

News Digest

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Justice denies memo to Congress

WASHINGTON (AP) — Holding fast in a confrontation with Congress, the Justice Department refused Monday to surrender FBI Director Louis Freeh's subpoenaed memo, which urged that an independent prosecutor investigate campaign fund raising.

Rep. Dan Burton, R-Ind., criticized the decision on the eve of today's scheduled testimony by Attorney General Janet Reno and Freeh to the House Government Reform and Oversight Committee.

Freeh is at odds with Reno's announcement last week not to seek an independent counsel to look into telephone fund raising by President Clinton and Vice President Al Gore. But Reno and Freeh agree that the FBI director's memo should not be turned over to Congress. They say turning it over would compromise their ongoing criminal investigation.

"I am especially troubled that the attorney general is refusing to respond to a legitimate oversight request after we made clear that we would accept a version of the memo

from which any grand jury materials were removed," said Burton, the committee's chairman.

"It's Director Freeh's reasons for recommending an independent counsel that we want to review, not grand jury testimony," said Burton.

According to a news release by the House panel, committee chief counsel Richard Bennett's negotiations with the FBI to obtain the memo had been proceeding in a positive manner until Justice Department lawyers refused to approve an arrangement blacking out references in the document to grand jury activity.

But FBI officials, speaking on condition of anonymity, gave a different account. They said the FBI objected to turning over grand jury evidence and investigative strategies detailed in the memo, and they only considered turning over the bare-bones conclusion that Freeh was recommending an outside prosecutor because that advice had leaked anyway.

Justice officials said, however,

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DAN BURTON
U.S. representative

that release of even that sentence of advice would violate the principle of keeping internal executive branch recommendations private, which could ultimately undermine Reno's ability to get candid advice from aides.

Officials have said that Freeh argued for an outside investigation of a broad range of allegations as part of a possible conspiracy and that top Justice Department officials had the appearance of a conflict of interest in pursuing such a case against fellow executives of the Clinton administra-

tion.

Reno has argued that the independent counsel law requires her to find credible evidence that a specific federal felony may have been committed by covered officials and does not allow her to refer "a big blob" of allegations to an independent counsel. She has said the continuing Justice task force investigation can investigate possible conspiracies so long as they are conspiracies to violate a specific law.

U.S. irked at drugs, poll says

■ A recent survey hints that Americans are more concerned with family values than social issues.

WASHINGTON (AP) — Americans overwhelmingly think drugs are the most serious problem facing children today, with crime and the breakdown of home life trailing behind, a survey indicates.

The poll, released Monday, suggests those who focus on family values are winning the battle for public opinion over those who say it is more important to improve the social condition of children, said the study's director, Robert Blendon, a professor at Harvard University.

"The family values side has really caught on in the American mind," he said. "All the issues that relate to kids in poverty have not caught on in the last decade."

A similar survey conducted 11 years ago also found drugs to be the top concern.

But while the breakdown of home life was a close second in 1986, with 46 percent mentioning it, just 22 percent see it as a serious problem today, according to the survey, which was sponsored by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation and conducted by the Harvard School of Public Health and the University of Maryland.

While 28 percent of Americans were concerned about child and sexual abuse in 1986, fewer than 2 percent of people mentioned it this year.

By contrast, this year's survey showed 24 percent of Americans concerned with crime, which didn't register in 1986.

Blendon suggested that general concerns about crime may have replaced concern about a particular crime — child sex abuse, which got considerable attention a decade ago. But he argued that the shift is unwarranted given that crime rates are falling.

"People really are anxious about things that should be going down the list," he said.

He said that given the chance to name any problem facing children, few Americans mentioned child poverty or health care and wondered if support for a new, \$24 billion children's health insurance program will die at the state level.

The exception was poor quality education, which 17 percent of people named as a top concern, up from 9 percent 11 years ago.

"In a country where one in five kids live in poverty, that's not resonating at all with people we surveyed," he said.

The telephone survey, conducted in September and October, has a margin of error of plus or minus 3 percentage points.

Israeli army ignored petitions, group says

JERUSALEM (AP) — Israel's army systematically ignored complaints against its soldiers by Palestinians during the Palestinian uprising from 1989 to 1994, an Israeli human rights group said Monday.

The complaints generally met with bureaucratic stalling, unreasonable delays, and "grossly incompetent investigations," said Dalia Kerstein, director of the group Hamoked.

"This was not a coincidental string of errors by military authorities but a policy fully endorsed by the military justice system," Kerstein said.

The army spokesman's office dismissed Kerstein's claims as "nonsensical and baseless," saying the defense establishment dealt with many Palestinian complaints during the uprising against Israel's occupation of the West Bank and Gaza Strip.

Some 1,200 Palestinians are seeking hundreds of millions of dollars in damages.

Hamoked issued an 85-page report examining 441 Palestinian complaints, saying just 22 soldiers have been brought to trial.

Twenty-two of the complaints involved the deaths of Palestinians. Those resulted in the trials of two soldiers, both of whom were acquitted, Hamoked said.

Legislation is pending that would prevent Palestinians from applying for compensation for injuries suffered during the uprising — called the intefadeh — by defining all army actions in the West Bank and Gaza during that time as acts of war.

"It's time for the military to start being accountable. The intefadeh is over, the peace accords have been signed, but nothing has changed," Kerstein said.

Officer recants account of Biko's trip to prison

PORT ELIZABETH, South Africa (AP) — Anti-apartheid leader Steve Biko was naked and laboring for breath when he reached prison after riding 660 miles in the back of a Land Rover, but the police officer who delivered him said Biko was only feigning sickness.

Two decades after Biko's death, the same officer, former police Brig. Gen. Daniel Siebert, told Truth and Reconciliation Commission on Monday he lied when he brought Biko to a Pretoria prison.

Siebert drove Biko from Port Elizabeth to Pretoria in 1977, days after police severely beat him and withheld medical attention. Authorities at the Pretoria prison wanted to know why Biko was in such bad shape.

"I told the men ... he was making as if he was sick" and was on a hunger strike, Siebert, then a police captain, told the Truth and Reconciliation Commission.

A short time later, the 30-year-old black leader was dead. His death provoked international outrage and mobilized the anti-apartheid struggle at home.

Siebert, without naming names, said he had simply been following orders. "I did what I was told," he said.

Siebert, 51, is one of five former police officers seeking amnesty in Biko's death. The men say they never intended to seriously injure or kill Biko, but acknowledge the interrogation went wrong.

In September, the amnesty committee heard how police butted Biko's head into a wall and then chained him to a gate crucifixion style for 24 hours while interrogating him in Port Elizabeth.

Under the leadership of retired Anglican Archbishop Desmond Tutu, the Truth Commission has approved amnesty in about a third of the cases it has acted on. More than 5,000 applications are pending.

To receive amnesty, applicants must make full confessions and prove political motivation.

George Bizos, a lawyer representing Biko's family in opposing amnesty, said he would show the officers continue to lie and that their actions were not politically motivated.

Bizos also challenged Siebert's claim that Biko was transported naked to prevent him from hanging himself.

"You were prepared right to the end to insult his humanity by handing him over in a completely naked condition," Bizos said. "He was hardly able to move. How did you expect him to lift himself up and commit suicide in his miserable condition?"

Ailing pope helps usher in Roman Christmas season

ROME (AP) — He walked slowly, didn't kneel and his voice was weak, but Pope John Paul II kept his traditional pre-Christmas appointment with Romans on Monday.

More than 15,000 people crowded the Spanish Steps and the square below, joining John Paul in honoring the Virgin Mary on the Feast of the Immaculate Conception.

On this day, Romans traditionally place flowers around a column supporting a large statue of Mary on the square. The pope sent a large

basket of pink roses.

In past years, the pope has knelt and prayed at the foot of the statue, but this year he read while standing. The 77-year-old pope has had difficulty walking and bending down since undergoing surgery for a broken leg in 1994.

The feast day, a national holiday in Italy and several other European countries, marks the Catholic teaching that Mary was free from original sin from the moment of her own conception. The holiday also ushers in Rome's Christmas season.

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