

News Digest

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Quebec secession subject of hearing

OTTAWA (AP) — In what the chief justice calls Canada's most important legal case ever, the Supreme Court opened hearings Monday on whether Quebec has the right to secede unilaterally and declare independence.

"It's obviously the most important case ... because it goes to the very existence of the composition of our country," said Chief Justice Antonio Lamer.

Weeklong oral arguments, televised live on two all-news channels, began with the federal government's lawyer, Yves Fortier, arguing that the high court did in fact have the authority to rule on the matter. Quebec separatists say the secession question should be settled by voters, not judges.

The court is expected to issue its ruling within six months. If it rules that Quebec cannot secede without the rest of Canada's consent, there could be a backlash in the mostly French-speaking province that would intensify the already strong drive for independence.

"It will plunge us into a kind of political crisis," Quebec's separatist premier, Lucien Bouchard, said of a ruling restricting the province's options.

The case was initiated by the federal government of Prime Minister Jean Chretien, a Quebecer who opposes secession. Ever since the separatists' near-victory in a 1995 referendum on independence, Chretien has been struggling to thwart their ambitions.

Last year, hoping to persuade Quebecers that secession could not be quick and painless, Chretien's government asked the Supreme Court to rule on three questions:

■ Can Quebec unilaterally secede under Canada's Constitution?

■ Does international law give the province the right to secede?

■ If international and domestic law conflict, which takes precedence?

Chretien says he would not oppose independence for Quebec under certain circumstances — if a decisive majority of Quebecers voted for secession, if other provinces consented, and if Quebec negotiated in good faith on the

details of a breakaway.

What the federal government opposes is the prospect of Quebec seceding without negotiations, or on the basis of a narrow victory in a referendum involving an ambiguously worded question.

Separatists contend that only Quebecers can decide their own future.

"The last word belongs to Quebec democracy, the Quebec people," Bouchard said last week. "And what's this word? It's the word 'Yes,' pronounced in the next referendum."

Bouchard was alluding to his plans to hold another vote on secession, probably next year if his Parti Quebecois wins a second term in power in a yet-to-be-scheduled provincial election.

Bouchard's disdain of the court case is widely shared in Quebec. Even Quebec federalists who oppose secession say the issue should be settled by voters, not judges.

Three of the nine Supreme Court justices are from Quebec, but all were appointed by federalist prime ministers.

Though Bouchard's government is boycotting the hearings, it will be represented by a court-appointed lawyer, separatist Andre Joli-Coeur. He intends to suggest that the Supreme Court should refuse to answer the federal government's questions on the grounds that these are matters for politicians to resolve.

Chretien has been annoyed by separatist arguments that the court hearings somehow circumvent democracy, noting that Quebecers voted on secession in 1980 and 1995 and opted each time to stay in Canada.

An intriguing subplot in the court case involves Quebec's aboriginals, who claim jurisdiction over the northern two-thirds of the province. Cree and Inuit leaders have intervened to argue that they would be entitled to remain part of Canada if the province declared independence.

About 83 percent of Quebec's 7 million people are French-speaking; the rest include long-established English-speaking Canadians and more recent immigrants from other nations.

U.N. team allowed into Iraq

■ Surveyors work to map eight presidential sites that Saddam had declared off-limits to inspectors.

BAGHDAD, Iraq (AP) — Iraq welcomed a U.N. team mapping presidential compounds Monday, but warned that its citizens would defend the symbols of Iraqi sovereignty with their lives.

Iraq's foreign minister cautioned Kuwait against allowing U.S. and British forces to attack Iraq from Kuwaiti soil.

Mohammed Saeed al-Sahhaf, speaking to reporters Monday in Beirut, said he was not threatening Kuwait. He did not say what Baghdad would do if Kuwait ignored the warning, but said, "We hope they won't commit this deadly mistake."

"Those who open their territory for the Americans, to shed the blood of the Iraqi children and women, will bear the consequences of their crime," al-Sahhaf said.

Iraq invaded Kuwait in 1990, setting the stage for the Persian Gulf War. While Kuwait has not said it would allow an attack to be launched from its territory, it has allowed the United States and Britain to station warplanes at its bases.

A Kuwaiti envoy downplayed the Iraqi warning.

Kuwait's planning minister, Ali al-Zumaih, who also was visiting Beirut, said the threat was "characteristic of the Iraqi regime."

U.N. surveyors resumed work in Baghdad early Monday, outlin-

ing the eight sites that Iraqi President Saddam Hussein has declared off-limits to U.N. inspectors who are trying to verify that all weapons of mass destruction have been destroyed.

U.N. officials hope to use the maps to determine which areas of the sprawling compounds are legitimate targets for inspections and which areas should remain closed.

The mission has been depicted in Iraq as a sign that a diplomatic solution was still possible. The United States has threatened to attack if Saddam does not open all presidential sites to unrestricted inspections.

Iraq was not budging from its insistence that the palaces are symbols of its sovereignty, and emphasized that Iraqis would fight to the death to defend them.

"Volunteering to defend people's palaces is a sublime moral action against U.S. barbarism," the government newspaper al-Jumhuriya said in an editorial today.

Hundreds of thousands of soldiers would face death to defend "a symbolic location like a palace or a museum," the paper said.

Al-Sahhaf called for a direct meeting between U.S. and Iraqi officials to solve the crisis, the English-language Jordanian Times reported today. Iraq has portrayed the dispute over U.N. weapons inspections as a conflict with the United States, not the United Nations.

U.N. Secretary-General Kofi Annan was to meet at the United Nations later Monday with the ambassadors of the five permanent

Security Council members to try to speed a diplomatic solution.

Several hard-line Russian lawmakers visiting Iraq plan to stay there as a "human shield" against possible U.S. strikes.

Ultrationalist Vladimir Zhirinovskiy, an outspoken supporter of Saddam who led the delegation, planned to return to Moscow while others in the group will stay in Baghdad, fellow lawmaker Alexei Mitrofanov said in Moscow Monday.

In other developments:

■ Israel's military, which drew up plans to kill Saddam in 1991, is again considering proposals to assassinate him, this time with a precision bombing raid. The Jerusalem Report magazine said Monday. It said Washington is also drawing up assassination plans.

■ The Palestinian Authority arrested the leader of a pro-Iraq party in the West Bank and banned broadcast commentary on the Gulf crisis.

■ Australian Prime Minister John Howard said Australian forces, including elite commandos of the Special Air Service unit, will leave for the Persian Gulf today in case they are needed for a strike on Iraq.

■ French President Jacques Chirac's office said he would meet today with Iraq's foreign minister in Paris to discuss the standoff.

■ In London, peace campaigners swarmed around an air base that would direct British strikes against Iraq, and the Times of London said the government is making emergency plans should Iraqi agents retaliate in Britain.

Taipei plane crash kills 205

TAIPEI, Taiwan (AP) — A China Airlines jet trying to land in fog crashed into a country neighborhood Monday, ripping the roofs off houses before skidding into a rice paddy and erupting in flames. Authorities said all 196 aboard and nine people on the ground were killed.

Firefighters went house to house in the blackened neighborhood, putting out the flames licking doors and windows and searching for survivors. Searchlights illuminated a life raft from the Airbus A-300, wrapped around a broken tree stump. Seats from the plane were scattered in the dirt, one with a body trapped beneath it.

China Airlines said the dead included the governor of Taiwan's Central Bank and other key financial officials; four Americans; and many Taiwanese families returning from vacations in Bali. Victims on the ground included a 2-month-old baby.

Witnesses said the plane hit several hundreds yards short of the runway at Chiang Kai-shek airport, 25 miles west of Taipei. It tore through homes along a highway before coming to rest in flames in the rice paddy.

"It came down — I heard a loud explosion and a fireball. And then I thought the chances for any survivors were slim," said a vendor in the area, who identified himself only as Mr. Yang.

The fiery impact scattered charred bodies and body parts

throughout the area. Authorities sealed off the neighborhood, leaving families of passengers to congregate at hospitals and the airport. Relatives broke into tears and fell into each other's arms as the extent of the disaster hit them; one woman collapsed to the floor.

"They all went to Bali on a trip — and they are all dead," said one woman, whose four children were on the flight.

Rescue workers on the scene said they had given up looking for survivors, but the deputy director-general of Taiwan's Civil Aeronautics Administration, Chang Kuo-cheng, said he still hoped to find survivors among the 182 passengers and 14 crew members.

Airport officials said two flight data recorders were recovered and were being analyzed to help determine the cause of the crash.

The twin-engine Airbus went down while attempting to land on a second approach at 8:09 p.m. local time at the airport's northern runway, the Taipei-based China Airlines reported.

Heavy fog was reported around the airport throughout the afternoon and evening, and a light rain was falling at the time of the crash.

The plane had been asked to make the second approach due to poor visibility, said Hamilton Liu, a China Airlines spokesman. Earlier, the Civil Aeronautics Administration had said the visibility was reported to be adequate.

Tsai Twei, director of the Civil

Aeronautics Administration, resigned to take moral responsibility for the crash, which was the worst in the airport's history. It came after Taiwan's flagship carrier embarked on an extensive safety campaign that followed a crash in Japan in 1994 that claimed 264 lives.

Among the passengers on flight CI-676 were Sheu Yuan-dong, governor of Taiwan's Central Bank, his wife, and four other finance officials returning from a conference in Bali. They included Chen Huang, head of the bank's Department of Foreign Exchange, and Chien Chin-min, head of the Department of Economic Research.

China Airlines released the names but not the hometowns of the four Americans aboard. The names appeared to be those of three men and a woman.

In a statement, Airbus Industrie — based in Toulouse, France — said the plane that crashed was delivered to China Airlines from the production line in December 1990. By the end of January, the aircraft had accumulated approximately 20,070 flight hours in some 8,800 flights, Airbus said.

In 1994, a China Airlines A300-600R exploded and burned during an aborted landing in Nagoya, Japan, killing 264 people.

The airline has had four other crashes since 1986. After the 1994 Nagoya crash, it embarked on an extensive safety program that included pilot retraining.

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