

Ashcroft: Duty not swayed by opinions

■ The attorney general-designate believes his own views will not affect his service in the White House.

THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

WASHINGTON — Attorney General-designate John Ashcroft, answering critics of his anti-abortion and civil rights views, pledged Tuesday to enforce the nation's laws despite his "personal preferences."

While Ashcroft said in an opening statement at his Senate confirmation hearing that he believes the Roe v. Wade case legalizing abortion was "wrongly decided," he accepts it "as the settled law of the land. The Supreme Court's decisions on this have been multiple, recent and emphatic."

He insisted that, if confirmed, he would be "advancing the national interest, not advocating my personal interest," adding that he would enforce federal laws protecting women's access to abortion clinics.

"No woman should fear being threatened or coerced in seeking constitutionally protected health services," he said.

Not since the Clarence Thomas hearings a decade ago has the Senate Judiciary Committee held hearings amid such an onslaught of criticism against a nominee from civil rights and women's groups.

"From racial profiling to news of unwarranted strip searches, the list of injustice in America today is still long. Injustice in America against any individual must not stand," Ashcroft said.

The nominee, a former Republican senator from Missouri, commented on several specific issues in his opening statement and then told senators they could "pummel me with questions."

"When I swear to uphold the law, I will keep my oath, so help me God," Ashcroft said, holding his hand up as he completed his statement.

Four people in the hearing room crowd of 200 immediately began yelling, "Ashcroft kills!"

Within seconds, they were surrounded by police officers, who carried one protester out of the room as the other



A supporter of former Senator John Ashcroft, left, and an anti-Ashcroft protester hold banners as they demonstrate Tuesday on Capitol Hill in Washington D.C. The Senate Judiciary Committee is holding a hearing this week on the nomination of Ashcroft to the U.S. attorney general position.

three left without resisting. Ashcroft, a gun-control opponent who has been opposed by liberal women's groups, said that as a senator he voted to "deny the right to bear arms to those convicted of domestic violence offenses."

He said he supported mandatory background checks for gun show sales and increased federal funds for law enforcement.

Ashcroft testified that his opposition to Missouri Supreme Court Justice Ronnie White, whose confirmation

to be a federal judge was rejected, was "well founded." Critics charged that Ashcroft's opposition to White, who is black, was based on race.

"Studying his judicial record, considering the implications of his decisions and hearing the widespread objections to his appointment from a large body of my constituents, I simply came to the overwhelming conclusion that Judge White should not be given lifetime tenure as a U.S. District Court judge," Ashcroft said.

McVeigh execution date set

THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

OKLAHOMA CITY — The government set a May 16 execution date Tuesday for Oklahoma City bomber Timothy McVeigh, who has dropped his appeals and is apparently pinning all his hopes on winning clemency from the president.

The execution date was set by the Federal Bureau of Prisons. Spokesman Dan Dunne said the agency will try to meet the needs of victims' relatives and survivors, some of whom have expressed interest in watching McVeigh die by lethal injection.

McVeigh, 32, who is on death row at a federal prison in Terre Haute, Ind., has said he doesn't plan any more appeals and last Thursday allowed a deadline for resuming that process to expire. However, he has reserved the right to seek executive clemency.

"That's something Mr. McVeigh has under consideration," said his attorney, Nathan Chambers.

McVeigh has 30 days to file a petition for clemency with the Justice Department, which would make a recommendation to the president.

George W. Bush, who will be inaugurated Saturday, is a firm death penalty supporter: 152 inmates were put to death during his tenure as Texas governor, and only once during nearly six years in office did he ever use his power to stop an execution.

McVeigh was convicted of murder and conspiracy for the April 19, 1995,

bombing of the Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building that killed 168 people and injured hundreds of others. It was the deadliest act of terrorism ever committed on U.S. soil.

Prosecutors said McVeigh, a decorated Gulf War veteran, was motivated by hatred of the U.S. government and a desire for revenge for the April 19, 1993, deaths of about 80 people in the cult disaster near Waco, Texas.

Terry Nichols was convicted separately and sentenced to life in prison. The federal government has not put a prisoner to death since 1963, when it executed Victor Feguer for murder and kidnapping.

There is one federal execution set before May 16 — that of David Paul Hammer, who is scheduled to die by injection Feb. 21 for strangling his cellmate. But he is pursuing appeals.

"If there is any individual who deserves the ultimate punishment, it is Timothy McVeigh, who forfeited his life the moment he detonated that deadly cargo he had brought to downtown Oklahoma City," Gov. Frank Keating said.

But Kevin Acers, president of the Oklahoma City Chapter of Amnesty International, said, "I don't believe that granting an execution date for Timothy McVeigh in any way compensates for the tragedy of his violent act."

Betty Robins, who was working in the Murrah building at the time of the bombing, said the execution date is fine with her.

"If there is any individual who deserves the ultimate punishment, it is Timothy McVeigh."

Frank Keating
governor

"He can be forgiven, but he must pay restitution, and his death will be that restitution," she said. "I just wish he would tell people why before he dies and what he wanted to accomplish."

Oklahoma City Attorney Karen Howick said she is pursuing an effort to get a closed circuit television hookup for families to watch the execution.

McVeigh has never publicly explained why he wanted to drop his appeals and get a prompt execution date.

McVeigh's father, retired Pendleton, N.Y., factory worker William McVeigh, has said that his son explained his decision to drop appeals to the family. He told The Buffalo News: "I guess his feeling is, he knows he's going to die — it might as well be sooner than later."

Others speculated McVeigh wants to become a martyr for anti-government causes, or wants to mock the government with his petition for clemency, knowing that federal authorities haven't put anyone to death in nearly 40 years.

Shooting leaves Congo unsure of leadership

■ The status of President Kabila is unknown after a suspected bodyguard allegedly fired shots at him.

THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

KINSHASA, Congo — President Laurent Kabila was shot during an attempted coup on Tuesday, senior Congo officials said, and the Belgian government reported that the embattled leader was dead.

Belgian Foreign Ministry spokesman Koen Vervaeke said from Brussels that "two sources, of whom we are 100 percent certain" said Kabila had been killed during the intense 30-minute shooting at his palatial residence in the capital.

"He has probably been shot by one of his guards," he said.

The Belgian officials gave no further information, and the report could not be confirmed in Kinshasa. Belgium is Congo's former colonial ruler.

Asked about the report, Interior Minister Gaetan Kakudji said: "The Belgian Minister of Foreign Affairs can say what he wants but I will make my announcement tomorrow."

A member of Kabila's security entourage said on condition of anonymity that the bodyguard had shot the president in the back and right leg. He maintained that Kabila was alive and was being treated by doctors.

French diplomats in Paris also said they believed Kabila had been shot but was alive.

Intelligence officers in Rwanda said they had unconfirmed reports that Kabila was killed in the intense shooting at the presidential palace, which lasted half an hour. Rwanda supports rebels fighting to topple the Congolese strongman.

Kabila's government, in earlier statements, would not be publicly drawn on their president's condition, or even whether he'd been shot.

"President Kabila is alive and everything is OK," said Congolese Gen. Francois Olenga.

The conflicting reports came hours after witnesses told of 30 minutes of gunfire around the home of Kabila, who has been fighting multiple rebel armies for more than two years. It was unclear who was responsible for the shooting.

A presidential helicopter landed at Kinshasa's main hospital, a government official who witnessed the event said, adding there were unconfirmed reports that the aircraft was carrying Kabila's son, Joseph Kabila, who had apparently been injured. The younger Kabila is the head of Congo's military.

Presidential aide Eddy Kapend went on national television shortly after the gunfire ended to appeal for calm, but he made no mention of the incident.

The bleary-eyed Kapend ordered that all airports and borders be closed, appealing to the armed forces and civil society leaders to help maintain order.

"The Congolese people need your serenity and your discipline," he said.

Later, an 8 p.m. to 6 a.m. curfew was announced by Kakudji as having been ordered by Kabila himself.

Kakudji also put all fighting units in Kinshasa on alert until further notice.

In the neighboring Republic of Congo, a senior military official said it was unclear who was in control of the Kinshasa government after Kabila was wounded. The official declined to be named.

Amid the confusion of the shooting, Kinshasa residents hurried home and many streets were quickly deserted. Truckloads of armed soldiers patrolled the streets in the capital city of the vast Central African nation.

Lawyer blames WWF for 'accidental' death

THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

MIAMI — A teen-ager, who says he accidentally killed a 6-year-old girl while imitating pro wrestlers, kicked and slugged her repeatedly, inflicting injuries more severe than those seen in many car crashes, a prosecutor said Tuesday.

Lionel Tate, 13, smashed Tiffany Eunick's skull, pulverized her liver, broke a rib and caused numerous cuts and bruises, prosecutor Ken Padowitz said in opening statements at Tate's first-

degree murder trial.

"Tiffany Eunick was beaten to death," Padowitz told the jury.

Tate, who was 12 at the time and weighed 170 pounds, is being tried as an adult and faces a mandatory 25-year sentence with no parole if convicted.

Defense attorney Jim Lewis said the 1999 death was an accident.

"Lionel didn't understand that he could hurt the 48-pound girl if he punched her and threw her because he had seen pro wrestlers do that hundreds of times without injuring each other," said Lewis. "This was child's play and unfortunately child's play is sometimes dangerous."

Lewis, who has said before that Lionel has the intelligence of an 8-year-old, tried unsuccessfully to force wrestling stars such as The Rock Johnson and Hulk Hogan to testify. The World Wrestling Federation is suing Lewis for libel for linking the girl's death to pro wrestling.

The death was one of at least four cases in 1999 in which pro wrestling was blamed after one child killed another.

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Ask for the appropriate section editor at
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high 27, low 20

TOMORROW
Cloudy
high 34, low 20

World/Nation

The Associated Press

■ Washington, D.C.

Clinton diagnosed with treatable skin cancer

A growth removed from President Clinton's back last week turned out to be cancerous but highly treatable, the White House said Tuesday.

Doctors at Bethesda Naval Hospital found a flat lesion on the president's back during a routine physical Jan. 12. They removed it, and, as a precaution, they treated skin around it in a procedure known as "scraping and burning."

Clinton has had skin growths before. A precancerous lesion was removed from his nose in 1996, and a benign cyst was taken from his chest a year later.

This new lesion marked the first time that skin cancer was suspected, Dr. David Corbett, retired chairman of the naval hospital's dermatology department, said last week.

Pathology results confirmed basal cell carcinoma the most curable form of skin cancer. The White House said it strikes 800,000 to 1 million people each year.

■ California

Stage 3 alert leaves state scrambling for natural gas

SACRAMENTO — State power officials declared another electricity emergency Tuesday morning as several plants reported a shortage of natural gas. Southern California Edison told federal regulators it didn't have the money to pay its \$596 million wholesale electricity bill.

The California Independent System Operator, keepers of much of the energy-starved state's power grid, called a Stage 3 alert after reserves dipped below 1 1/2 percent. A Stage 3 alert could lead to rolling blackouts if reserves drop still lower.

Last week, a Stage 3 alert was called when the biggest storm to hit the state in three years cut electricity generation at a key nuclear plant. The alert was dropped back to Stage 2 on Friday, when more power became available from other states.

The new Stage 3 alert was expected to be in effect all day. A shortage of natural gas was forcing many power plants in Southern California to switch to oil, ISO spokesman Patrick Dorinson said. Power producing problems are possible and could worsen the power shortage, he said.

■ Antarctica

Journey across continent almost over for two women

Two adventurers on a bid to become the first women to ski across Antarctica reached the South Pole on Tuesday, completing nearly two-thirds of their journey, a spokesman for the expedition reported.

Ann Bancroft, 45, of Scandia, Minn., and Liv Arnesen, 47, of Oslo, Norway, reached the Pole after 64 days of skiing and sailing across the continent, said Charlie Hartwell, president of a Minneapolis company supporting the trek.

The women have covered 1,300 miles and will probably rest about 24 hours before setting out on the final 800 miles, he said.

"They went and filled their bellies with something besides chocolate, then they gave us a call," he said.

Bancroft and Arnesen ran low on supplies because the expedition was delayed at the outset, and they had been rationing food for the past two weeks.

■ Australia

Mass smooch protests homosexual banishment

BRISBANE — About 100 protesters puckered up in public Sunday to protest restrictions on kissing at a Brisbane, Australia park.

The mass smooch, at which 50 couples kissed, was a show of solidarity with two gay men who were ejected from the city-run South Bank Parklands last weekend for kissing in public.

"We don't see South Bank Parklands kicking off heterosexuals you see at the park, so we don't think there is any reason why gay couples should be not allowed to do that as well," Pendleton said.