

# NEWS DIGEST

FRIDAY, OCTOBER 8, 1999

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## House OKs insurance bill

■ **The measure will help make the health insurance industry more responsible for its actions, representative says.**

WASHINGTON (AP) — Capping a two-year struggle, the House approved a sweeping bill meant to give patients a stronger hand in dealing with their health insurance companies, including a controversial new right to file lawsuits.

The final vote, 275-151, came after intense lobbying on both sides, including President Clinton, who phoned lawmakers from Air Force One.

"It is time we asked the insurance industry to be responsible for its actions," said Rep. Charlie Norwood, R-Ga., who joined with Democrats to push the bill — first to the House floor and then to passage.

Earlier Thursday, the House rejected a GOP-backed patient protection bill that included new rights to sue but only in federal court and only in limited circumstances. That vote was 238-193, with 29 Republicans joining all but two Democrats.

For two years, Democrats have put the GOP on the defensive over the politically popular HMO issue. Republican leaders, struggling with a slim majority and a fractured caucus, did not endorse any bill until debate opened on the issue this week.

But they worked fiercely in recent days to rally

support for their version. Many Republicans reluctantly supported it in hopes of defeating the broader Democratic bill, and supporters painted it as a compromise between the Democratic approach and doing nothing.

"We've got a solid, balanced approach that I urge you to support," said House Speaker Dennis Hastert, R-Ill. "The difference in these bills is how far you go. How far you give license to the trial lawyers."

But Democrats argued that it did not go far enough.

"It fails to hold health care providers accountable. It lets them off the hook," said Minority Leader Dick Gephardt, D-Mo.

Now the House bill must be reconciled with a considerably more limited version already approved by the Senate. The Senate bill has no new rights to sue and excludes many Americans from other patient protections.

Also Thursday, the House rejected, 284-145, the most modest of four competing patient-protection bills. Backed by Rep. John Boehner, R-Ohio, it would have given patients new rights to file lawsuits now.

It was the first choice of conservative Republicans and their allies in the business and insurance industries.

It also rejected a similar plan backed by Reps. Amo Houghton Jr., R-N.Y., and Lindsey Graham, R-S.C. Backers hoped it would attract more

“*I endorse this legislation without reservation.*”

**PRESIDENT CLINTON**

Democrats, but it failed 269-160.

Federal law now effectively bans such lawsuits for millions of Americans, even if they are injured or die because of an HMO's decision.

The bill approved Thursday allows patients to sue HMOs in federal or state court and to collect whatever damages a jury might award.

Managed care has dominated the health debate on Capitol Hill all year, as Congress responds to voters' frustration over cost cutting and fears they may be denied needed care.

Meanwhile, hoping to keep Democrats united, Clinton on Thursday sent a letter to Capitol Hill restating his strong support for a broad bill that would give patients a host of new rights, including new rights to sue.

Democratic leaders feared that concerns over how to pay for it may cost them votes, but Clinton sought to clarify that he still strongly supports the bill. He promised not to sign any bill that was not fully paid for.

"I endorse this legislation without reservation," Clinton said in a letter to Gephardt.

### World and Nation

#### Datelines

#### ■ Washington

#### Donald Trump considers candidacy in Reform Party

WASHINGTON (AP) — Real estate tycoon Donald Trump announced Thursday that he was forming an committee to help him determine if he could win a presidential race as a Reform Party candidate.

He said his first choice for vice president would be Oprah Winfrey.

"The only thing that could interest me is if I could win. I'm not talking about the nomination, I'm talking about the whole megillah," he said in a telephone interview from New York.

Trump had dinner Thursday night with Minnesota Gov. Jesse Ventura — the Reform Party's leading elected official — and actor Woody Harrelson.

#### ■ Ecuador

#### Cloud rises from volcano; officials expect ash rain

QUITO, Ecuador, (AP) — The Guagua Pichincha volcano near this Andean capital on Thursday spewed a cloud of smoke shaped as the mushroom from a nuclear blast, and officials warned they anticipate an ash rain similar to the one that already killed one man.

The huge cloud, caused by several gas explosions inside the 15,850-foot volcano, emerged slowly at about 7 a.m. and was clearly visible from almost anywhere in the city under crystal clear sky.

The mushroom — dark gray in the inside, white in the edges — was several kilometers high.

#### ■ Washington

#### Flu death statistics prompt calls for vaccinations

WASHINGTON (AP) — The flu appears to have killed more Americans than usual last winter, and there is also a growing threat from bacterial pneumonia — underscoring doctors' pleas Thursday for Americans to get both a flu vaccination this month and a protective shot against pneumonia.

Although both shots are free for Medicare patients — those most at risk — one-third of such patients don't get regular flu shots, and 55 percent have never had a pneumonia vaccine, said a study released Thursday.

#### ■ Colombia

#### Twins released after tribe promises it won't hurt them

BOGOTA, Colombia (AP) — After months at a Bogota adoption home at the center of a bizarre custody battle, a pair of 8-month-old twins will be returned to their Indian tribe after its elders promised not to hurt the children.

Customarily, the U'wa tribe abandons twins in the forest or tosses them into rivers, believing they are ill-equipped for life and bring bad luck.

Juan and Keila Aguablanca were spared that fate when their parents left them in a public health clinic three days after their Feb. 11 birth. Their case drew attention to customs many Colombians consider barbaric and put the U'wa once again in the public spotlight.

The combative 8,000-member tribe threatened mass suicide in 1997 in a successful protest to stop oil drilling on their lands and has become a cause celebre among many U.S. environmentalists and indigenous rights groups.

## Mexico rescuers try to reach remote areas

TEZIUTLAN, Mexico (AP) — With dozens of people believed buried alive in mudslides, rescue workers struggled Thursday to reach remote towns in southern and central Mexico, where flooding brought on by more than a week of rain has killed at least 124 people.

Government officials said the death toll was certain to rise as reports come in from towns now cut off from the outside world. Flooding sent rivers roaring over their banks in 10 states across the southern and central portions of the country. More than 157,000 people have been forced from their homes.

In Mixun, a village in the mountains of the Puebla state, about 105 miles northeast of Mexico City, a mudslide buried 15 homes and a school. Ten people escaped but at least 40 others were believed trapped in the mud, said Juan Francisco Ponce Salas, an official in the Pantepec municipality, which

includes Mixun.

The school was empty on Wednesday at the time of the mudslide, Ponce said Thursday.

Another Pantepec official, Luis Francisco Diaz, appealed for assistance.

Seventy people were confirmed dead in the state of Puebla, state Gov. Melquiades Morales said Thursday in a radio address. Most had been killed in mudslides in remote communities, and crews were at work repairing roads in order to reach the stricken areas, he said.

The death toll included at least 26 people who died near Teziutlan. The mountain city 110 miles east of Mexico City recorded more than 80 mudslides, one that swept away 20 houses, said Julieta Perez, secretary-general for the municipality of 180,000.

Townpeople said 30 to 40 people could still be buried in the mud.

## Mourners make memorial at site of London wreck

■ **Authorities say they will not be able to explore all of the wreckage until at least Saturday.**

LONDON (AP) — A mass of twisted metal, charred human remains and random personal belongings began to transform into a memorial site Thursday as authorities investigating a massive train collision allowed a few dozen mourners to lay flowers and say prayers.

In the commuter town of Reading, where dozens of people waited for confirmation of the loss of a loved one still missing from Tuesday's crash, a bouquet lay in the town center with this note attached: "Daddy come home. I love you, Clare."

The agonizing wait didn't appear to be ending any time soon.

Authorities said Thursday they wouldn't even be able to get inside one of the centers of the wreckage until at least Saturday. They believe dozens of victims may have been inside a first-class coach where the fire ignited by the head-on collision was particularly

intense.

Without remains, the Westminster coroner said Thursday that identifying the dead will likely involve procedures including DNA testing.

"I think it's quite likely that we will have to do this in the weeks ahead," said Dr. Paul Knapman. "I think it is very likely that very few, if any, identifiable people will come out of that carriage."

Knapman said 25 bodies were in the Westminster mortuary. Only one had been positively identified, and 17 others had been tentatively identified, he said.

Thirty-three deaths were confirmed from the crash, the worst rail disaster in Britain in at least a decade, and police fear the toll could more than double. But the living already know who didn't come home, who left a car unclaimed at a railway station parking lot, whose mobile phone rings, unanswered, amid the wreckage.

Deputy Prime Minister John Prescott said he would move swiftly to adopt improved safety systems for the railways.

In Reading, 35 miles west of London, police said about 50 cars appeared to be unclaimed in the station parking garage.

## Forgotten Beethoven tune found

LONDON (AP) — A hushed silence fell over the audience Thursday as a lone violin played the first plaintive bars of a forgotten composition by Ludwig van Beethoven, hidden away for almost two centuries.

The string quartet movement is just 23 bars, penned for a young British traveler in 1817 and discovered recently among the papers of the Molesworth St. Aubyn family in Pencarrow, Cornwall.

"The true moment of discovery was today, when I heard it for the first time," said Stephen Roe, head of Sotheby's books and manuscripts department, of Thursday's performance at the auction house. "It is so beautiful. I am very moved."

Sotheby's will offer the manuscript for sale on Dec. 8 and estimated the auction price at up to \$330,000.

The tragic tone of the piece, composed 10 years before Beethoven's death, speaks of dark despair, characteristic of Beethoven's later work.

The music was a gift from the German composer to Richard Ford, a traveler and writer who inscribed the score: "This quartette was composed for me in my presence by Ludwig v. Beethoven at Vienna Friday 28th November 1817 Richard Ford."

The score was spotted by Roe in August when he was invited by the family to value a collection of autographs and manuscripts. Roe subsequently had the work checked with other Beethoven experts.

Sotheby's expert Simon Maguire said the music came after a barren period for Beethoven, and at the start of a flurry of activity.

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