

MOM WHO SAYS SHE LEFT TOT ON PORCH FACES CHARGES

COLUMBUS, Ohio: A mother accused of abandoning a 14-month-old Maryland boy on the front porch of a stranger's home in central Ohio is scheduled for arraignment yesterday on a child endangerment charge as police searching for the toddler warn he may be dead. Columbus officers searched Tuesday near a creek with a dive team and helicopter after Dainesha Stevens admitted she and a

male acquaintance left the boy, Cameron Beckford, on Friday night because they could no longer care for him. The area being searched on the city's far east side is more than 2 miles from the home where Stevens said she left the child.

It is now considered a recovery effort because of information obtained by investigators, said Sgt. Rich Weiner, a Columbus police spokesman. Stevens

is scheduled for arraignment in Franklin County Municipal Court on two felonies, including tampering with evidence. She remains in custody, and online court records listed no attorney for her. Stevens on Monday reported that Cameron's 6-year-old sister had been taken to an unknown location by a friend, and investigators determined the toddler was missing while questioning the woman, police said.

The girl, Cheyenne, later was found at a home on the city's west side and is in good condition, authorities said. She has been turned over to Franklin County Children Services.

Police said Stevens had legal custody of both children. The man, who police aren't identifying, was jailed on unrelated warrants. A missing-child alert said the toddler was wearing a puffy black coat, gray pants, black and

red boots and a gray elephant hat. Police say he's black with brown eyes and a Mohawk hairstyle.

Police in Frederick, Maryland, said the father of the two children called police on Sunday and reported that their mother had taken them to an unknown location in Columbus in mid-December. Based on the father's concerns, missing-child reports were issued.—AP

LOW-PROFILE US DIPLOMAT HELPED NEGOTIATE WITH CUBA

WASHINGTON: Just in time for the holidays, a low-profile presidential aide invited long suffering Judy Gross into his White House office to personally give her the gift she'd been hoping for the past five years. Her husband, Alan Gross, was being released from a Cuban prison and coming home. The meeting was the culmination of two years of quiet negotiations with Cuban officials. The man who helped handle those negotiations for President Barack Obama was Ricardo Zuniga, an American diplomat born in Honduras to a prominent political family.

The dealings involved much more than just Gross' release from a 15-year sentence, but the re-establishment of diplomatic ties between the United States and Cuba after a half-century of Cold War hostility. Obama tasked two aides with the challenge - Ben Rhodes, his long-running foreign policy adviser, and Zuniga, a foreign service officer newly detailed to the White House's National Security Council as senior director for Western Hemisphere Affairs.

Dan Restrepo, who previously held Zuniga's job, said he recommended the Cuba expert to replace him in part because he knew that relations with the country could be an important part of Obama's second-term agenda. Zuniga was serving at the US Embassy in Brazil at the time, but previously had worked at the US Interests Section in Havana and led the State Department's Office of Cuban Affairs.

"There's nobody in government who better knew the mechanics, the policies and politics of Cuba," Restrepo said. "That's a very complex set of interactions and laws. And how they interact and what is movable and not movable is not easy to figure out."

Another important skill that Zuniga brought to the Cuba negotiations was his fluent Spanish. He was born 44 years ago in the Honduran capital of Tegucigalpa, the grandson of Ricardo Zuniga Augustinus, a conservative who ran unsuccessfully for president in 1981 and supported the military dictatorship of Oswaldo Lopez. He moved to the United States with his American mother as a boy and got a degree in foreign affairs and Latin American studies from the University of Virginia.

Restrepo said Zuniga is a no-nonsense professional and, although they had talked about his Honduran roots in passing, he never mentioned his grandfather or any personal or family politics.

"That's a testament to his professionalism that I don't know what his politics are, having worked very closely with him," Restrepo said in a telephone interview.

Restrepo said Zuniga had another

important qualification for an issue that needed to be handled in utmost secrecy - discretion. "He's not an attention-seeking kind of person," said Restrepo, now a senior fellow at the Center for American Progress. "Cuba policy development has often been notable for how quickly it ends up in the newspaper. That's not something that Ricardo traffics in."

Word of the Cuba negotiations did not leak over nearly two years of negotiations with Cuban officials, in Canada and at the Vatican at Pope Francis' invitation, with Rhodes and Zuniga personally keeping Obama updated. Beyond the negotiations with the small island country, Zuniga had a whole hemisphere of concerns to worry about, including an influx of children coming over the border from Central America and other implications of Obama's immigration policies.

When Obama made a historic phone call going over final negotiations with Cuban President Raul Castro on Dec 16, Rhodes and Zuniga sat in front of the president on an Oval Office couch, listening with briefing books on their laps. A White House photo taken after Obama hung up shows Zuniga being embraced by his boss, National Security Adviser Susan Rice. Zuniga and Rhodes spent the next day furiously preparing Obama's remarks to announce the thaw, then took a quiet moment to watch the televised speech from Rhodes' West Wing office.

Obama's announcement was an unexpected news development during the holiday season, with Gross flying home on the second day of Hanukkah. Even Judy Gross was skeptical that a breakthrough had really come in her husband's case, which Obama had set as a requirement for improving relations with the communist nation.

Gross family attorney Scott Gilbert was with Judy Gross in Zuniga's office in the Eisenhower Executive Office Building on Dec 12 when she learned a deal had been reached. Zuniga told them Alan Gross would be freed the following Wednesday and invited them to come on the US government flight to retrieve him.

"I think after the five years of this, Judy was still somewhat unbelieving even at that meeting and also somewhat in shock," Gilbert said in a telephone interview.

"My comment to Ricardo was he needed to get this done so that both he and Alan could go home for the holidays," Gilbert added. He said Zuniga also had spent a lot of time away from wife and two daughters. "He was extremely committed to trying to accomplish this outcome and worked day and night to get it done." —AP



HAYDEN: People stand inside a Wal-Mart in Hayden, Idaho on Tuesday. A 2-year-old boy accidentally shot and killed his mother after he reached into her purse at the northern Idaho Wal-Mart and her concealed gun fired, authorities said Tuesday.—AP

TWO-YEAR-OLD FATALLY SHOOTS MOTHER IN US

'PROLIFERATION OF GUNS LEADS TO ACCIDENTAL SHOOTINGS'

LOS ANGELES: A two-year-old in a shopping cart at a Walmart store shot and killed his mother with a handgun taken from her purse, in the latest US shooting tragedy. The accident took place Tuesday in Hayden, Idaho, where the victim, Veronica Rutledge, was shopping with her children and other family members.

"Her son was seated in the shopping cart and accessed the victim's concealed weapon from her purse and discharged it, striking the victim," Kootenai County Sheriff Ben Wolfinger said in a statement. "Once on scene, deputies found a 29-year-old victim was deceased from an apparent gunshot wound."

Idaho, a rugged and largely rural state, is among the US states with the highest percentage of Americans who own guns. Rutledge, who was spending the holidays in the area, had a concealed weapons permit, the sheriff's office confirmed, allowing her to legally carry the gun.

Sheriff's department lieutenant Stu Miller told local television KHQ that in "instances like this, you know I'm a big proponent of a concealed weapon for your own safety. However, you have to be responsible. Unfortunately, in this case, that just wasn't."

Walmart said it was "fully cooperating with

the Kootenai County Sheriff's deputies as they investigate this matter." KREM television reported that Rutledge was in the store with three other children, which police did not immediately confirm. Authorities sent psychologists to help employees needing assistance, it added. The store, which was evacuated, will be closed on Wednesday.

300 million guns in the US

Accidental shootings are not uncommon in the United States given the proliferation of guns, but Tuesday's accident was unusually tragic, and led to a torrent of online commentary under the hashtag #IdahoWalmart. "Enough is enough don't you think? A 2-year old killing with a gun? Seriously America?!" wrote one Twitter user, while others expressed concern for the plight of the now-motherless toddler.

A leading anti-gun lobby group, the Brady Campaign to Prevent Gun Violence, estimates that there are some 300 million guns in the United States—one for almost every individual in the nation. Much of the research about children and firearms has focused on the nearly 20,000 minors who are killed or injured each year by guns in the United States.

In 2011, 2,703 young people, ages 0-19, were killed by gunfire in the United States. There is, however, comparatively little information about how many youths are involved in accidental shootings that lead to injury or loss of life. Meanwhile, an increasing number of US states over the years have adopted laws allowing their residents to obtain concealed carry permits, like the one that allowed Rutledge to take her handgun on her shopping errands. In December 2011, the US Government Accountability Office estimated there were about eight million concealed handgun permits, but by June 2014, the number had grown to well over 11.1 million.

Florida is the US state that has issued the most concealed carry permits—1.28 million. The state with the highest percentage of residents with concealed carry permits is South Dakota, at 12 percent.

Earlier this year, Americans were shaken by another unintended fatal shooting by a child, when a nine-year-old girl learning to fire an Uzi submachine gun at a shooting range accidentally killed her instructor. In that incident last August, the girl was unable to control the weapon's recoil as she fired it, and an errant bullet struck her instructor in the head, killing him. —AFP



Two people use their cell phones in the driving rain as the motorcade carrying President Barack Obama passes en route to a luau at a friend's house on Tuesday in Waialua, Hawaii during the Obama family vacation. —AP

HAWAII VACATION REUNITES OBAMA AND CHILDHOOD PALS

HONOLULU: Since returning to his childhood home this month on vacation, President Barack Obama has spent a good part of most days cloistered with three people whose company puts him at ease. They're not his wife and daughters, who came with him, but a trio of pals whose friendship dates back to Obama's high school days in Hawaii.

The three men - Mike Ramos, Bobby Titcomb and Greg Orme - are among the few people still in Obama's life who knew him long before he was famous. Although their paths have long since diverged, they've made it a point to gather for frequent reunions, in one of Obama's most visible links to the days when his life was much simpler and his problems more mundane.

On this visit alone, Obama has spent more than 22 hours with the group on the lush golf courses that dot the island of Oahu. When it rained, Obama and his pals went bowling, instead. And on Tuesday, in what's become a yearly tradition, the men and their families gathered for a luau hosted by Titcomb. With rain drizzling over Oahu, Obama's motorcade whisked Obama

across the island to Titcomb's beachside home in Waialua, about an hour outside of Honolulu on the North Shore.

Increasingly, the reunions have become the focal point of Obama's family vacations in his second term, as his teenage daughters spend less and less time at their father's side. Once content to join their parents for outings to the aquarium or to get shave ice, Sasha and Malia are now more independent. Since arriving more than a week ago, Obama has been out in public with one of his daughters only once, briefly, during a hike.

What Obama and his companions talk about during their many hours alone is anyone's guess. But the foursome rarely goes more than a few months without reconvening in one arrangement or another. In August, Obama kicked off his 53rd birthday weekend golfing with the three friends in suburban Maryland before heading to Camp David, the presidential retreat in the Catoctin Mountains.

All four were classmates at Punahou School in Honolulu, which Obama has described as "a prestigious prep school, an incubator for island elites." —AP

8 KILLED IN CANADA 'SENSELESS MASS MURDER'

MONTREAL: A man with a lengthy criminal record killed six adults and two young children before taking his own life in Edmonton in what the police chief on Tuesday called the western Canadian city's worst mass murder. Edmonton Police Chief Rod Knecht told a news conference late Tuesday night that there was no suggestion of gang involvement and said the motive for the "senseless mass murder" appears to have been "planned and deliberate" domestic violence.

"It's terrible for the city," Knecht said. "The scene ... has been described as chaotic, horrific. Particularly when there's children involved, it has a tremendous impact on our folks."

Knecht did not release the name of the suspect, but said the man was well-known to police and had a criminal record dating back to September 1987. Cindy Duong, 37, was fatally shot in a home in south Edmonton on Monday, while two men and three women between the ages of 25 and 50, and a girl and a boy - both under the age of 10 - were found dead a few hours later at a home in the northeast.

The suspect was found dead by his own hand in a restaurant in the Edmonton bedroom community of Fort Saskatchewan on Tuesday morning. A police tactical team had surrounded the area and reportedly smashed through the front of the restaurant with a vehicle before finding the suspect dead. Duong's body was found around 7 p.m. Monday when police responded to a report of a man entering the south-side home, opening fire and fleeing, Knecht said.

An hour and a half later, officers responded to reports of a suicidal man at a northeast residence in a quiet cul de sac, the same home where the suspect had been arrested in November 2012 and charged with domestic and sexual assault.

Family members reported in the call that the man was "depressed and over-emotional."

When officers arrived, no one answered the door, Knecht said. They searched the exterior of the home but found nothing overtly suspicious and did not go inside. "We can't just arbitrarily go into that residence," explained the chief. Hours later police were contacted by a second

person and returned to the residence. When they went inside, they found a scene of carnage with seven bodies.

Neighbor Moe Assiff said he saw officers come out and talk to a woman sitting with a man in a white car outside the house. "She just let out a hysterical scream. It was eerie," Assiff said. "She was screaming about her kids: 'My kids! The kids!', grabbing her hair and trying to pull her hair out. The cops then ushered her down the road into a police cruiser." Outside the restaurant where the suspect's body was found, police found a parked black SUV that they say was seen near the location of the first shooting. Knecht said the suspect had a business interest in the restaurant, but would not say if he was

the owner. Investigators have determined the 9 mm handgun used in the killings was a registered weapon that had been stolen in Surrey, British Columbia, in 2006.

In Edmonton, a city of 878,000 people, mass murders are extremely rare. Knecht said the case was the worst mass killing in the city since at least 1956, when six people were murdered. John Etter Clark, a provincial politician who served as a member of the Legislative Assembly of Alberta for four years, killed his wife, son, three daughters and an employee of their family farm before taking his own life in 1956. Clark had been suffering from frequent nervous breakdowns in the years before the killings. —AP



EDMONTON: Edmonton City Police Chief Rod Knecht arrives to speak about multiple homicides that took place at different scenes over night in Edmonton, Alberta on Tuesday. Police have confirmed the deaths of six adults and two young children in what Chief Ron Knecht called a "senseless mass murder." —AP