries the land had been redeveloped and built over many times. It wasn't until Philippa Langley, an amateur historian with a lifelong interest in Richard III, raised the funds to conduct an excavation of the site that his true location was unveiled. "I can only describe it as a feeling that I was walking on Richard's grave," Langley said, describing what motivated her to push for an investigation of the area that led to the discovery.

Langley contested Shakespeare's characterization of Richard III as a murderous villain responsible for the deaths of two of his young nephews — princes who represented a potential challenge to his rule as king.

"Shakespeare's account was a very powerful one, but it's just a portrayal and unfortunately it's the one most people know about," Langley said. She said her next project is to find more conclusive evidence about the princes' mysterious disappearance. "That's the last thing we need to find out (to clear his name) and we think we should be able to answer that," she said.

Yemen rebel leader vows to take fight to embattled president

Yemen's Shiite rebel leader escalated his attack Sunday against the country's embattled President Abed-Rabbo Mansour Hadi, calling

him a "puppet" of the United States and regional powers.

Abdel-Malik al-Houthi, the rebel leader backed by supporters of former president Ali Abdullah Saleh, vowed to send fighters into the southern part of the country where Hadi has taken refuge against the rebels, the Associated Press reported.

Al-Houthi said the move is aimed at fighting al-Qaeda and other militant groups, as well as forces loyal to Hadi in the south.

His one-hour fiery speech came hours after his militia seized the country's third largest city of Taiz, an important station in its advance. He called Hadi a "puppet" to international and regional powers who want to "import the Libyan model" to Yemen. He named the United States, Israel, Saudi Arabia and Qatar as conspirators against Yemen.

"The decision (to mobilize) aims to confront the criminal forces, al-Qaeda, and its partners and sisters, and all those who want to take cover in regions or using political pretexts," al-Houthi said.

The Shiite militia had also seized Taiz's airport, the AP said.

Thousands of people took to the streets of Taiz to protest against the Houthis and Saleh loyalists, prompting the rebels to disperse them by firing into the air and beating them back with batons, the AP reported.

It comes the day after the Houthis called for a general mobilization against forces loyal to Hadi.

On Saturday, U.S. troops evacuated a southern air base after al-Qaeda seized a nearby town amid growing violence in the war-torn nation. About 100 American troops and special forces units were stationed at the Al Anad air base, near the southern city of al-Houta, which was seized by al-Qaeda's Yemen branch — considered the terror organization's most dangerous — on Friday. In a statement, U.S. State Department spokesman Jeff Rathke said: "Due to the deteriorating security situation in Yemen, the U.S. government has temporarily relocated its remaining personnel out of Yemen." He said there is "no military solution to Yemen's current crisis," and added: "We urge the immediate cessation of all unilateral and offensive military actions."

The BBC, citing unnamed officials, said the militants were later pushed out of al-Houta by Yemen's armed forces.

The evacuation of U.S. troops comes amid growing sectarian violence in the mostly Sunni nation under assault from the Houthis, who are the sworn enemies of the Sunni al-Qaeda terrorists.

The Houthis took over the Yemeni capital of Sanaa in September. The rebels control at least nine of Yemen's 21 provinces and have seized parts of the U.S.-backed government, threatening a key American anti-terrorism partner in the region.

Hadi, the embattled president, fled to Aden in the south of the country last month after escaping house arrest at the hands of Houthis in Sanaa. Over the weekend, he made a

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They're also planning a letter-writing campaign in the next few months. Gov. Scott Walker's budget calls for a \$300 million system-wide cut.

State lawmaker considers religious freedom bill from 2013

A Wisconsin lawmaker who previously proposed a religious freedom law said he does not currently plan to re-introduce the measure, but continues consultation with attorneys. Rep. Dave Craig, R-Big Bend, was the author of a constitutional amendment in 2013 that would have "protected the right of conscience from state action."

That bill never made it past committee stage in either the Senate or Assembly that year. Craig said since then, he's met with attorneys specializing in constitutional law.

"I think at this point, I'm content with the language as it is in the constitution that we don't need anything further right now," Craig said.

He said he would reconsider if a court case showed the protections were not strong enough.

"I think it would take some kind of court actions that would in some way upend what we think the language in the constitution does in protecting religious freedom," Craig said. "I don't expect that to happen, because I think the language is quite clear in the constitution."

Wisconsin's constitution currently states that "the right of every person to worship almighty god according to the dictates of conscience shall never be infringed" and goes on to say "nor shall control of or interference with the rights of conscience be permitted." The state also bars discrimination based on sexual orientation, which is currently not law in Indiana.

Craig said he will continue to consult with attorneys and keep an eye on the courts, but when asked if the controversy had anything to do with the bill not coming up again, he said it did not.

"No, I don't think we should duck issues based on what we think is a dangerous political situation," Craig said. "My goal as a policymaker is to make sure that my constituents and all Wisconsinites' religious freedoms are able to be expressed and not impeded by government in any way that we possibly can as lawmakers."

Iran Nuclear Agreement Opens 'Window of Possibility,' John Kerry Says

Secretary of State John Kerry dismissed the notion that Iran came out victorious in the interim agreement reached Thursday to dismantle the country's nuclear program in exchange for lifting economic sanctions.

"This is the most extreme and intrusive inspection structure of an arms control agreement. We have entirely new mechanisms to be able to gain access, to be able to inspect, to hold accountable what is happening in the years ahead," Kerry said in an interview with ABC News Chief Foreign Correspondent Terry Moran. "Those people

who criticize it like that, they don't have an alternative."

Kerry concedes that Iran could still try to cheat, despite the agreement, "but we believe we have an ability to be able to know that," he told Moran. The deal could also still fall apart, Kerry concedes.

"Of course it could [fall apart]. It could. What we did was open a window to a possibility," Kerry said.

While negotiators still have three months to write down the technicalities of a deal, Thursday's announcement made clear Tehran will have to significantly cut the number of centrifuges from nearly 20,000 to just over 5,000. It was also announced that United Nations led monitoring and inspections will be enhanced.

Opponents of the emerging accord, including Israel and Republican leaders in Congress, reacted with skepticism to the announcement. Prime Minister Netanyahu said the deal would "threaten the survival of Israel."

"Such a deal would not block Iran's path to the bomb. It would pave it. It would increase the risks of nuclear proliferation in the region and the risks of a horrific war," said Netanyahu. "The alternative is standing firm and increasing the pressure on Iran until a better deal is achieved."

President Obama tried to reassure critics saying the deal was not based on trust but based on unprecedented verification.

Obama, speaking at the White House, said the agreement was "a good deal, a deal that meets our core objectives," while Iranian Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif called it a "win-win outcome."

Kerry pointed out that the aim of the agreement was never to eliminate Iran's nuclear capabilities.

"They have one, they already have it. Long before I became Secretary of State and before Obama became President. They had a nuclear program and guess what? They were already enriching," he said.

Sanctions on Iran will remain active until a final deal is drafted and announced on June 30.

Report: Co-pilot persuaded captain to leave cockpit

The co-pilot of the doomed Germanwings flight repeatedly suggested that the captain leave the cockpit, then locked him out and stymied his desperate efforts to return, according to data recorder transcripts reported Sunday.

Flight 9525's captain, Patrick Sondheimer, screamed, "For God's sake, open the door!" when he realized co-pilot Andreas Lubitz had essentially jammed the cockpit door, according to transcripts obtained by the German newspaper *Bild*.

French and German investigators say Lubitz, 27, deliberately crashed the Düsseldorf-bound jet into the French Alps less than an hour after departing Barcelona on Tuesday, killing himself and the other 149 people on board.

In Rome, Pope Francis offered prayers for the victims after Palm Sunday Mass in St. Peter's Square.

The transcript in *Bild*, translated by London's *Daily Mail*, describes a tranquil cockpit after takeoff where Lubitz suggested Sondheimer go to the toilet, noting that Sondheimer had not done so in Barcelona. About 20 minutes later, Lubitz says, "You can go now."

Two minutes later the pilot says, "You can take over," and apparently leaves the cockpit. The plane begins its descent almost immediately at 10:29 a.m. local time.

Within minutes, *Bild* describes a loud bang as someone attempts to enter the cockpit, then Sondheimer yells, "For God's sake, open the door!" Passengers are heard screaming.

At 10:35 a.m., more banging, and less than two minutes later the pilot is heard yelling, "Open the goddam door!"

At 10:40 a.m., the right wing of the jet clips a mountain and the last sounds are those of passengers screaming, *Bild* reports.

German newspaper *Die Welt* reported that Lubitz was suffering from a "psychosomatic" illness and that investigators found prescription medication in his Düsseldorf apartment. Other German media reported that Lubitz apparently suffered from depression. According to *Bild*, Lubitz was being treated for vision problems that he feared could jeopardize his career.

The pastor of the Lutheran church in Lubitz's hometown of Montabaur said Sunday that the community stands by him and his family.

"For us, it makes it particularly difficult that the only victim from Montabaur is suspected to have caused this tragedy," pastor Michael Dietrich told the Associated Press. "The co-pilot, the family, belong to our community, and we stand by this, and we embrace them and will not hide this, and want to support the family in particular."

Philip Bramley, whose son Paul, 27, a Briton, died in the crash, said such an incident "should never happen again."

He said, "What happened on the morning of 24 March was the act of a person who at the very least was ill," Sky News reported Saturday. "If there was a motive or reason, we don't want to hear it. It's not relevant.

What is relevant is this should never happen again. My son and everyone on that plane should not be forgotten ever."

Bramley added: "I believe the airlines should be more transparent and our finest pilots looked after properly. We put our lives and our children's lives in their hands."

Air Canada plane skids off runway; 25 hurt

An Air Canada plane skidded off the runway at Halifax Stanfield International Airport in Nova Scotia, injuring 25 people on board, the airline said Sunday.

The airline said Flight AC624, an Airbus 320 that left Toronto late Saturday, had 133 passengers and five crew members. Air Canada said the aircraft landed in stormy conditions at 12:43 a.m. Sunday.

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"They touched down 1,100 feet (330 meters) short of the runway so I'd say they're pretty lucky," Mike Cunningham, a regional manager for Canada's Transport Safety Board, told a news conference.

Cunningham said the plane hit an antenna array, shearing the main landing gear off before sliding on its belly onto the runway for another 1,100 feet before coming to a stop. Cunningham said there was significant damage to the plane and could not rule out weather as a factor. He also said he believes a power line was severed, which led to a loss of power at the airport.

Air Canada Chief Operating Officer Klaus Goersch said 25 people were taken to local hospitals and all but one of them were released.

"All of us at Air Canada are greatly relieved that there have been no critical injuries as a result of this incident," Goersch said. Passengers told the Associated Press they believe the aircraft hit a power line as it came in to land and described the plane skidding on its belly for some time. Passengers also said they evacuated the plane -- and were left standing on the tarmac, some in their stocking feet, for more than an hour in a brutal snowstorm before buses arrived. Spurway said the incident was technically not a crash because the plane, which had departed Toronto, is believed to have been under control when it came into the airfield. He added that there is no indication what caused the hard landing.

Greg Wright, waiting for his 13-year-old son, who was a passenger on the plane, told CBC he thought his son was joking when he called from the aircraft.

Wright said: "He said, 'We crashed, we crashed.' I said, 'Where are you?' He said, 'I'm on the runway.' I was panicked."

The airport said operations resumed early Sunday. Federal investigators were investigating the crash.

4 dead, 16 hurt in oil platform fire in Gulf of Mexico

At least four people were killed and 16 workers injured when a fire erupted early Wednesday on an oil platform in the Gulf of Mexico belonging to Mexico's state petroleum giant Pemex, the company said in a statement.

The company said one of those who died when the fire broke out at dawn at the Abkatun Permanente platform was a contractor for the Mexican oil services company Cotemar.

Pemex said on Twitter that it was using eight firefighting boats to battle the blaze.

Two of the injured were in serious condition and 300 workers were evacuated from the Abkatun platform, located in the Campeche Sound, near the coast of the states of Campeche and Tabasco.

A spokesman for emergency services in nearby Ciudad del Carmen, however, put the number of injured at 45, Reuters reports. The Abkatun-Pol-Chuc offshore oilfields, where the dewatering and pumping platform

is located, produced under 300,000 barrels per day in 2013, a decrease of more than half from a peak in the mid-1990s of 700,000 barrels, according to the US Energy Information Administration.

At least 37 people were killed in a blast at the company's Mexico City headquarters in 2013, according to Reuters.

In 2007, at the Kerrick Kab 121 platform further up the coast, 21 workers were killed in a spill of crude oil and a natural gas leak, Diario de Yucatan reports. The accident was blamed on intense waves that hit the tower and caused the valve assembly to explode. The worst spill from a platform in Mexico occurred in 1970 when a drilling rig, the Ixtoc 1, exploded, spilling 140 million gallons, the newspaper reports. It took nine months from PEMEX and several U.S. to bring the spill under control and clean up the disaster.

Iraq declares victory over Islamic State in Tikrit

TIKRIT, Iraq (AP) — Iraq declared a "magnificent victory" Wednesday over the Islamic State group in Tikrit, a key step in driving the militants out of their biggest strongholds.

Iraqi Defense Minister Khalid al-Obeidi made the pronouncement, saying security forces have "accomplished their mission" in the monthlong offensive to rid Saddam Hussein's hometown and the broader Salahuddin province of the militant group. "We have the pleasure, with all our pride, to announce the good news of a magnificent victory," Obeidi said in a video statement. "Here we come to you, Anbar! Here we come to you, Nineveh, and we say it with full resolution, confidence, and persistence," naming other provinces under the sway of the extremists.

Extremists from the Islamic State group seized Tikrit last summer during its advance across northern and western Iraq. The battle for Tikrit is seen as a key step toward eventually driving the militants out of Mosul, Iraq's second-largest city and the provincial capital of Nineveh.

Iraqi forces, including soldiers, police officers, Shiite militias and Sunni tribes, launched a large-scale operation to recapture Tikrit on March 2. Last week, the United States launched airstrikes on the embattled city at the request of the Iraqi government. Recapturing Tikrit would be the biggest win so far for Baghdad's Shiite-led government. The city is about 130 kilometers (80 miles) north of Baghdad and lies on the road connecting the capital to Mosul. Retaking it will help Iraqi forces have a major supply link for any future operation against Mosul. Earlier Wednesday, Iraqi security forces fired on snipers and searched homes for remaining militants. Soldiers fanned out in circles from the charred skeletal remains of the Salahuddin provincial government complex, captured the day before.

Militant mortar fire, which had been intense over previous days, fell silent Wednesday,

with commanders saying only a few militant snipers remained in the city. They spoke on condition of anonymity to discuss ongoing operations.

The objective, Interior Minister Mohammed Salem al-Ghabban said Wednesday, is now to restore normalcy as quickly as possible.

"After clearing the area from roadside bombs and car bombs, we will reopen police stations to restore normalcy in the city, and we will form committees to supervise the return of people displaced from their homes," al-Ghabban said. He said the government will help displaced residents return and that a civil defense unit will be combing the city for roadside bombs and car bombs.

"Daesh is completely defeated," he added, using an Arabic name for the group. During a visit to Tikrit, Iraqi Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi said that military engineering units still need more time to clear the city from booby traps. He also waved an Iraqi flag in photos posted on his social media accounts.

"God's willing, there will be a fund to rebuild areas destroyed by Daesh and the war. Tikrit and Salahuddin areas will be covered by this fund," al-Abadi said.

A satellite image of Tikrit, released in February by the United Nations, showed at least 536 buildings in the city have been affected by the fighting. Of those, at least 137 were completely destroyed and 241 were severely damaged. The current offensive also exacerbated previous damage, particularly in the south where clashes have been the most intense in recent days.

Iraq's parliament speaker, Salim al-Jabouri, called on the government to find the means to resettle residents from damaged Tikrit buildings. He said this "requires effort and support by the central government in order to financially support the people in rebuilding their houses."

Aziz Jaber, a political science professor at Baghdad's Mustansiriyah University, said retaking Tikrit could be seen as the "beginning of the end" for the Islamic State group in Iraq.

"Daesh was very talented in psychological warfare, but not any more after its defeat in Tikrit," he said. "Now, the morale of the Iraqi forces is high, while that of Daesh is low." Meanwhile, the U.N. mission to Iraq said Wednesday that violence claimed the lives of at least 997 people in March, a slight drop from the February death toll.

UNAMI said in a statement that among them were 729 civilians while the rest were security forces. It said at least 2,172 people were wounded, including 1,785 civilians. The new U.N. envoy to Iraq, Jan Kubis, said he is shocked to see that Iraqis continue to "bear the brunt" of the ongoing violence in the country.

Kubis also said Wednesday that the offensive in Tikrit is "a victory for all the Iraqi people," and that the U.N. was ready to assist the provincial and national authorities.