

Buying time: Milosevic still in power

■ The Yugoslav president's opposition said he is playing tricks to avoid conceding defeat.

THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

BELGRADE, Yugoslavia — In an apparent attempt to buy time for Slobodan Milosevic, Yugoslavia's highest court invalidated parts of the presidential election on Wednesday after thousands of opposition supporters forced police to back off from seizing a strikebound mine.

The constitutional court ruling, reported by the state news agency Tanjug, came in a case brought by the opposition — which sought to have Vojislav Kostunica declared the winner of last month's election.

Instead, the court, dominated by loyal Milosevic supporters, annulled "parts" of the election, the agency said, adding details of the ruling would be made public Thursday. If the presidential vote —

or even parts of it — must be repeated, it means Milosevic retains power longer.

"At first this may seem like a concession by Slobodan Milosevic, but I'm afraid this is a big trap," Kostunica said. "In any case, I believe Milosevic is weaker than ever before, which is clear from the fact that he has to do various tricks to gain time."

The announcement was issued after a stunning and swift turn of events at the strikebound Kolubara mine, the largest of the protests that the opposition launched to force Milosevic to accept defeat.

It began with riot police swooping down on the compound. But they were forced to back off when 10,000 townspeople swarmed to the complex to "defend" the strikers. The turnout gave opposition forces hope that the Milosevic regime was mortally wounded.

"The battle for Serbia was won here," cried one jubilant opposition leader, Dragan Kovacevic.

The independent Beta news agency reported police left the compound late Wednesday.

The confrontation at Kolubara, one of the country's major mines with 7,000 workers, was unprecedented in Yugoslavia, a former communist nation with no history of major worker uprisings. It dramatically illustrated the commitment of those seeking to topple Milosevic's regime.

It caught even top opposition figures off guard. They rushed to join more than 10,000 protesters at the mine and predicted Milosevic's quick demise.

The court announcement was made on the eve of a planned mass rally in Belgrade that the opposition hoped would force Milosevic to concede defeat, and opposition leaders saw the ruling as a desperate attempt to undercut their campaign.

Milosevic acknowledges Kostunica finished first in a five-candidate field on Sept. 24 but without a majority needed to avoid a runoff Sunday. The oppo-

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Goran Svilanovic
opposition official

sition has rejected a runoff.

"He saw that he cannot push through the second round against the majority of the people," opposition campaign manager Zoran Djindjic told reporters. "His solution is ... to create a new situation for totally new elections ... (so) he can stay in power for two or three more months and then try to organize new elections."

Opposition official Goran Svilanovic said he believes the opposition will also not agree to take part in a rerun of the first round.

"We have our elected president," he said. "These are things we can discuss, but my initial reaction is that there can be no bar-

gaining."

The opposition, challenging the official findings of the Federal Electoral Commission, went to Yugoslavia's highest court earlier Wednesday, appealing to the justices to grant them victory in the presidential elections.

The court met in emergency session Wednesday to hear complaints by the 18-party opposition coalition, maintaining Milosevic's supporters manipulated election results by using a sophisticated software program.

Opposition leaders said they had obtained a copy of the program and would use it to illustrate how the vote was rigged to favor Milosevic's candidacy.

Site a 'market' for selling votes

THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

CHICAGO — Mindful of the city's history as a place where elections have been bought, Chicago officials are trying to shut down a Web site that offers votes to the highest bidder.

The Board of Elections sent letters on Tuesday to federal and state prosecutors, saying that the site, www.voteauction.com, should be shut down.

"In Chicago we react strongly and quickly to this type of activity — whether it's tongue-in-cheek or not — because we need to guard our reputation here that this is a place where voting activity is legal and above board and beyond reproach," board chairman Langdon Neal said.

Voteauction.com provides "a forum for campaign contributors and voters to come together in a free market exchange," according to the site.

Voteauction.com says it will collect absentee ballots from voters, verify them, and then sell them to the highest bidder who can "choose who the group will vote for en masse."

Sellers then receive money depending on how much is bid.

So far, the site boasts that 8,313 voters nationwide have signed up — 380 in Illinois. The price tag thus far in Illinois, according to the Web site, is \$15.79 a vote or \$6,000 for the state.

California, the national prize because of its 54 electoral college votes, has a high bid of \$22,000 offered to make the choice for 1,230 voters. The Web site notes that it is not valid in New York, after that state questioned its legality.

Neal said there is no indication any money or ballots have changed hands. Nor, he said, is there any way to verify how many voters have signed up or even contacted the Web site. But, he said, "we don't think it can work."

The U.S. Attorney's office has forwarded the board's letter to the Department of Justice in Washington, and the state's attorney's office would only say it received the letter.

A New York graduate student, James Baumgartner, launched the site this summer and said it wasn't really meant to work, at the time.

"It was more to make a point that the campaign financing system operates as a business," he said.

Neal said while others may think the site is funny, "to us it is not, particularly because of the history of Chicago."

Stopping it, though, may be tough. The site has been sold to a Vienna businessman, Hans Bernhard who, Baumgartner said, is "in Austria and the server is in Bulgaria, so he thinks he's outside the jurisdiction" of any American board of elections.

Debate math messes up minds

■ Numbers flew through the air Tuesday at the presidential showdown, leaving those watching confused.

THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

WASHINGTON — They swept into viewers' homes like brain Novocain — all those numbers in the first presidential debate.

Al Gore said that for every dollar he'd use for this thing, he'd use so many dollars for that. George W. Bush talked in trillions. Baffling percentages flew between them. There was no telling amid the math mania whether average Americans would be well served or sold down the river.

"I started to glaze over," said Tom Norman, a systems analyst in Grand Rapids, Mich. "When Gore was flinging those numbers all over, it's like — take a breath."

Gore issued a stiff challenge Wednesday to voters confused by the arithmetic.

"They can add up the numbers for

Election 2000

themselves," he said on CBS' "The Early Show."

But after the statistical slugfest Tuesday night, even the experts were benumbed.

"I couldn't figure out what he was saying," said Bob Bixby of the Concord Coalition, a nonpartisan group that advocates deficit reduction, after watching Bush try to explain where he gets the money for partial Social Security privatization.

The numerical claims are bound to intensify in the five weeks until the Nov. 7 election and more will be heard on Gore's favorite device for slamming Bush's proposed tax cuts — casting as many of the benefits as possible in terms of how much would be soaked up by the nation's "wealthiest 1 percent."

Bush was mostly on the defensive on the numbers as his Democratic rival attacked his across-the-board tax cuts,

as well as a prescription drug benefit for the elderly that Gore says is too limited and takes too long to help people.

Figures collided headlong.

Bush said he would spend one quarter of the projected surplus over the next 10 years on tax cuts. Gore insists the tax package is more expensive than that because money that could be used for debt reduction is tied up in the tax plan, making the government's interest payments higher.

Gore said the Republican governor would give almost one half of the surplus to that "wealthiest one percent."

Actually, Bush's tax cuts — in total — only consume 29 percent of the surplus, making it a mathematical stretch to say half of the surplus would go just to the rich.

Gore also said the wealthiest one percent would get 30 percent of Bush's tax cuts.

In response, Bush complained about Gore's "fuzzy math" and pointed out, for example, that middle-income and low-income Americans would see big gains from his tax cuts, not just the rich.

Doctors' chicken scratch targeted

■ Physicians are being sent back to school to improve their handwriting.

THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

ATLANTIC CITY, N.J. — He's a veteran physician who works as a trauma surgeon. Just don't ask Dr. Sheldon Brotman to write a legible prescription.

That's why he's here, sitting in a handwriting class at Atlantic City Medical Center, learning how to hold his pen, position his paper and put a sharp angle on his "z" so it doesn't look like an "s."

"My signature is always a problem down at the pharmacy," Brotman said.

Long winked at as a harmless peccadillo, poor penmanship among health care providers is increasingly being diagnosed as a threat to patients.

Now, some of them are being sent back to school in hopes of eliminating the illegible. Such chicken scratch can become a prescription for tragedy.

Experts say up to 25 percent of med-

ication errors may be related to illegible handwriting: A pharmacist misreads an illegible prescription, one drug is mixed up with another.

Last year, a Texas jury ordered a doctor, drugstore and pharmacist to pay \$450,000 to the family of a man who died after the pharmacist misread the doctor's handwritten prescription.

Also last year the Institute of Medicine, an arm of the National Academy of Sciences, reported that medical mistakes overall — including those stemming from unreadable notes from doctors — may cause up to 98,000 deaths a year in the U.S.

Other researchers later termed those numbers exaggerated, but the authors stood by their report.

"It's no longer a laughing matter," handwriting expert Barbara Getty said. "If an accountant makes a mistake, someone loses some money. But with a doctor, it can cost someone their life."

But experts say such training — while a good idea — is no cure-all for errors.

"There will still be many prescrip-

"My signature is always a problem down at the pharmacy."

Dr. Sheldon Brotman
trauma surgeon

tions given over the phone or orally to a nurse or pharmacist. These will be misheard, misinterpreted, mistranscribed," said pharmacist Mike Cohen of the nonprofit Institute for Safe Medication Practices.

Charles Inlander, president of the nonprofit People's Medical Society, agreed.

"It's good they're doing a seminar, but I'm surprised they're not going with automated bedside and hand-held computers, which cut the errors by up to 50 percent," Inlander said. Such devices require doctors and others to type orders into a computer system.

Economy slow, but steady

THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

WASHINGTON — Stronger demand for airplanes and electronics helped orders to American factories bounce back in August after a record plunge. Economists said the report is further evidence the economy is growing at a slower but still healthy pace.

Factory orders rose a surprising two percent in August to a seasonally adjusted \$382.5 billion, the third increase in the past four months, the Commerce Department reported Wednesday.

"The pace of manufacturing activity is sure but slowing," said National Association of Manufacturers' economist Gordon Richards.

August's increase came on top of a record 8.1 percent drop in factory orders in July, an even sharper drop than the government previously estimated.

The Federal Reserve has raised interest rates six times since June 1999 with the goal of slowing the economy enough to prevent inflation, but not raise rates so high they push the country into a recession.

Economists have described this as trying to engineer a soft landing for the high-flying economy.

Wednesday's report along with a slew

of other economic data suggest that "a soft landing flight approach is unfolding," said economist Ken Mayland of ClearView Economics.

On Tuesday, the Fed decided not to raise rates for a seventh time but still held open the door to further rate increases in the future if inflation flares up.

In financial markets, blue-chip stocks led Wall Street higher. The Dow Jones industrial average closed up 64.74 points at 10,784.48, after gaining as much as 120 points during the day.

August's factory-orders performance was stronger than many analysts were expecting. They had predicted factory orders would fall by 1.9 percent.

The advance was led by a 6.6 percent increase in orders for transportation equipment, mostly due to stronger demand for airplanes and aircraft parts, the government said. In July, transportation orders fell by a record 32.6 percent.

Excluding the volatile transportation category, factory orders rose 1.3 percent in August, the fifth increase in the last eight months.

The transportation sector swings widely from month to month because it includes costly items such as airplanes, ships and military equipment, including tanks.

World/Nation

The Associated Press

■ Puerto Rico
Safe radiation levels offer relief to island residents

SAN JUAN — Radiation levels on most of the Puerto Rican island of Vieques are below normal, a government study concluded, contradicting claims by critics of Navy bombing activities there.

"Vieques is a paradise with low levels of radiation" said Luis Reyes, regional director of the Nuclear Regulatory Commission, at a news conference Wednesday.

Spots of higher radiation were found along the bombing range, in an area where a jet accidentally fired 263 shells tipped with depleted uranium in February 1999, the NRC reported. The Navy found only 116 of the rounds.

But there was no evidence that radioactive particles had blown or been carried by water to civilian areas, about 10 miles from the range, Reyes said.

Angry anti-Navy activists interrupted the news conference and contested the findings. They say the military exercises have caused health problems among the island's 9,400 residents, including a high cancer rate.

■ Washington, D.C.
Medicaid bill would reimburse women for cancer treatments

Uninsured women who rely on the government for breast or cervical cancer screening could get federally funded treatment under a bill approved Wednesday by the Senate.

The Breast and Cervical Treatment Act, passed by a voice vote, gives states the option of providing Medicaid reimbursement for the treatments.

The bill returns to the House, which passed its version in May. Supporters hope for quick approval.

In a written statement, President Clinton said he would be "proud" to sign the measure and gave credit to his wife, Hillary, the Democratic U.S. Senate candidate from New York.

The treatment would be tied to a Centers for Disease Control program, approved in 1990, that has enabled nearly 800,000 women without health insurance to be screened for breast or cervical cancer. The federal government provides \$3 for every \$1 in state money for screening.

■ Washington D.C.
Same health risks found in experimental 'safe' cigarette

Anti-smoking groups said Wednesday they want R.J. Reynolds Tobacco Co. to stop test-marketing its experimental cigarette after an independent study found that Eclipse, touted as safer than ordinary cigarettes, poses many of the same health risks.

The company refused, said its testing supports the claims and questioned the conclusions of the study commissioned by the state of Mass., contending they were drawn from limited data.

RJR says Eclipse, which heats rather than burns tobacco, delivers 80 percent fewer carcinogens than typical "ultralight" cigarettes and "may present less risk of cancer associated with smoking."

Several anti-smoking groups said the claim was misleading because some of the cigarettes used for comparison are not commercially available.

■ Kansas
Bomb threat sends elementary principal to prison

JOHNSON CITY, Kan. — An elementary school principal has been sentenced to nearly three years in prison for threatening to blow up a school.

Steve Nelson, who was principal of Johnson Elementary School, called in the bomb threat Dec. 9 against Johnson Middle School, prosecutors said.

All schools in the district were evacuated, but no bomb was found.

Nelson, 49, was convicted in August of aggravated criminal threat. He was sentenced Tuesday.

Nelson testified that he was set up by the middle school principal out of professional jealousy.

Weather

TOMORROW

Showers
high 52, low 35

TODAY

Partly sunny
high 39, low 24

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