

# NEWS DIGEST

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## Tradition ends in tragedy

■ The logs used for the annual bonfire at A&M topple, killing at least nine.

COLLEGE STATION, Texas (AP) — A towering, 40-foot pyramid of logs erected for Texas A&M's traditional football bonfire trembled and then came roaring down early Thursday, crushing at least nine students to death and injuring 28 others.

At least four of the injured were in critical condition, and two people could be seen trapped in the rubble late Thursday afternoon. Rescuers couldn't tell if they were dead or alive.

"We fear (the death toll) will escalate," said fire department spokesman Bart Humphreys.

A wave of grief settled over the campus of 43,000, some 90 miles northwest of Houston. Thousands turned out for a memorial service Thursday night.

Rescuers earlier in the day used sensitive sound-detection equipment to listen for moaning or tapping from the

enormous pile of collapsed logs and heard scratching noises that led them to believe there were victims trapped.

Top levels of the structure, which is tiered like a wedding cake, fell to one side. Workers removing the base level Thursday afternoon were certain there were no bodies in that section, Humphreys said.

Later, school officials said they had accounted for everyone involved in building the bonfire structure.

But the painstaking work was expected to continue into the night as rescuers tried to reach the two people seen in the debris.

"We take it one log at a time," said Kem Bennett, director of a state rescue unit. "They're wired three together in stacks, so we have to cut the wire and move them one at a time."

Shocked students gathered at the scene, holding hands and praying while the rescue went on.

Officials had no explanation for the collapse and said engineers would examine the site.

“There was just a sudden movement. Five to seven seconds, and it was on the ground.”

RUSTY THOMPSON  
Texas A&M faculty adviser

Sixty to 70 students were on top of the logs trying to build the stack when it gave way, university officials said.

Faculty adviser Rusty Thompson said students told him there was no hint of a problem until there was "noise and chaos."

"There was just a sudden movement," he said. "Five to seven seconds, and it was on the ground."

The bonfire, meant to get students fired up for the football game against archrival Texas, is a beloved tradition at Texas A&M and attracts tens of thousands of spectators.

Since the tradition began in 1909, the bonfire has been canceled only one

other time: in 1963, after President Kennedy's assassination.

This year's bonfire was to have been lit on Thanksgiving, the night before the big game.

Ray Bowen, the university president, said this year's bonfire would be canceled and added he was not sure if the bonfire would be permanently abolished.

Although the project is run by students, engineers are always at the site, said Thompson, the faculty adviser.

The structure, which this year would have included about 7,000 logs and reached 55 feet, is designed to twist inward and collapse on itself as it burns.

## Number of deaths by guns decreases

ATLANTA (AP) — Gun deaths in the United States dropped 21 percent between 1993 and 1997 to the lowest level in more than 30 years, and firearm-related injuries fell 41 percent, the government said Thursday.

Experts cited such reasons as tougher gun-control laws, better police work and gun-safety courses.

The study by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention looked at all gunshot wounds reported at emergency rooms, whether they were intentional, accidental or self-inflicted.

The number of fatalities dropped from 39,595 — 15.4 gun deaths per 100,000 people — in 1993, to 32,436 — 12.1 per 100,000 — in 1997.

The rate "is the lowest it's been since the mid-'60s," said J. Lee Annett, a CDC statistician. "This progress is really encouraging."

The drop was not unexpected: Homicide rates in the 1990s have fallen to levels not seen since the 1960s, and about two-thirds of all homicides are committed with guns.

Moreover, nonfatal shootings fell from 104,390 to 64,207 in the

same period, or from 40.5 per 100,000 to 24.0.

Bill Manown, a spokesman for the National Rifle Association, said the numbers prove that more gun laws aren't needed; the laws on the books need to be enforced.

"It is a fact that this substantial drop in gun violence directly correlated to a big increase in gun enforcement by police," said Lawrence W. Sherman, a University of Pennsylvania professor who has studied gun policy. "Police were not treating guns in a preventive sense prior to 1993, and now they are."

The CDC also listed such possible factors as an aging population, increased gun safety measures and the waning of the crack trade.

Gun control advocates said they are encouraged, but pointed out that even so, an average of 265 people a day were shot in 1997.

"People shouldn't be satisfied," said Nancy Hwa, spokeswoman for Handgun Control and the Center to Prevent Handgun Violence. "Everybody is still at risk, and the presence of guns should still be a major concern."

## \$390 billion budget bill passed by House

WASHINGTON (AP) — The House concluded its major business for the year Thursday by passing a \$390 billion budget bill, a giant fiscal balancing act that allowed both congressional Republicans and the White House to claim credit for fulfilling their promises to the nation.

The 296-135 vote sends the bill to the Senate, which could approve it by the end of the week, sending it to the president for his signature and ending a session of Congress marked by political strife.

A potential roadblock to adjournment emerged in the Senate on Thursday when Sen. Max Baucus, D-Mont., prevented consideration of a measure keeping federal offices open while Congress finishes work on the budget. Baucus was upset over the failure to provide rural loan guarantees in a provision expanding satellite TV services. Other senators were poised to disrupt action on the measure over other issues in the giant package.

The budget package was finalized late Wednesday after 10 days of negotiations covering everything from education and crime-fighting programs to foreign aid.

Without further hitches — always a possibility with a massive package laden with controversial provisions — the House was expected to vote on the measure as soon as today and the Senate by this weekend, bringing to an end this year's session of Congress.

Senate Democratic leader Tom Daschle of South Dakota on Thursday said Senate action could spill over until after Thanksgiving because of objections of Midwestern senators to dairy provisions, but he said the agreement deserves and will win eventual passage.

"This is a huge victory and a major accomplishment," Daschle said, noting that one of the benefits would be bringing down the \$5 trillion national debt by \$147 billion.

President Clinton said the agreement meets his goals to clean the environment, reduce class size by hiring more teachers and fight crime by hiring more community police.

"This budget is a victory, and a hard-won victory, for the American people," he told reporters in Istanbul,

“This budget is a victory, and a hard-won victory, for the American people.”

PRESIDENT CLINTON

Turkey, where he was attending a summit of European leaders.

It wasn't until near midnight Wednesday that the two sides agreed that they had settled differences on the last remaining holdup — White House insistence that federal agencies get some flexibility in carrying out the GOP proposal of an across-the-board cut.

Passage would give both Republicans and Democrats the fodder they need to return home claiming accomplishments.

Republicans say they achieved their goal of balancing the budget while assuring that the Social Security trust fund goes untouched. They also won their 0.38 percent across-the-board cut for federal programs, small but symbolic in showing their commitment to fiscal responsibility.

Sen. Pete Domenici, R-N.M., chairman of the Senate Budget Committee, said it also held the growth of federal spending to 2.5 percent while increasing funds for veterans, the military and education. "I'm very pleased and thrilled with this bill."

Democrats also claimed major victories in securing funds for 50,000 more police officers on the street; additional teachers to reduce class size; guaranteeing money to pay U.S. back dues to the United Nations and finance the Wye River Mideast peace accord; and eliminating provisions on mining and oil drilling that the Clinton administration opposed as threats to the environment.

The budget package covers five of the 13 annual spending bills, financing the departments of Interior, Health and Human Services, foreign aid and scores of other programs, agencies and departments. Clinton has signed eight other bills into law.

## World and Nation Datelines

### ■ Texas

#### Man gets life in prison in Jasper dragging death

JASPER, Texas (AP) — The last of three white men to stand trial for chaining James Byrd Jr. to the back of a truck and dragging him to pieces was found guilty of murder Thursday but spared the death penalty.

Shawn Allen Berry, who insisted he was just a frightened bystander, was sentenced to life in prison for one of the nation's grisliest racial crimes since the civil rights era. His racist roommates were both sentenced to death.

The all-white jury took 10 hours Wednesday and Thursday to convict him but only two hours to agree on a sentence. Berry, 24, must serve at least 40 years in prison before he has a chance of parole.

Jurors rejected Berry's pleas that he felt his own life was in danger by his racist companions.

### ■ Anguilla

#### Four die after Hurricane Lenny hits islands

THE VALLEY, Anguilla (AP) — Slowed to a dangerous, unnerving crawl, Hurricane Lenny pounded the Dutch, French and British islands of the northeast Caribbean on Thursday and left a trail of debris and confusion in its wake.

The late-season storm has killed at least four people from Colombia to Dutch St. Maarten in the northeast Caribbean and rattled nerves throughout the region as it careened on a zigzag path along a rare west-to-east course before coming to an abrupt halt off St. Maarten.

Whipping up huge waves, Lenny pounded the island's main port, said a reporter at GVBC Radio.

Lenny's winds had powered up to 150 mph on Wednesday when it battered the U.S. Virgin Island of St. Croix for 12 hours, stripping roofs, flooding buildings and roads, tearing away a pier and strewing boats like debris across the beach at the yacht club, some piled on top of each other.

### ■ Turkey

#### Leaders chastise Yeltsin for hits on Chechnya

ISTANBUL, Turkey (AP) — World leaders led by President Clinton admonished Boris Yeltsin on Thursday for Moscow's bloody military crackdown in Chechnya — prompting angry words from the Russian leader but also a concession for an outside look at the rebellious region.

"You have no right to criticize Russia for Chechnya," Yeltsin shot back at a chorus of rebuke from presidents and prime ministers at a summit of the 54-nation Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE).

Gathered around an oval table, Clinton chastised Yeltsin for "an endless cycle of violence" against innocent civilians in Chechnya. French President Jacques Chirac called Russia's air and ground assaults "a tragic error." German Chancellor Gerhard Schroeder said, "War is no way to eliminate terrorists."

Yeltsin said he was not interested in "reproaches or sermonizing" from his colleagues, and gave no indication the criticism would have any effect on Russia's two-month-old military campaign to combat separatist rebels in the southern Russian region.

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