Three killed in N.J. dormitory fire

Fire broke out at a Seton Hall because she left her room in only a University dormitory early Wednesday short nightgown, a jacket and hiking as hundreds slept, killing three people, injuring 58 and sending terrified students crawling in pajamas through choking smoke into the freezing cold

Four students were critically burned. One of them suffered thirddegree burns over most of his body.

Many of the 640 residents of Boland Hall rolled over to go back to sleep when they heard the alarm around 4:30 a.m., thinking it was another in a string of 18 false alarms set off in the six-floor building since September.

But many soon heard screams for help, smelled the smoke and saw flames creep under doors.

"I opened the door just to check," Yatin Patel said. "All the ceiling tiles were coming down. I saw a ceiling tile fall on someone."

"It was panic. Everybody was just, 'Go! Go! Go!" said Nicole McFarlane,

The cause of the fire was under investigation.

The tragedy cast a pall of grief over the campus of the Roman Catholic school 15 miles southwest of New York

Classes for the 10,000 students es on the ground in case he had to jump. were canceled for the week. A memorial service was planned for Wednesday. Sports events also were postponed through today.

"There's not much you can say at this time," said Newark Archbishop Theodore McCarrick, who came to offer support. "We're glad we're people of faith. The mystery of God's work is always a great mystery."

Patel, who lives on the third floor, down the hall from the lounge where the blaze broke out, said he put a wet towel under his door, kicked out his window screens and threw his mattress66 I opened the door just to check. All the ceiling tiles were coming down. I saw a ceiling tile fall on someone."

Yatin Patel

At least two students did jump, witnesses said. Tim Van Wie, 18, said a friend jumped from the third floor and suffered a broken wrist and sprained ankle. Others tied sheets together to

them by ladder. Keara Sauber, 18, saw one fellow student shivering in a T-shirt and boxers, his skin completely blackened by

climb down from the windows, but

firefighters arrived in time and rescued

'His skin was, like, smoking," she

Two of those killed were found in the investigation.

the lounge, and one was found in a bedroom nearby.

Two firefighters and two police officers were among those hurt. The injuries ranged from exposure and smoke inhalation to burns.

The blaze was largely confined to the lounge. Students said they frequently saw people smoking in the lounge, though it is prohibited.

Essex County Prosecutor Donald C. Campolo would not comment on whether careless smoking may have caused the fire. The Bureau of Alcohol Tobacco and Firearms was assisting in

Cuban boy's relatives file a federal lawsuit

MIAMI (AP) - Elian Gonzalez's the boy's father can represent his son. relatives in Miami went to federal court Wednesday to challenge the asking the court "not to decide the Immigration and Naturalization Service's ruling that the 6-year-old boy must be returned to his father in

Lazaro Gonzalez, Elian's greatuncle, filed the federal lawsuit after Attorney General Janet Reno declared last week that the boy's status was an immigration matter, solely in the jurisdiction of federal law.

"It is about protecting Elian's civil and constitutional rights, the same as if he was any other child," said Spencer Eig, a lawyer for the great-uncle. Elian has been living with his Miami relatives since he was picked up off the Florida coast on Thanksgiving Day.

No hearing date was immediately

Reno had overruled a ruling from a Miami family court judge delaying the boy's return. But Reno postponed an INS deadline to return the boy to his father in order to give Elian's U.S. relatives time to challenge the INS

Elian's mother and stepfather were among 11 people who drowned trying to reach the United States, and the boy was rescued at sea by the Coast Guard after he was found clinging to an inner tube in the Atlantic.

The INS's top official initially ruled Elian should return to his father, and the agency rejected a second asylum petition filed last week on behalf of Elian by Lazaro Gonzalez. The INS ruled that only

Eig said Lazaro Gonzalez was issues in the case, not to take custody away from Elian's father, not to decide whether or not Elian should go back to Cuba, simply to compel the U.S. government to give Elian a fair hearing and his day in court."

Many legal experts have insisted since the fervor over the case began that Elian's U.S. relatives have no

"All along, the legal issue has been who speaks for a 6-year-old boy, and the answer is the closest surviving relative. That is the father," said David Abraham, an immigration law professor at the University of Miami.

The president of Cuba's National Assembly, Ricardo Alarcon, called Elian's Miami relatives "a bunch of kidnappers" Wednesday and said their attempts to keep the boy in the United States "ignores the American government, showing disrespect for its institutions."

Leaders of several U.S. groups that want Elian returned to his father have warned they will call for protests and acts of civil disobedience if the child is not sent back soon. The groups denounced Congress for considering legislation that would grant U.S. citizenship to the boy over his father's objections.

Sen. Connie Mack, R-Fla., who is sponsoring a resolution to grant citizenship to the boy, said Wednesday:

"This is an issue about what his mother wanted for the boy," she said. "To ignore her interests and her concern is unthinkable."

RFK nephew charged in death

■ Michael Skakel is accused in a 25-year-old homicide.

BRIDGEPORT, Conn. (AP) - A nephew of Robert F. Kennedy was charged Wednesday with bludgeoning a girl to death with a golf club in 1975, when he was 15, providing the long-awaited break in a case that frustrated police in wealthy Greenwich and raised suspicions of a Kennedy cover-up.

Michael Skakel, 39, flew to Connecticut from his home in Florida and surrendered at Greenwich police headquarters after a warrant was issued for his arrest in the slaying of Martha Moxley.

Because of Skakel's age at the time of the crime, the case will be handled, at least initially, in juvenile

Moxley was beaten with a 6-iron and stabbed in the throat with a piece of the club's shattered shaft.

For years, investigators had been trying to find the killer without suc-

Investigators got their big break during the past year, when a one-man grand jury heard testimony from former patients at the Elan school, a substance abuse treatment center in Maine that Skakel attended from 1978 to 1980. Prosecutors filed court documents that said Skakel admitted killing Martha to fellow students at Elan.

World and Hatien

■ South Carolina S.C. governor thinks flag should not be flown.

COLUMBIA, S.C. (AP) - Gov. Jim Hodges said Wednesday that the Confederate battle flag should be removed from the Capitol

It was the governor's boldest statement yet on the issue and came two days after nearly 50,000 people rallied on the Statehouse lawn, urging the Legislature to bring the flag

In his State of the State address, Hodges said it was time to resolve a matter that led a national civil rights group to boycott South Carolina amid charges of racial insensitivity.

'We must move the flag from the dome to a place of historical significance on the Statehouse grounds," Hodges, a Democrat, said in a prepared copy of his speech.

"The debate over the Confederate flag has claimed too much of our time and energy."

As a state legislator, Hodges supported previous attempts to remove the flag, and earlier this year he said he personally did not think it should fly above the dome.

Russia

Military leader: Chechen conflict should end by March

GROZNY, Russia (AP) - The Russian military redoubled its drive to conquer Chechen rebels on Wednesday, with troops fighting street by street in the capital, Grozny, while helicopter gunships and cannons relentlessly pounded the southern mountains.

Lt. Gen. Gennady Troshev, Russia's deputy chief commander Chechnya, announced Wednesday that the war was expected to be over by Feb. 26, although "nobody is giving the forces any firm deadlines for ending the operation," the Interfax news agency reported.

He did not explain how he arrived at that date.

Wednesday, federal forces pushed toward the center of Grozny from several directions, trying to squeeze rebel fighters into an ever-tightening circle, the military said.

New York

Letterman leaves hospital to recover from heart surg NEW YORK (AP) - David

Letterman left the hospital Wednesday, five days after undergoing quintuple bypass surgery, his spokesman said.

"I think there must have been some kind of mixup. I went to the hospital to get a face-lift," Letterman joked as he left the hospital, according to spokesman Howard Rubenstein.

Letterman, 52, was continuing to recuperate at an undisclosed location, Rubenstein said.

Letterman had emergency heart surgery at New York-Presbyterian Hospital on Friday after tests showed that one of his arteries was

"Dave has been an ideal patient," said his physician, Dr. Louis Aronne.

"He feels strong and strolled out of the hospital in great spirits. I am confident his recovery will continue along the same path.

Rubenstein said he did not know when Letterman would be able to return to the "Late Show." CBS is airing reruns while Letterman recovers.

Clinton presents health care plan

unveiled a whopping \$110 billion package of health insurance initiatives for his final year in office, asking the Republican-dominated Congress to approve the largest investment in health care since Medicare was created in 1965.

Less expensive versions of the programs died last year, in part because of the president's own veto of the Republicans' \$792 billion taxcutting plan.

These proposals are a significant investment in the health of Americans; another step toward giving every American access to quali-

ty health care," the president said. About 44 million Americans lack health insurance, and the president's proposal would cover about 5 million of them.

The largest ingredients of Clinton's plan are a \$3,000 longterm care tax credit, costing \$28 bil-lion over 10 years, and a \$76 billion proposal to insure 4 million parents of children who receive health cov-

WASHINGTON (AP) - erage under Medicaid and the state President Clinton on Wednesday Children's Health Insurance Children's Health Insurance Program (CHIP).

Sensitive to the politics of a presidential campaign year, the president credited Vice President Al Gore with helping shape the administration's plan. He said Gore and his Democratic rival, former Sen. Bill Bradley, have proposed health programs more extensive than his own.

"If you just look at what's going on in the election season this year, the public cares a lot about health care, and they're talking a lot about it," Clinton said in an Oval Office

With the election year, health care is a hot topic. Republicans and Democrats alike are drawing up bills dealing with long-term care, drugs bought via the Internet, prescription

drugs and other initiatives.
"I'm pleased to see the president joining the debate as we try to find solutions to long-term care needs," said Sen. Charles Grassley, R-lowa, chairman of the Senate's special committee on aging.

TODAY

Partly cloudy, high 31, low 19

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