

Castro given permission to visit U.N.

Watered-down version of Cuba sanctions bill may be passed today

WASHINGTON — Republican senators bowed to Democratic opposition Wednesday and dropped a bid to starve the Cuban economy by denying it hard currency. They received another setback when the administration authorized a visa to President Fidel Castro to travel to the United Nations.

After a Saturday arrival in New York, Castro is expected to speak Sunday at the United Nations' 50th

birthday celebration. Visas for foreign heads of government to travel to U.N. headquarters are routine, although the State Department, not wishing to seem overeager, announced its approval nine days after the request was filed.

The announcement came shortly after Sen. Jesse Helms, R-N.C., dropped a provision from Cuba sanctions legislation that was aimed at drying up foreign investment on the island. Following the deletion, a watered-down Cuba sanctions bill remained, and final approval was expected today.

Administration officials said they had little leeway on the visa request,

citing U.S. obligations as host country for the United Nations.

The visa will be issued to Castro in Colombia, where Castro is making a visit. State Department spokesman Nicholas Burns said it was granted for Oct. 21-25. It bans travel beyond a 25-mile radius of midtown Manhattan.

Burns said the administration is expected to honor a Cuban request to provide security. The visit will be only the second by Castro to the United Nations in 35 years.

After narrowly losing two procedural votes, Helms, R-N.C., agreed to abandon his effort to limit foreign investment in Cuba through legal

means.

The provision would have allowed Cuban exiles who are now naturalized U.S. citizens to sue in U.S. courts foreigners in Cuba who "traffic" in the billions of dollars worth of property seized by the Cuban revolution without compensation. It would also bar such traffickers and their close relatives from visiting the United States.

Sen. Chris Dodd, D-Conn., argued that the proposal would swamp already overburdened courts. The administration contended the measure would impair its hopes for a peaceful democratic transition in Cuba and would violate international trade

agreements. Close U.S. allies were almost unanimously opposed to it as well, officials noted.

A provision similar to the one Helms dropped is included in a House-passed Cuba sanctions bill, and Helms said he hopes the proposal will survive the House-Senate reconciliation process in some form.

The emasculated version of the Helms bill would require U.S. opposition to Cuban membership in international financial institutions and would call on the administration to seek internationalization of the more than three-decade-old U.S. embargo against Cuba.

Gingrich questions debt extension Treasury estimates called 'Halloween trick'

WASHINGTON — House Speaker Newt Gingrich backed away Wednesday from an offer to temporarily extend the government's borrowing authority, saying Clinton administration warnings of a crisis by Halloween could not be trusted.

In the latest exchange in a war of nerves, the Georgia Republican said Treasury Secretary Robert Rubin's projections that the federal debt limit would be reached Oct. 31 could be "a Halloween trick to try to scare people." Before agreeing to raise the debt ceiling for even a short time, Republicans would insist that Rubin provide details on the government's borrowing needs and would like to discuss it with President Clinton, Gingrich said.

"In the next couple of days, if the president wants to sit down, we'll be glad to meet with him," Gingrich said after a half-hour meeting in his office Wednesday evening with Federal Reserve Chairman Alan Greenspan and Senate Majority Leader Bob Dole, R-Kan.

Before that session, Dole was more conciliatory. Although he accused Rubin of "scare tactics," he said, "I can guarantee that we in the Congress will work hard to see to it that there is no default by the U.S. government on its obligations."

Nonetheless, White House spokesman Mike McCurry, expressing administration chagrin, said the stand-off over federal borrowing "is now

apparently going to be a crisis because Congress won't act to extend the debt ceiling."

Both sides know that neither would benefit if a failure by Clinton and Congress to break the impasse leads to an unprecedented default. The likely results would include higher interest rates, tumult in the financial markets and possibly greater interest in a third-party presidential candidate.

Nonetheless, Republicans plan to tie the debt-limit increase to their seven-year package for balancing the budget and cutting spending and taxes. It is a strategy lawmakers have long used to force presidents to handle issues they would rather avoid.

The administration, on the other hand, wants to see the debt limit extension separated from the budget issue, which would make it easier for Clinton to veto the GOP package. White House officials say that ideally, they would like to see the debt limit extended until after the 1996 elections, or at least until this Christmas, when the year's budget work may be completed.

Democratic leaders met with Clinton and discussed the debt limit, as well as GOP proposals to cut Medicare and Medicaid. They warned that Americans with variable mortgage rates would suffer if the debt-limit dispute drives up interest rates.

Homeowners "are going to pay more per month because of the irre-

sponsibility of the speaker and Bob Dole and the Republicans," House Minority Leader Dick Gephardt, D-Mo., said.

Gingrich and Rubin spoke by telephone Wednesday and agreed to continue discussing their differences, said Treasury Department spokesman Howard Schloss.

But he added "there's no agreement" on extending federal borrowing authority.

By law, the government's total debt cannot exceed \$4.9 trillion. The Treasury had said that limit would be reached Oct. 31, though the limited borrowing plans it announced Tuesday pushed that back a few days.

Treasury can resort to other strategies that could avert default, some of which could keep the government paying its debts for months. But some of these, such as shifting large amounts of money from trust funds for Social Security and other programs, would be politically risky.

On Tuesday, Treasury said it would sharply scale back its short-term borrowing plans to help stay within limits. It blamed the disruption on recalcitrant Republicans.

Shortly afterward, Gingrich said lawmakers would agree to raise the limit until mid-November. That is when Republicans hope to have their balanced-budget package ready for Clinton, who has pledged to greet it with a veto.

Brothers write book on prank letters

AUSTIN, Texas — Purina Puppy Chow spiced with a taste of squirrel?

No such thing, of course. But at least Ralston Purina Co. was polite in telling that to Stuart and James Wade.

The prankster brothers who get their kicks out of tweaking humorless companies wrote the pet-food manufacturer: "Is it true that Ralston Purina has recently launched a new brand of dog food called 'Squirrel Blend'?" The rumors circulating here are that it even comes in two flavors: Woodland and Rocky Mountain (chunky)."

The company's reply: "Ralston Purina Company does not manufacture a dog food product called 'Squirrel Blend' and I know of no plans to do so."

Whether the answer was deadpan or innocent isn't entirely clear.

The Wade brothers have com-

plied the replies to their prank letters in a book, "Drop Us a Line ... Sucker." Stuart Wade is a public relations consultant in Austin and his brother a marketing consultant in Switzerland.

After the Persian Gulf War, Stuart Wade wrote to Hormel Foods asking "why the straits at the mouth of the Gulf share the same name as your company."

Hormel's answer: "I have learned through our people that the area you are probably referring to is called the Strait of Hormuz. It is not the Strait of Hormel."

Stuart Wade said that most American companies didn't seem to get the joke, while the British often wrote inspired responses.

The Wades asked to use Winchester Cathedral in England "to hold a requiem in honor of Mr. P. Castor

Mahoney, a very dear friend who passed away last month in Lapland, another tragic victim of reindetransmitted brucellosis (RTB). Castor had friends all over the world. ... Therefore I believe we need a large church."

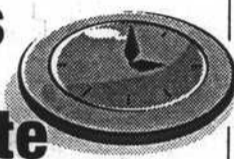
The reply suggested they "approach His Holiness the Pope to see if the service might be held in St. Peter's."

In another letter, James Wade applied for the job of "a kind of human fly" version of Mickey Mouse at Euro Disney.

"With the help of tiny suction cups, I could climb vertical surfaces for a very crowd-pleasing effect," he wrote. "Note for the Wardrobe Department: I wear a size 40 regular shirt."

Euro Disney wrote back and asked for a resume.

News in a Minute



Lawmakers condemn Disney's gay benefits

TALLAHASSEE, Fla. — Fifteen Florida lawmakers are condemning Walt Disney Co. for extending health insurance to partners of gay employees, complaining the move endorses an "unhealthy, unnatural" lifestyle.

"We wonder what Walt Disney himself would think of your decision if he were alive today?" the state legislators said in a letter sent last week.

Disney told its 70,000 employees earlier this month that, starting Jan. 1, it will offer health benefits to live-in partners of homosexual employees, as well as their dependent children.

Disney has no intention of changing its decision, said John Dreyer, a spokesman in Burbank, Calif. He said it is consistent with the company's policy against discrimination based on race or sexual orientation.

Scientists spot baby boom of galaxies

NEW YORK — Peering three-quarters of the way across the universe and billions of years back in time, astronomers have discovered evidence of a baby boom of galaxies long, long ago.

The observations show galaxies formed at high rates when the universe was about one-half to one-quarter as old as it is now, suggesting many of today's galaxies may have been born at that time, said researcher Lennox Cowie.

That's more recent than many scientists would have thought, he said.

The age of the universe is under debate, but if one assumes 15 billion years, the new work would put the galaxy baby boom at about 8 billion to 11 billion years ago.

Britain may ease demands for IRA disarmament

LONDON — Prime Minister John Major and his Irish counterpart John Bruton plan to meet this week amid signs that Britain might ease demands that the IRA begin disarming before peace talks can start.

The British disarmament demand and the Irish Republican Army's refusal to comply with it have stalled negotiations on ending more than 25 years of sectarian violence in Northern Ireland.

"I expect to be talking to Mr. Major during the week to further advance discussions I have had with him and to build in the progress that has been made," Bruton told the Dail, or lower house of the Irish Parliament, on Wednesday.

Last month, Bruton withdrew at the last minute from a summit planned with Major to pave the way for peace talks. The key sticking point was Britain's insistence the IRA commit to giving up its weapons before its political ally, Sinn Fein, be allowed to join negotiations.

Britain has not dropped its demand but is willing to consider other ideas, said Michael Ancram, deputy to Britain's top official in Northern Ireland.

Hearing on official language opens

WASHINGTON — House Republicans opened hearings Wednesday on legislation to make English the nation's official language amid charges from opponents that some of the measures would harm children who speak another language.

Education Secretary Richard Riley told a House education subcommittee it would be "sheer folly" to eliminate bilingual programs for children who don't speak English, as a version sponsored by Rep. Peter King, R-N.Y., would do.

"Passing these bills is saying to children, and those who are struggling to learn English, that we don't care if they fall behind and fail," Riley said in a written statement.

Supporters of the bill with the most co-sponsors, introduced by Rep. Bill Emerson and Sen. Richard Shelby, say that measure would only affect the language of government and would do nothing to federal bilingual education programs.

Emerson, R-Mo., said their bill would exempt essential services — such as those dealing with emergencies, health and the justice system — from the official English mandate on the federal government.

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