

OBAMA DERIDES 'RECKLESS' PLAN TO REPEAL NOW, REPLACE LATER

WASHINGTON: President Barack Obama derided as "reckless" on Friday a Republican plan to repeal his health care law now and replace it later, predicting that the replacement may never come. In an opinion piece in the New England Journal of Medicine, Obama sought to dispel the notion that Republicans could fulfill their campaign promises to gut the Affordable Care Act immediately without risking devastating consequences for consumers. Calling that approach "irresponsible," Obama urged Republicans to do the work now to develop an alternative. "Given that Republicans have yet to craft a replacement plan, and that unforeseen

events might overtake their planned agenda, there might never be a second vote on a plan to replace the ACA if it is repealed," Obama wrote.

"And if a second vote does not happen, tens of millions of Americans will be harmed." In his final days in office, Obama has been ramping up a public push to pressure Republicans over their plans to undermine "Obamacare," his signature legislative achievement. He traveled Wednesday to Capitol Hill to strategize with Democratic lawmakers, and on Friday he will answer questions on health care during a live-streamed interview at Blair House, the government guest house across from the White

House. Although Democrats are largely resigned to the likelihood the GOP will succeed in repealing the law, they are seeking to exploit divisions among Republicans who for years have been unable to unite behind an alternative. President-elect Donald Trump's team has said repeal is the first order of business, and leaders in Congress hope to deliver a bill voiding much of the law to Trump by late February. Yet with no replacement ready to go, they've been discussing a repeal that wouldn't take effect for 18 months or longer, giving them time to devise a new plan.

Although House Speaker Paul Ryan said this

week that lawmakers will vote on a replacement this year as well, it's unclear how Republicans could move that quickly to replace a law that took more than a year to craft - especially given GOP disagreements about how to pay for popular parts of the law they hope to preserve.

But Obama said the uncertainty of a repeal with no replacement could lead insurance companies to bail on the health care marketplaces during the phase-out years, leaving millions without insurance. He said it would set up a "cliff" with harmful consequences if lawmakers fail to approve a replacement in time. —AP

FLORIDA SHOOTING SUSPECT COULD FACE DEATH PENALTY

MIAMI: US authorities have charged the Iraq war vet accused of shooting five people dead and wounding six at a Florida airport with federal crimes that could carry the death penalty. The Justice Department on Saturday charged Esteban Santiago, 26, with firearms offenses and carrying out an act of violence when he opened fire at the busy Fort Lauderdale airport. Santiago, who had earlier shown signs of "erratic behavior," arrived Friday on a flight from Alaska. At baggage claim he retrieved a 9mm semi-automatic handgun and ammunition that he had declared and stowed inside his checked luggage, then allegedly loaded the weapon in a bathroom and opened fire in the crowded baggage claim area of Terminal 2.

Once his ammunition was exhausted Santiago lay on the floor with his arms and legs spread out and peacefully surrendered when a sheriff deputy approached him, witnesses quoted in US media said. The hail of bullets sent thousands scrambling for safety and shut down the airport, a major gateway to the Caribbean and Latin America, for about 16 hours. If convicted of the charges Santiago could face the death penalty or life in prison, US Attorney Wifredo Ferrer said in a statement.

"Santiago started shooting, aiming at his victims' heads until he was out of ammunition," Ferrer said. FBI special agent George Piro said agents were looking into the motives for the attack, including "continuing to look at the terrorism angle." Piro said Santiago appeared to be acting alone and that "every indication" is that he followed rules in flying with the weapon. Santiago is scheduled to make an initial court appearance today.

'Erratic'

A former member of the Puerto Rico and Alaska National Guard, Santiago served in Iraq from April 2010 to February 2011. He ended his service in August. On November 7, Santiago walked into the FBI's office in Anchorage, Alaska and complained that his mind was being controlled by national intelligence agencies, which were forcing him to watch Islamic State jihadist videos,

authorities said. This "erratic behavior" led agents to contact local police, who took him for a mental health evaluation, Piro said. Anchorage police chief Christopher Tolley said Santiago came to the FBI office with a loaded magazine, but left his gun and newborn child in his car.

Police took Santiago's weapon for safekeeping at the time, but he was able to reclaim it on Dec 8. Tolley said it was unclear if that gun was used in the airport rampage. Santiago's brother, Bryan, criticized the way authorities handled his case. "They had him hospitalized for four days and they let him go. How are you going to let someone leave a psychological center after four days when he said he hears voices that the CIA is telling him to join certain groups?" Bryan Santiago told CNN, in a Spanish-language interview the network translated into English.

"Not everyone has the same reaction when they return from war. Some are better, and some, not so much." Authorities have not identified any victims, but three named in media reports were all getting ready to set off on cruises. They included British-born 84-year-old grandmother Olga Woltering, who was going on a family cruise with her 90-year-old husband, the Sun Sentinel reported. Terry Andres, 62, was going on vacation with his wife of nearly four decades, Ann, the Palm Beach Post reported. Other victims included Michael and Kari Oehme, a couple in their 50s. Michael was killed while his wife was wounded in the shoulder, the Miami Herald reported.

Checking weapons

The shooting renewed anxieties about security at US airports. The Transportation Security Administration - the agency responsible for airport security - lets passengers travel with unloaded firearms and ammunition as checked baggage. Congresswoman Debbie Wasserman Schultz, who represents the Florida district that includes the airport, said the rules need to be reexamined. The incident should prompt a review of "whether or not you should be allowed to check a firearm at all" - as well as how passengers should be able to retrieve checked weapons after landing, she told CNN. —AFP



FORT LAUDERDALE, Florida: George Piro, special agent in charge of the FBI's Miami Division, speaks during a news conference at Fort Lauderdale-Hollywood International Airport Terminal on Saturday. — AP

FBI AGENT WHO INTERROGATED SADDAM LEADS AIRPORT CASE

LEBANESE-AMERICAN PIRO FLUENT IN ARABIC, ASSYRIAN

FORT LAUDERDALE, Florida: The FBI agent who interrogated Saddam Hussein alone for months after the former Iraqi leader's capture is now leading the investigation into the Florida airport shooting rampage blamed on an Iraq war veteran. George Piro, special agent in charge of the FBI's Miami field office, was Saddam's sole interrogator beginning in Jan 2004. In previous interviews, Piro has said Saddam did not know his true identity - the Iraqi leader called him "Mr George" - and that he posed as a high-level envoy who answered directly to then-President George W Bush.

Now Piro, a native of Beirut, Lebanon, fluent in Arabic and Assyrian, is in charge of the FBI investigation into the shooting at Fort Lauderdale-Hollywood International Airport that left five people dead and six wounded. Federal prosecutors have charged Esteban Santiago, 26, with airport violence and firearms offenses that could bring the death penalty if he is convicted.

In announcing the charges filed Saturday, Piro said his thoughts are with the victims and their families. "I want to ensure these families that law enforcement is working tirelessly in order to ensure justice is served," he said. Piro, an FBI agent since 1999, moved with his family from Lebanon to California's San Joaquin Valley as a teenager. After high school he enlisted in the Air Force, then became a police officer for a decade

in Ceres, California, followed by a job as an investigator in the local prosecutor's office.

Once he joined the FBI in Phoenix, Piro was one of only a handful of Arabic-speaking agents - a group that suddenly was in great demand after the Sept 11, 2001 terror attacks and the subsequent US invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq. In 2003, Piro was promoted to the FBI's Counterterrorism Division at headquarters in Washington, leading to his work as Saddam's interrogator. In later interviews, including a 2008 appearance on CBS's "60 Minutes" program, Piro said he met daily with Saddam in a windowless room and worked to gain his trust by becoming his only provider of necessities and such things as paper for Saddam to write poetry.

Eventually, Piro said Saddam confirmed that Iraq did not have weapons of mass destruction prior to the US invasion but might seek them in future to deter Iran and other threats. Saddam also denied any links to Al-Qaeda and Osama bin Laden, Piro has said. Saddam also liked to brag about how he escaped US airstrikes and capture, according to Piro. "What he wanted to really illustrate is... how he was able to outsmart us," Piro told "60 Minutes". "He got rid of his normal vehicles. He got rid of the protective detail that he traveled with, really just to change his signature." Saddam was later tried and executed by hanging in Dec 2006.

Interrogator

Santiago, the airport shooting suspect, also served in Iraq in 2010 with the Puerto Rico National Guard as part of an engineering battalion, guard officials said. Santiago later served in the Army Reserves and Alaska National Guard. After Iraq, Piro moved on to top FBI counterterrorism jobs in Washington, including a White House position involving high-value detainee interrogation that works with various intelligence agencies.

Since taking the top Miami FBI job, Piro has overseen work in more domestic areas such as healthcare fraud, identity theft and tax fraud, Ponzi schemes and mortgage fraud - all areas where South Florida is among the nation's leaders. Bank robberies, violent street gangs, public corruption and smuggling of humans and drugs round out much of the work for the Miami office's roughly 1,000 agents and employees.

Since Friday's shooting, Piro has been careful to say no evidence linking Santiago to terrorism has been found but such connections have also not been ruled out. "It's way too early in the investigation. We're looking over all of his social media, things like that. It's giving us a picture of the individual, but it's way too early for us to rule out anything," Piro said Saturday. "We're pursuing all angles on what prompted him to carry out this horrific attack." — AP



FLORIDA: Law enforcement vehicles are parked outside of terminal 2 at the Fort Lauderdale-Hollywood International Airport in Fort Lauderdale, Florida. — AP

WORK TOGETHER FOR CHANGE, SAYS OBAMA IN FAREWELL PREVIEW

WASHINGTON: President Barack Obama on Saturday spoke about the importance of ordinary people working together for change in a preview of the farewell address he will deliver in Chicago next week. Many departing US presidents have given farewell addresses as they leave office, a tradition dating to the first US president, George Washington, in 1796. "The running thread through my career has been the notion that when ordinary people get involved, get engaged, and come together in collective effort, things change for the better," Obama said in his weekly radio address.

"That's the belief at the heart of this precious American experiment in self-government. It's what gives work and purpose to each new generation." Obama urged listeners to "remember that America is a story told over a longer time horizon, in fits and starts, punctuated at times by hardship, but ultimately written by generations of citizens who've somehow worked together, without fanfare, to form a more perfect union." He then highlighted some of the accomplishments during his presidency, which include sweeping improvements to health care coverage, bringing home troops from Iraq and Afghanistan, reaching a nuclear deal with Iran, and bringing "the world together around a climate agreement."

Nevertheless "our work is and will always be unfinished. That's the imperative of citizenship - the idea that with hard work, people who love their country can change it." The Hawaii-born Obama said he chose to deliver Tuesday's farewell address in Chicago "not only because it's my hometown - where I met my wife and we started a family - but also because it's really where my career in public service began." The White House said it was the first time a president returns to his hometown to deliver such a speech. Democrat Obama hands the presidency over to Republican Donald Trump in Washington on January 20. — AFP

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