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Gov. Greg Abbott commutes death sentence minutes before Bart Whitaker's scheduled execution



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With rates still low, Fed officials fret over next U.S. recession

NEW YORK (Reuters) - Federal Reserve policymakers fretted on Friday that they could face the next U.S. recession with virtually the same arsenal of policies used in the last downturn and, with interest rates still relatively low, those will not pack the same punch.

In the midst of an unprecedented leadership transition, Fed officials are publicly debating whether to scrap their approach to inflation targeting, how much of its bond portfolio to retain, and how much longer they can raise interest rates in the face of an unexpectedly large boost from tax cuts and government spending.

After years of near-zero rates and \$3.5 trillion in bond purchases all meant to stimulate the economy in the wake of the 2007-2009 recession, the Fed has gradually tightened policy since late 2015. Its key rate is now in the range of 1.25 to 1.5 percent, and while the Fed plans to hike three more times this year it has also forecast that it is about halfway to its goal.

That could leave little room to provide stimulus when the world's largest economy, which is heating up, eventually turns around.

"We would be better off, rather than thinking about what we would do next time when we hit zero, making sure that we don't get back there. We just don't want to be there," Boston Fed President Eric Rosengren told a conference of economists and the majority of his colleagues at the central bank.

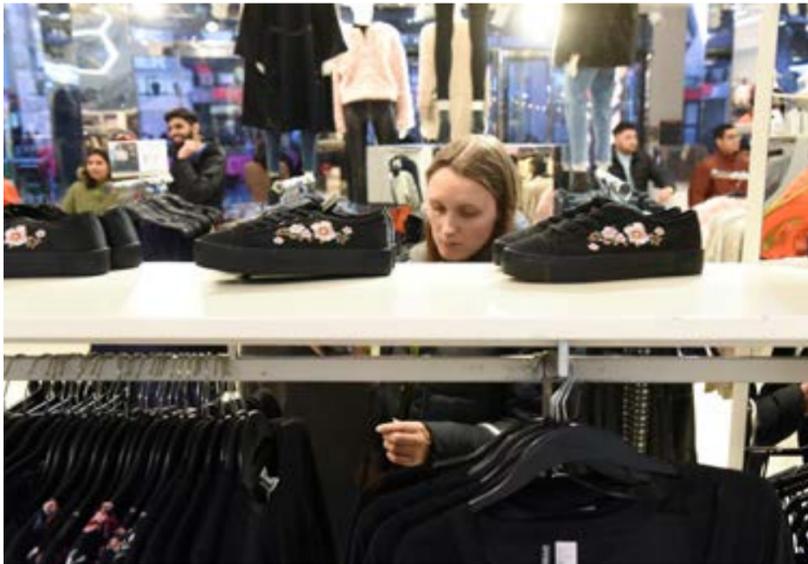
Rosengren, one of only a few sitting policymakers who also served during the last downturn, said the expanding U.S. deficits could further erode the government's ability to help curb any future recession. "With the deficits we are running up, it's not likely (fiscal policy) will be helpful in the next recession either," he said.

Since mid-December the Republican-controlled Congress and U.S. President Donald Trump aggressively cut taxes and boosted spending limits, two fiscal moves that are expected to push the annual budget deficit above \$1 trillion next year and expand the \$20 trillion national debt. That stimulus, combined with synchronized global growth, signs of U.S. inflation perking up, and unemployment near a 17-year low could set the stage for overheating that ends one of the longest economic expansions ever.

"We want more shock absorbers out there and really ... the main shock absorber is the ability to reduce the fed funds rate, which means that you want to get to a higher inflation rate so that the pre-shock fed funds rate is 4 and not 2," said Paul Krugman, the Nobel Prize-winning economist and professor at City University of New York.

In a speech to the conference hosted by the University of Chicago Booth School of Business, Krugman said every recession since 1982 has been caused by "private sector over-reach" and not Fed tightening, as in decades past.

The conference's main research paper argued the central bank should focus on



FILE PHOTO: A woman shops at an H&M store in New York City, U.S., December 23, 2017. REUTERS/Stephanie Keith/File Photo GLOBAL BUSINESS WEEK AHEAD SEARCH

cutting rates in the next recession and avoid relying on asset purchases that are less effective in stimulating investment and growth than previously thought.

In October the Fed began trimming some of its assets and it has yet to decide how far it will go. William Dudley, president of the New York Fed, told the conference that, to be sure, the ability to again purchase bonds if and when rates hit zero "seems like a good tool to

have."

The Fed's approach to any economic slowdown would likely be to cut rates, pledge further stimulus, and only then buy bonds. Rosengren and others dismissed the possibility of adopting negative interest rates, as some other central banks have done.

Yet five years of below-target inflation, combined with an aging population and slowdown in labor force growth, has sparked a

debate over ditching a long-standing 2-percent price target. Some see this month's succession of Fed Chair Janet Yellen by Jerome Powell as ideal timing to consider new frameworks that could help drive inflation, and rates, higher. Cleveland Fed President Loretta Mester, who the White House is considering naming Fed Vice Chair, told the conference the central bank could begin to reassess the framework.

Numbers starting to add up for Tesla trucks: DHL executive

(Reuters) - The numbers behind Tesla Inc's (TS-LA.O) long-distance Semi electric trucks are close to making sense for hauliers looking at a shift away from diesel that may save them tens of thousands of dollars a year, according to an executive with DHL.

Jim Monkmeyer, president, Transportation at DHL Supply Chain, was among the first to order the trucks Silicon Valley billionaire Elon Musk's company is expected to begin churning out in 2019.

He says the 10 trucks ordered are a test run and that he is still years away from switching the majority of his fleet of trucks to electric. But he is taking heed of a major shift away from diesel and the money it could save DHL.

He says he could potentially pay off the difference between the purchase price of a Tesla Semi and a traditional diesel truck in less than two years, thanks to savings on maintenance and fuel.

"We are estimating that we could have pay back within a year-and-a-half based on energy usage as well as lower maintenance cost," Monkmeyer told Reuters in an interview from his office in Columbus, Ohio.

"The maintenance savings can be enormous as well. Just because the engines are much simpler in

terms of the number of parts and the complexities of the parts."

The payback benefit is one of the keys to the success of the new generation of electric trucks and DHL, a unit of Germany's Deutsche Post (DPWGN.DE), has a history in the area, having already introduced 5,000 of its own electric "scooter" vans for local deliveries.

The two-year timeline also chimes with assurances being given by Daimler AG's van unit to customers interested in its forthcoming electric Sprinter van that the total cost of ownership will be the same as the cost to own and operate a conventional van over a few years.

Monkmeyer says he does not expect to buy just Tesla electric trucks, but the in-depth discussions on price and feasibility that DHL is running on the trucks are in line with several small and large international hauliers who spoke to Reuters.

A truck runs around 65,000-100,000 miles a year, and Tesla has promised a 20-percent saving on the per-mile operating costs truckers pay now, estimating its new Semi will cost \$1.26 per mile compared to what it says are industry standards of around \$1.51 for diesel trucks. Analysts, however, say the figures continue to evolve; the \$1.51 cost assumes prices for diesel fuel and that fuel economy costs remain static.



A Tesla dealership is seen in West Drayton, just outside London

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SOUTHERN CHINESE DAILY NEWS

Gov. Greg Abbott commutes death sentence minutes before Bart Whitaker's scheduled execution

By Keri Blakinger

AHUNTSVILLE - Kent Whitaker was praying when he got the news: The governor had spared his son. In an unexpected last-minute decision, Gov. Greg Abbott granted clemency to the Sugar Land man slated for execution Thursday, just minutes before he was to be strapped to the gurney in Huntsville.

Thomas "Bart" Whitaker was sent to death row for targeting his own family in a 2003 murder-for-hire plot aimed at landing a hefty \$1 million inheritance. Thomas Whitaker's family speaks out minutes after his clemency ruling was announced by Governor Greg Abbott on Thursday, February 22.

"I'm thankful not for me, but for my dad," Whitaker said upon learning the news, according to a prison spokesman. "Whatever punishment I would have or will receive is just but my dad did nothing wrong. The system worked for him today."

The commutation came after years of desperate pleas from the condemned man's father - the only other survivor of the attack - spurred the seven-member Texas Board of Pardons and Paroles to make a rare unanimous push on Tuesday for clemency, sending the final decision to the governor's desk.

After two days of weighing the options - life in prison or death - Abbott announced his decision less than an hour before Whitaker was scheduled to die by lethal injection at 6 p.m. It is the first time a Texas governor has commuted a death row prisoner's sentence following a board recommendation since 2007.

"In just over three years as Governor, I have allowed 30 executions. I have not granted a commutation of a death sentence until now," Abbott said late Thursday in a statement.

"The murders of Mr. Whitaker's mother and brother are reprehensible. The crime deserves severe punishment for the criminals who killed them. The recommendation of the Texas Board of Pardons and Paroles, and my action on it, ensures Mr. Whitaker will never be released from prison."

In his reasoning, the governor cited father Kent Whitaker's passionate opposition to the execution and the con-

demned man's willingness to waive all parole claims as factors in his decision.

Now, the 38-year-old will spend the rest of his life in prison - and not on death row.

"I'm so grateful," Kent Whitaker told reporters outside the death chamber. Hours earlier, he'd already said his goodbyes to his son, who'd been given his last meal and withdrawn his final remaining motion for a stay.

"What a fantastic outcome," said Houston-based defense attorney James Rytting. "This is confirmation that victims' rights matter in Texas."

The December 2003 killings took place just after celebratory dinner marking Whitaker's supposed graduation from Sam Houston State University - a milestone that never happened. Before the ruse of a dinner, Whitaker had arranged for two friends to wait at the family's Sugar Lakes subdivision home and stage a fake burglary.

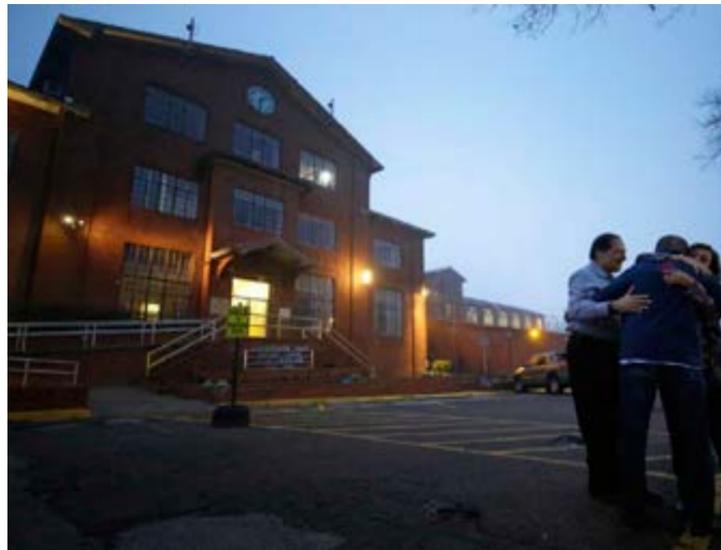
When the family of four returned from the restaurant, a gunman opened fire as they walked through the door, killing 51-year-old Patricia Whitaker and 19-year-old Kevin.

Initially, the case baffled police. But then, authorities learned - after reading an article in the Houston Chronicle, one detective later said - that Whitaker was no longer enrolled in college. He'd been out on academic probation.

As police zeroed in on him as a suspect, Whitaker stole \$10,000 from his father and fled to Mexico, where authorities eventually captured him and brought him back to Texas.

The pair of slayings came after three years of planning and at least two previous murder plots - a fact that was not lost on the Fort Bend County jury.

"We tried to find a way to not kill the guy as a jury," said one former juror, who asked to remain anonymous, citing concerns for her safety. "We tried really hard to follow the law - the law said he needed to be a continuing danger to society and we finally decided that he was because his method of killing was to get other people to kill



for him. If he could convince college kids to kill for him, what would prevent him from getting other inmates to do it?"

Triggerman Chris Brashear, Whitaker's housemate, pleaded guilty to murder and took a life sentence, while the getaway driver - neighbor Steve Champagne - agreed to a 15-year plea deal.

From the outset, Kent Whitaker - who was wounded in the attack - argued against the state's harshest sentence.

"I wrestled with God about my anger and desire for revenge," he said. "It's difficult to explain but he led me to a miracle of forgiveness where I forgave everyone involved with the crime long before I realized it was my son."

In the years that followed, his father led the fight against death, speaking out passionately about his son's case,

penning a book on it and forming the centerpiece of the clemency petition that moved the notoriously tough seven-member Texas parole board.

"There is only one person on Earth who is intimate with the murderous attack, the lives and deaths of the other victims, and the life of Thomas Whitaker - Mr. Whitaker's father, Kent. Kent was there," the condemned man's attorneys wrote in their clemency petition. "For the rest of us, the case against commutation to a life sentence seems clear. We can't forgive; we have no sympathy. But clemency is not about something so simple as sympathy or as formidable as forgiveness."

Full of graphic descriptions of the crime and Old Testament references, the petition was bolstered by a few dozen letters from friends, family, fellow death row inmates and even prison guards.

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A Snapshot Of The World



Stamp sheets are seen on display at the 'Made in North Korea: Everyday Graphics from the DPRK' exhibition in London



Trump speaks at the CPAC conference at National Harbor, Maryland



Visitors look at items on display at the 'Made in North Korea: Everyday Graphics from the DPRK' exhibition in London



Figure Skating - Pyeongchang 2018 Winter Olympics - Women Single Skating free skating competition final - Gangneung Ice Arena - Gangneung, South Korea - February 23, 2018 - Alina Zagitova, an Olympic Athlete from Russia, comp



Usipa fish and locally manufactured sugar, both used to deal with fall armyworm in the absence of chemicals, Chambu village in Lilongwe district, Malawi, February 7, 2018



Protesters rally during a student-organized anti-government demonstration in Budapest



Feb 23, 2018; Tampa, FL, USA; New York Yankees and Detroit Tigers wear the caps of the Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School (MSDHS) baseball team, the Stoneman Douglas Eagles, prior to the game at George M. Steinbrenner Field to honor the victims of this senseless act of violence and to show support for the Parkland, Fla., community.



Mossos d'Esquadra officers remove people from the door of the Catalonia's Supreme Court during a protest called by the "Defense Committee of the Republic" in Barcelona



Hostesses pose on the podium at the end of the biathlon competitions at the Alpensia Biathlon Centre in Pyeongchang

How Plastic In The Ocean Is Contaminating America's Seafood

Compiled And Edited By John T. Robbins, Southern Daily Editor



"A lot of people are eating seafood all the time, and fish are eating plastic all the time, so I think that's a problem," says a marine toxicologist.

We've long known that the fish we eat are exposed to toxic chemicals in the rivers, bays and oceans they inhabit. The substance that's gotten the most attention — because it has shown up at disturbingly high levels in some fish — is mercury. But mercury is just one of a slew of synthetic and organic pollutants that fish can ingest and absorb into their tissue. Sometimes it's because we're dumping chemicals right into the ocean. But as a study published recently in *Nature*, Scientific Reports helps illuminate, sometimes fish get chemicals from the plastic debris they ingest.

"The ocean is basically a toilet bowl for all of our chemical pollutants and waste in general," says Chelsea Rochman, a postdoctoral researcher at the University of California, Davis, who authored the study. "Eventually, we start to see those contaminants high up in the food chain, in seafood and wildlife."

For many years, scientists have known that chemicals will move up the food chain as predators absorb the chemicals consumed by their prey. That's why the biggest, fattiest fish, like tuna and swordfish, tend to have the

highest levels of mercury, polychlorinated biphenyls (PCBs) and other dioxins. (And that's concerning, given that canned tuna was the second most popular fish consumed in the U.S. in 2012, according to the National Fisheries Institute.)

What scientists didn't know was exactly what role plastics played in transferring these chemicals into the food chain. To find out, Rochman and her co-authors fed medaka, a fish species often used in experiments, three different diets.

One group of medaka got regular fish food, one group got a diet that was 10 percent "clean" plastic (with no pollutants) and a third group got a diet with 10 percent plastic that had been soaking in the San Diego Bay for several months. When they tested the fish two months later, they found that the ones on the marine plastic diet had much higher levels of persistent organic pollutants.

food counter has consumed this much plastic, Rochman's findings do have implications for human health, she notes. "A lot of people are eating seafood all the time, and fish are eating plastic all the time, so I think that's a problem."

And there's a lot of plastic out there in the open ocean. As Edward Humes, author of *Garbology*, told *Fresh Air's* Terry Gross in 2012, the weight of plastic finding its way into the sea each year is estimated to be equivalent to the weight of 40 aircraft carriers.

be of concern.

The Environmental Protection Agency does put out advisories to warn consumers when fish get contaminated with chemicals in local U.S. waters. But a lot of our seafood now comes from foreign waters, which the EPA does not monitor. Just a tiny fraction of imported fish get tested for contaminants.

As for Rochman, she says her research in marine toxicology has persuaded her to eat seafood no more than twice per week. And she now avoids swordfish altogether. (Courtesy <https://www.npr.org/sections>)



Top items found in the "Great Pacific Garbage Patch."

Consider the five massive gyres of trash particles swirling around in the Indian, Atlantic and Pacific oceans alone. Those gyres, Hume told Gross, contain "plastic that has been weathered and broken down by the elements into these little bits, and it's getting into the food chain."

One of those gyres is the infamous Great Pacific Garbage Patch. Fish could encounter the plastic in those gyres, but also much closer to shore, says Rochman.

Even so, the consensus in the public health community still seems to be that the benefits of eating fish — because of their omega-3 fatty acids, among other assets — exceed the potential risks. And many researchers advocating for Americans to increase their fish consumption argue that the levels of dioxins, PCBs and other toxic chemicals in fish are generally too low to

Seafood in grocery stores may have been caught in parts of the polluted ocean.

"Plastics — when they end up in the ocean — are a sponge for chemicals already out there," says Rochman. "We found that when the plastic interacts with the juices in the [fish's] stomach, the chemicals come off of plastic and are transferred into the bloodstream or tissue."

The fish on the marine plastic diet were also more likely to have tumors and liver problems.

While it's impossible to know whether any given fish you buy at the sea-



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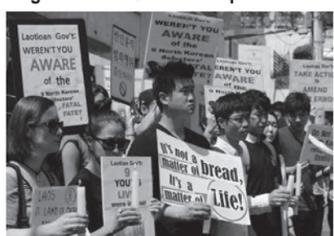
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SEOUL, Feb. 22 (UPI) -- North Korea's nuclear weapons provocations have often been blamed for stealing attention from human rights and responsible for decisions to cut off international food aid.

But South Koreans who are no strangers to North Korean belligerence told UPI last Thursday they still favor providing humanitarian assistance to North Koreans as a way to alleviate some of the regime's gravest human rights abuses. The violations they addressed remained confined to issues that could be resolved with outside help, like food or medical assistance.

Cho Hoi-soo, 28, a marketer living in Seoul, acknowledged that North Korea's human rights situation is not an issue that comes to her mind on a day-to-day basis.

"I know North Korea human rights violations are a critical part of the larger problems in the country," she said. "It's a serious problem. I have no background in North Korea human rights, but it would be good for the South to help the North."



Cho and others, who have been bearing witness to the rapid detente between North and South Korea at the 2018 Pyeongchang Winter Olympics, are implicitly endorsing South Korean President Moon Jae-in's cautious approach to North Korea human rights.

"Human rights should get an equal amount of interest" as nuclear weapons, Cho said. "But it should be addressed in a careful way."

Cho, who had been waiting at Seoul Station for a visiting American friend to arrive from the Olympics, also said the Winter Games have brought peace and that the unified Korea team entry at the opening ceremony had left a positive impression.

Her friend, an expatriate in China, said she attended the women's ice hockey match between the unified Korea team and Sweden.

South Korean President Moon Jae-in Using Cautious Approach South Koreans Favor Humanitarian Aid To North Korea To Fight Abuses

Compiled And Edited By John T. Robbins, Southern Daily Editor



South Koreans who have been bearing witness to the rapid detente between North and South Korea at the 2018 Pyeongchang Winter Olympics strongly endorse South Korean President Moon Jae-in's cautious approach to North Korea human rights. (Photo/UPI)

"There was such an interesting energy," said Cho's friend, who asked not to be identified. "As a third-party spectator, just to see the energy in the room as people cheered, 'You're doing great,' or 'Let's go,' was a very unique experience."



But forgiving views like Cho's could collide with policy approaches in Washington, where the Trump administration is still leaving military options on the table, and the government continues to withhold humanitarian aid after provocations increased in 2017.

Not all South Koreans like the policies, and some said they have succumbed to

Trump fatigue.

Shin Jun-yeong, 43, said there should be no restrictions placed on providing humanitarian assistance, including medical aid.

He also aired grievances about U.S. President Donald Trump and his brash approach to threatening North Korea on social media.

"It's not even their [the Americans'] problem. Trump is excessively intervening in affairs," he said.

Older South Koreans are less critical of the United States and are more cautious about North Korea's friendly overtures.



A 75-year-old man who asked to be identified only by his surname Jeong said he has reservations about aid.

"I don't think we should help [the North

Koreans] at this point. Unless the North Korean government changes, I don't think new developments can come about, including unification or human rights improvements," he said. "North-South relations have improved a bit, on the outside. But realistically, there are no changes."

As the decades pass and division continues, different generations of South Koreans are no longer on the same page about how to alleviate North Korea's human rights situation, according to Kim Hyun-jung, a professor at Dong-a University Graduate School of International Studies.



"South Koreans' interest in North Korean citizens that they've never met before is getting weaker," Kim said. "That is why it is also hard to reach a consensus on humanitarian assistance."

But South Koreans who see humanitarian aid as an unconditional way of keeping in contact with the North, and not politicizing aid regardless of Pyongyang's military provocations, might be on the right track, according to Signe Poulsen, representative of the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights in Seoul.

"I think it is important to understand the issues of humanitarian assistance and human rights are not an 'either or,' it's an 'and,'" Poulsen told UPI Thursday. "Through providing humanitarian assistance you provide engagement and get a picture into North Korea, what's happening, and how things could be better."

Poulsen said that progress in the North's human rights situation goes hand in hand with attaining peace and security. "What our ultimate goal is for people in North Korea to live their lives freely with dignity, and the rights we take for granted -- with enough food, education and the capacity to make choices about their own lives."



Both U.S. and South Korea aid to North Korea has dropped precipitously since 2009 in response to the nuclear stand-off and the sinking of the South Korean warship Cheonan in 2010, an attack that may have been ordered by Kim Yong Chol, the North Korean vice chairman of the ruling Workers' Party Central Committee.

There are signs that times are changing, however.

Kim visited South Korea on Sunday for the Winter Olympics closing ceremony and was seated near Ivanka Trump -- a subtle indication detente may be building momentum on the peninsula. (Courtesy https://www.upi.com)

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