



Help is on the way

Tad Agoglia with First Response Team of America helped evacuate a family Thursday in the Norfolk, Va., area. Floodwaters were expected to continue to rise.

STEPHEN M. KATZ | THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

Nation Watch

TODAY'S TOP 5

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1. EASTERN U.S. HIT BY STORMS

NORFOLK, Va. | A drenching, wind-driven rain lashed much of the Atlantic seaboard Thursday, flooding streets, closing schools and causing three deaths in hard-hit Virginia and one in North Carolina. The torrential rains and winds gusting in excess of 30 mph were the work of late-season Tropical Storm Ida. A related photo is above.

2. SCAM TOTAL MAY EXCEED \$1 BILLION

NORTH MIAMI BEACH, Fla. | The suspected Ponzi scheme run by a high-profile South Florida lawyer, Scott Rothstein, is likely to exceed \$1 billion and involve thousands of investors in the U.S. and abroad, a top FBI official said Thursday.

3. SMOKING SHOWS SLIGHT INCREASE

ATLANTA | Cigarette smoking rose slightly for the first time in almost 15 years, dashing health officials' hopes that the U.S. smoking rate had moved permanently below 20 percent. A little under 21 percent of U.S. adults said they smoked, according to a 2008 national survey by the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. The year before, 19.8 percent said they were smokers.

4. NOT GUILTY PLEA IN 2003 WILDFIRE

SAN BERNARDINO, Calif. | A prison inmate has pleaded not guilty to arson and murder charges for a 2003 wildfire that destroyed nearly 1,000 homes and was linked to five deaths. Rickie Lee Fowler entered his plea Thursday. The so-called Old Fire erupted in the San Bernardino Mountains in October 2003 and swept across 140 square miles.

5. WARHOL SELLS FOR \$43.8 MILLION

NEW YORK | A painting by Andy Warhol, "200 One Dollar Bills," brought the equivalent of 43.8 million dollar bills at auction. The piece was one of Warhol's first silkscreens.

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DIPLOMACY | Obama trip highlights Asia in transition

A HOST OF CHALLENGES

China and Japan are claiming assertive roles as the president starts his first trip to the area.

By MARK S. SMITH
The Associated Press

WASHINGTON | Facing a daunting array of Asian challenges, President Barack Obama left Thursday on his first major trip to the region, where a surging China and newly assertive Japan are chipping away at America's standing on diplomacy and trade.

Obama took off Thursday for Tokyo on an Asian journey that will add four countries — Japan, China, Singapore and South Korea — to the 16 he's already visited.

The trip also will highlight a dramatically changing continent.

The president stopped briefly for refueling at Elmendorf Air Force Base in Alaska, where he told more than 1,000 troops and their families that he will not dispatch them into conflict without proper support — including the backing of the American people.

Obama was arriving in Japan a day later than planned, his schedule scrambled by Tuesday's memorial for the shooting victims at Fort Hood, Texas. His stop in Singapore for the annual Asia-Pacific eco-



AL GRILLO | THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

President Barack Obama spoke Thursday at Elmendorf Air Force Base on his way to a four-nation Asia trip.

economic summit, originally scheduled for two days, was cut back to 20 hours.

Awaiting Obama in Japan was a new prime minister, Yukio Hatoyama, who swept to power vowing a more equal partnership with Washington. He has also promised to halt Japan's refueling of U.S.-led forces in Afghanistan, review its basing agreement for 47,000 U.S. troops and explore the possibility of a new Asian trading bloc excluding the United States.

The 21-nation Pacific Rim meeting usually promotes free trade. But this year, with the global financial crisis still reverberating, the tide has been running the other way.

"There is creeping protectionism," declared Singapore Foreign Minister George Yeo. "That is very dangerous. It is a slippery slope."

While Obama's Singapore stop was trimmed, there was no stinting on China. Easily his biggest challenge in Asia is that rising economic and military power.

While America is still struggling out of its deepest recession in decades, China's economy is bouncing back briskly. Yet a vast trade gap exists. China's currency is — by U.S. reckoning — hugely undervalued, although the government signaled Thursday it's ready to allow its currency to rise. And there are disputes between the two countries on everything from Chinese tire exports to DVD piracy.

Obama hopes to enlist China's help in thwarting nuclear programs in Iran and North Korea and cooperation on a new climate treaty whose outlines are due to be agreed on next month in Copenhagen.

Parents in hoax to plead guilty

FORT COLLINS, Colo. | The parents accused of pulling a hoax by reporting that their 6-year-old son had floated away aboard a helium balloon have agreed to plead guilty in a deal that could send them both to jail but protect the wife from deportation.

Richard Heene will plead guilty to attempting to influence a public servant, a felony, said his attorney, David Lane. Heene's wife, Mayumi, a Japanese citizen who could be deported if convicted of more serious charges, will plead guilty to a lesser charge of false reporting to authorities, a misdemeanor.

The Oct. 15 saga gripped a global audience, first with fear for the safety of 6-year-old Falcon Heene and then with anger at his parents when authorities accused them of perpetrating the hoax to drum up attention for a possible reality show.

Lane said the deal does not call for removing Falcon or the couple's two other children — ages 8 and 10 — from the parents' custody.

| The Associated Press