

News Digest

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PAGE 2

News Briefs



Hurricane Georges heads toward Florida

PORT-AU-PRINCE, Haiti (AP) — A slightly weakened Hurricane Georges blew into Cuba and threatened the Florida Keys on Wednesday after making a shambles of much of Puerto Rico, the Dominican Republic and Haiti. At least 39 people were believed dead and many more were missing.

In Florida, up to 100,000 people were ordered to begin evacuating the exposed Florida Keys; and cars, trucks and sport utility vehicles streamed along the highway linking the island chain to the mainland.

South Florida was put under a hurricane watch and Gov. Lawton Chiles declared a state of emergency in central and southern Florida, allowing the state to use the National Guard, lift tolls along evacuation routes and purchase emergency supplies.

Flash floods ravaged Haiti on Wednesday, and whipping winds tore tin roofs off homes while floodwater overwhelmed drainage systems. Heavy rain soaked Cuba's southeastern coast, and Cuban news reports said authorities evacuated more than 200,000 people from eastern provinces.

Georges was deadliest on the impoverished two-nation island of Hispaniola. Thirteen people died in Haiti and 17, including two looters shot by police, were killed in the Dominican Republic.

South Africa's peacekeeping mission looks more like war

MASERU, Lesotho (AP) — Their peacekeeping operation in shambles, South African military leaders gave their troops shoot-to-kill orders Wednesday to suppress mutineers in Lesotho, where looters and arsonists rampaged through the capital.

Smoke plumes rose above Maseru from arson fires set Tuesday when 600 South African soldiers crossed the border to quell a military uprising.

About 200 soldiers from Botswana arrived Wednesday to reinforce the South Africans, but mostly only looked on as a procession of looters carried away booty and continued to torch buildings.

The South African military said eight South African soldiers were killed in Tuesday's fighting, which surprised the South Africans with its ferocity. Seventeen more South Africans were wounded in the combat — South Africa's first military intervention since the end of apartheid. President Nelson Mandela said 58 Lesotho rebels had been killed.

Lesotho's government requested the intervention two weeks ago amid a revolt by junior Lesotho military officers and strikes that paralyzed Maseru. The mutineers had apparently sided with opposition parties that claimed elections last May — swept by the ruling Lesotho Congress Party — were rigged.

Russian teachers paid in vodka

MOSCOW (AP) — Teachers in central Russia will be receiving their monthly salaries in vodka because the government's coffers are empty, a news agency reported Tuesday.

The 8,000 educators in the Altai republic will get 15 bottles of vodka each while local leaders pressure the federal government to pay its debts, the ITAR-Tass news agency said.

The federal government had promised to pay \$2.5 million to the teachers in August, but the money has not appeared, ITAR-Tass said.

About 75 percent of Altai's budget comes from the federal treasury, which is months behind in paying workers and pensioners nationwide.

But it isn't clear if this offer is a step ahead or behind. Officials in Altai, about 1,850 miles east of Moscow, had previously tried to pay part of the teachers' six-month wage arrears with toilet paper and funeral accessories.

Impeachment inquiry looms

Clinton under fire

WASHINGTON (AP) — Speaker Newt Gingrich rejected a call from the House's top Democrat on Wednesday to impose a time limit on a looming impeachment inquiry and suggested President Clinton speed the process by having reluctant aides answer grand jury questions.

In a swift rebuttal, presidential spokesman Mike McCurry said Gingrich, the leader of House Republicans, will bear the blame for a process that could "drag on and on and on endlessly" in defiance of the public's wishes.

The volleys from opposite ends of Pennsylvania Avenue underscored the hardening of partisan lines a few weeks before national elections, even as both sides professed to favor a cooperative approach to the nation's first impeachment inquiry since Watergate a generation ago.

Republican officials said the Judiciary Committee would probably meet next week to hear senior lawyers lay out the evidence that Independent Counsel Kenneth Starr has submitted, much of which has been made public. The full House would vote for a formal impeachment inquiry before lawmakers adjourn in early October, and hearings would begin after the Nov. 3 election.

One Republican familiar with the deliberations said GOP officials were considering a plan to allow the Judiciary Committee to enlarge its inquiry to include additional facts that might be considered impeachable offenses. That would permit the committee to range far beyond Clinton and his relationship with Monica Lewinsky, and into areas such as alleged fund-raising violations in the president's re-election campaign.

Democrats served notice they would vigorously contest any expansion of the case beyond Starr's evidence relating to Lewinsky.

"We do not believe that this referral of one matter, which (Starr) thinks may contain impeachable offenses, launches a fishing expedition into every possible wrong that's gone on anywhere in the world over the last

Clinton's ratings rise

WASHINGTON (AP) — The release of President Clinton's videotaped testimony in the Monica Lewinsky case bolstered his standing at a time the public's perception of him as the nation's leader was declining, a poll released Wednesday indicates.

Also, Republican leaders of Congress may have lost some ground with the public after the release of the videotape, according to the poll by the Pew Research Center for the People & the Press.

GOP leaders say they are not taking cues from polls as lawmakers decide whether to proceed with impeachment.

"I don't think people want this Congress to deal with a constitutional issue based on the latest overnight poll," House Speaker Newt Gingrich said Wednesday. He also said Congress should not "enact a grotesque version of justice based on the latest poll or the latest talk show."

The president, under increasing pressure in recent weeks from both Republicans and fellow Democrats, was losing ground in several key areas in the polling done over the weekend. Some had predicted the video's release would further damage his standing with the public.

But the Pew poll, in separate samples taken before and after the release of the videotape, shows a different result.

Clinton's job approval rating was at 55 percent in polling over the weekend after almost eight months above 60 percent. But his rating climbed back to 62 percent after the video was shown Monday.

The percentage of people who

thought it would be better for the country if Clinton were to remain in office dipped from 76 percent in early September to 60 percent by the weekend. But that figure rebounded to 69 percent after the video's release.

Almost half of those questioned over the weekend thought the president did not have moral standing to lead the nation. After the testimony aired, that dropped to 41 percent.

Just two weeks ago, Republican leaders of Congress had been getting their best job approval ratings in the Pew poll in almost three years, with 44 percent approving and 37 percent disapproving. After the video's release, the public was equally divided on their job performance.

"The Republicans are overplaying their hand," said Roy Romer, general chairman of the Democratic National Committee. "The American people have a wisdom about this that Congress has not yet picked up."

Even if the president benefits from some backlash because of the video's release, he does not fare that well among Americans who saw his taped testimony.

By a 50-38 margin, those who watched thought he did not make a good case for himself and he lost sympathy with more people, 43 percent, than he gained it with, 32 percent.

The sample of 500 adults interviewed Saturday and Sunday had a margin of error of plus or minus 5 percentage points. The sample of 706 adults interviewed Monday and Tuesday had a margin of error of plus or minus 4.5 percentage points.

six years," said Rep. Richard Gephardt of Missouri, the Democratic leader in the House.

"This does not need to take eight or nine months, as it did during the Watergate period," he said at a news conference after a closed-door meeting with Gingrich and other leading lawmakers.

For his part, Gingrich also scoffed

at Democratic suggestions for the equivalent of a plea bargain under which Clinton would be spared impeachment, but censured, possibly fined and otherwise punished.

"For anybody to talk about doing anything before we finish the investigative process simply puts the cart before the horse," the House speaker told reporters.

Iran may lift threat to Rushdie

LONDON (AP) — Author Salman Rushdie met with British Foreign Office officials Wednesday amid reports Iran is preparing to withdraw the threat on his life.

Rushdie supporters who accompanied him to the meeting issued a statement saying they met with representatives of the Foreign Office concerning remarks by Iranian President Mohammad Khatami.

"We remain cautiously optimistic," the supporters said.

The late Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini pronounced a "fatwa," or death sentence, against Rushdie in 1989 after the publication of his book "Satanic Verses," which many Muslims deemed blasphemous.

Islamic militants then put a \$2 million bounty on Rushdie's head, forcing him into hiding in Britain.

At a Tuesday news conference in New York, Khatami suggested Iran wanted to resolve the Rushdie affair, saying Iran considered it "completely finished."

London's Guardian newspaper reported Wednesday that Iranian

"It is Islamic law, it will remain so irrespective of what does or does not happen in Tehran. The fatwa stands."

GHAYASUDDIN SIDDIQUI
British Muslim leader

Foreign Minister Kamal Kharrazi plans to announce the lifting of the Rushdie death threat today when he meets with British Foreign Secretary Robin Cook in New York.

Two members of the International Rushdie Defense Committee who accompanied the author Wednesday said they hoped to meet again with government officials today.

Iran hopes the move to dissociate Tehran from the bounty will lead to a new diplomatic relationship with Britain, the Guardian reported.

Kharrazi is likely to tell Cook that the Iranian government is calling on the Khoradad Foundation that offered the

bounty in 1989 to drop the offer and make other steps to insure the affair is over, the newspaper reported.

Iran has long claimed the fatwa is an irreversible religious edict, even though it has no plans to send anyone to kill the author. But Britain, eager to end the affair, is seeking solid guarantees.

British Muslims said Wednesday the Iranian government has no authority to lift the fatwa.

"It is Islamic law, it will remain so irrespective of what does or does not happen in Tehran," said Ghayasuddin Siddiqui, leader of an umbrella group that styles itself the Muslim Parliament of Great Britain. "The fatwa stands."

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