

News Digest

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Mudslide victims survive 3 days on hilltop

CHICHIGALPA, Nicaragua (AP) — First there was a roar, then a monstrous wave of mud on the horizon. In an instant, entire towns were swallowed up.

For three days, survivors were trapped on a hilltop in El Ojochal without food or drinking water, under a driving rain brought on by Hurricane Mitch. The mud that covered El Ojochal and seven other villages in a miles-wide swath was too unstable to walk over safely.

After days of pounding rains, the crater lake high above them on the Casitas volcano had overflowed. The two rivers that drain the lake had joined to form one massive deluge.

The El Ojochal survivors, 45 in all, struggled to the hilltop, now an island in a sea of mud. The healthy men among them made brief, desperate forays onto the shimmering mud to look for survivors and rescue the injured. Nine people were found.

"The injured people stank because their wounds were so infected, and the dead stank even worse," Ortiz recalled.

They walked out Monday, because the ground had firmed somewhat and "because we would have died there if

we had not," Miguel Angel Ortiz, a survivor, said.

Vice President Enrique Bolanos said the slide apparently killed 1,000 to 1,500 people in several communities near the city of Posoltega, at the foot of the Casitas volcano.

Tuesday, the mayor of Posoltega, Felicita Zeledon, said workers had recovered 1,950 bodies. The president's office said 1,338 died in the crater lake mudslide. The differing figures could not immediately be reconciled.

Another small mudslide on the northern slope of the volcano wiped out 34 houses Monday night, but there were no apparent casualties, Defense Minister Pedro Joaquin Chamorro said.

Central American officials estimated Monday more than 7,000 people died in floods and mudslides triggered by Mitch, one of the strongest hurricanes ever to hit the Caribbean.

The first relief helicopters reached the region Sunday. They found decomposing bodies everywhere, some with just limbs sticking out of the mud.

At first soldiers struggled to bury bodies where they lay. But with the fear of epidemics growing, volunteer

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ELIJO PALACIO
Chichigalpa mayor

brigades set out from Chichigalpa on Monday to burn bodies.

"We need the government to send us gasoline if they want to avoid an epidemic," said Robert Lopez Marcia, a member of Chichigalpa's emergency commission.

At an improvised shelter in a Chichigalpa elementary school, doctors stitched wounds and performed other minor surgery on people evacuated from the mountains. The doctors were in desperate need of medicine, antibiotics and bandages, and there was little clean water or food. Children lay on desks with bloody bandages on their heads.

"The only thing the federal government does is ask us for a number every

half hour — how many dead, how many injured — but they don't send us anything," said Chichigalpa Mayor Elijo Palacio.

All along the Pan American highway, thousands of people walked in the pouring rain Monday, some leaving the disaster area, others going in to search for family members.

Few got very far. Dozens of bridges were washed out, and roads were damaged. Bystanders pitched in to help cars and ox carts stuck in the mud.

Eric Rio, 26, and his wife, Ruth Reyes, 25, hiked several hours through deep mud into Barrio Chamorro to check on family and friends.

"We saw about 10 bodies, all very decomposed," said Rio.

Mitch still menaces Yucatan Peninsula

SAN CRISTOBAL DE LAS CASAS, Mexico (AP) — Residents of Mexico's Yucatan Peninsula braced for a possible lashing from Mitch as the former hurricane strengthened Tuesday over the Gulf of Mexico and became a tropical storm.

Weather forecasters said the storm, moving to the northeast with 45 mph winds, could batter the northern portion of the peninsula and possibly southern Florida later in the week with heavy rains — but not with anything approaching hurricane-force winds.

The remnants of Hurricane Mitch already have killed at least five people in the southern state of Chiapas, officials said Tuesday.

Several hundred people were evacuated from the southernmost tip of Mexico on Monday because of rivers swollen by the storm.

U.S. seeks help of Saudis in possible attack on Iraq

WASHINGTON (AP) — Warning again of a possible military attack on Iraq, top Clinton administration officials sought the cooperation of Saudi Arabia, a key player in the Persian Gulf and in the U.S.-led combat operation against Baghdad eight years ago.

As Defense Secretary William Cohen flew overnight to the region, with Saudi Arabia his first stop, Vice President Al Gore and Secretary of State Madeleine Albright made separate telephone calls to Crown Prince Abdallah, first in line to ailing King Fahd.

As always, U.S. officials were reticent Tuesday about the contacts with

the Saudis, who guard their relationship with the United States from exposure in the Arab world. State Department spokesman James P. Rubin said only that Albright called Abdallah to underscore "the gravity of the situation."

Cohen took no reporters with him. Undersecretary of State Thomas Pickering was aboard, a signal that the Clinton administration was not abandoning diplomacy even while threatening President Saddam Hussein again for declaring an end to Iraq's cooperation with U.N. weapons inspectors.

But also with Cohen was Marine Gen. Anthony Zinni, commander for the region.

A Saudi official said Fahd had told Cohen in Riyadh that he would not permit the Arab kingdom to be used as a "springboard" for attacks on Iraq.

Saudi Arabia was the center of U.S. war operations during the 1991 Gulf War that evicted Saddam's forces from Kuwait.

If bases in Saudi Arabia were denied, one way the United States could get around the logistical problem would be by flying B-52 bombers from Britain to Iraqi targets. Six of the bombers are there.

President Clinton called British Prime Minister Tony Blair to discuss Iraq. In a 10-minute conversation, they agreed on the "gravity we see in the current state of affairs," White House spokesman P.J. Crowley said.

Albright, at a news conference here, said "the end point here is not specifically to use force but to achieve what you want." She said, however, that "all options remain on the table."

Albright, trying to bolster allied support for a tough stand against Iraq, has telephoned British Foreign Secretary Robin Cook and Foreign Ministers Hubert Vedrine of France, Igor Ivanov of Russia and Luiz Felipe Lampreia of Brazil, as well as U.N. Secretary-General Kofi Annan.

The State Department's position is that there is no need for a new U.N. Security Council resolution to authorize force, that there is a legal basis already to take action and that the United States could attack on its own if others did not choose to go along.

Robbers on trial after crime spree

Police say small mistakes doomed the usually clean work of the Trench Coat Robbers.

TACOMA, Wash. (AP) — Odd, Kathleen Prentice thought, as she and another bank employee were locking up the cash at the end of the day: There shouldn't be a man in the vault.

Stranger still, the man said he was with the FBI and had come for the money. But he showed no ID. And what kind of FBI agent enters a bank wearing a baseball cap, big sunglasses, gloves and a trench coat?

As his partner rounded up another employee in the lobby, the man whose presence had so baffled the bank staff felt compelled to explain the obvious: "This is a robbery."

In the next 90 minutes, the man and his similarly clad accomplice would drain the Seafirst Bank branch in suburban Lakewood, Wash., of \$4,461,681 — what real FBI agents say was the most ever taken in an American bank robbery. The job was so professional that customers outside continued to use the ATM without noticing anything wrong.

In a federal courtroom here, Prentice and other government witnesses described the last big haul by the Trench Coat Robbers — two men who for 15 years made crime pay very well.

The FBI contends Ray Lewis Bowman, 50, of Parkville, Mo., and his partner, William Arthur Kirkpatrick, 57, of Hovland, Minn., stole \$8 million in 28 robberies dating to 1982. The crimes, some of which are beyond the statute of limitations, took place in 17 Western and Midwestern states.

Bowman is on trial in connection with the Seafirst robbery as well as holdups in Des Moines, Iowa; Saginaw, Mich.; Portland,

Ore.; and West Carrollton, Ohio. Kirkpatrick will stand trial later, in Minnesota.

Bowman, who was sentenced to 2½ years in prison earlier this year for illegally possessing gun silencer parts, could get an additional 25 years if convicted in Tacoma.

Both he and Kirkpatrick have denied any wrongdoing. Defense attorney Peter Camiel said that Bowman does not match witnesses' descriptions and that there is no physical evidence linking him to any of the bank jobs.

The prosecution is expected to wind up its case this week.

U.S. Attorney Kate Pflaumer described the Trench Coat Robbers as pros who spent weeks casing their targets. Both were master lock picks and had a full set of master keys for Chryslers, their preferred getaway cars.

They struck just before banks opened or closed, quickly tying up tellers and rifling vaults and expertly evading alarms.

For the most part, the jobs were slickly done: in and out quickly, no fingerprints, minimal violence — though a teller was shot in a 1983 holdup, and during a Las Vegas heist, the robbers exchanged shots with police and took a hostage.

For all the Trench Coat Robbers' precision, it was small acts of carelessness — waving cash around, falling behind on a storage bill, speeding — that ultimately led to the two arrests.

In 1996, the IRS got a tip that Kirkpatrick and his girlfriend had paid \$183,000 in cash for a custom-built log home in Minnesota.

In 1997, Bowman failed to pay a bill at a Missouri storage company. When an auctioneer found guns inside, federal agents were called in.

That same year, a Nebraska state trooper pulled Kirkpatrick over for doing 7 mph above the limit. Inside his car, police found four pistols, ski masks, phony police badges, locksmith tools and \$1.8 million in cash.



Before it will comply, Israel asks for fugitives' arrest

JERUSALEM (AP) — Israel said Tuesday it will not carry out the land-for-security peace agreement until it gets assurances that the Palestinian Authority will arrest 30 Palestinian fugitives, raising questions about whether the accord could be implemented.

The Palestinians said the United States was satisfied with their anti-terror plan and accused Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu of seizing a pretext to avoid handing over West Bank land.

The peace accord, signed Oct. 23 in Maryland, was to have taken effect Monday but was delayed at the request of Netanyahu. Under the agreement, the first installment of an Israeli troop pullback from 13 percent of the West Bank is due on Nov. 16.

U.S. envoy Dennis Ross was to arrive Thursday to oversee implementation of the program that is to be carried out over 12 weeks. Palestinian negotiator Saeb Erekat said it was up to the Americans to break the latest impasse.

Justices hesitant to allow blanket searches by police

WASHINGTON (AP) — Supreme Court justices were skeptical Tuesday about giving police blanket authority to search people and their cars without consent after ticketing them for routine violations.

"It does seem an enormous amount of authority to put into the hands of the police," Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg said. "We do have constitutional checks because we're not always sure that the police will exercise good judgment."

An Iowa man's lawyer argued that his rights were violated by a search of his car that turned up marijuana.

Patrick Knowles, who had been stopped for speeding, said the search violated the Constitution's Fourth Amendment protection against unreasonable searches. Iowa courts allowed the marijuana to be used as evidence, and Knowles was convicted and sentenced to 90 days in jail.

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