

Congress to take up box-cutters incident involving N.C. student

BY LESLIE MILLER
THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

WASHINGTON — Congress wants to know how a 20-year-old college student apparently spirited box cutters onto two airplanes, where they lay undetected for weeks after he allegedly told the Transportation Security Administration what he had done.

He even e-mailed officials his name and telephone number, the FBI said.

Rep. Tom Davis, R-Va., chairman of the House Government Reform Committee, said Monday he told TSA chief James Loy that the panel would review the agency's operations, including airline passenger screening.

"Despite significant seizures of prohibited items from passengers going through TSA security checkpoints, this week's events highlight possible weaknesses in the system which need to be addressed," Davis said in a letter to Loy.

Nathaniel Heatwole, 20, of Damascus, Md., was charged Monday in federal court in Baltimore with taking a dangerous weapon aboard an aircraft. The case followed discovery of bags containing box cutters, bleach and other prohibited items aboard two Southwest Airlines planes.

Heatwole sent an e-mail to federal authorities in mid-September saying he had put the items aboard two specific Southwest flights as an act of civil disobedience to expose weaknesses in the security system, an FBI affidavit said. The objects were not found until last week, more than a month later.

The TSA did not send the e-mail to the FBI until last Friday. FBI agents then located Heatwole and interviewed him.

After his court appearance Monday, Heatwole, a junior at Guilford College in Greensboro, N.C., was released without bail for a preliminary hearing Nov. 10. He faces up to 10 years in prison.

Rep. Peter DeFazio, the top Democrat on the House Transportation aviation subcommittee, said someone should be fired because of the incident. But he said Loy, a former Coast Guard commandant, should stay if he owns up to what the agency's deficiencies are.

"I'm still willing to give the admiral a chance to come clean with us," said DeFazio, D-Ore. "He's a political appointee under tremendous pressure by this administration to cut corners, make things look good, not upset the airlines and not upset the passengers."

Sen. John McCain, R-Ariz., chairman of the Senate Commerce Committee, plans to hold a hearing in the next two weeks on aviation security.

Homeland Security Secretary Tom Ridge, whose department includes TSA, said officials "will go back and look at our protocol" for handling such e-mails. He said the agency gets a high volume of e-mails about possible threats and officials decided that Heatwole "wasn't an imminent threat."

The e-mail provided details of where the plastic bags were hidden — right down to the exact dates and flight numbers — along with Heatwole's name and telephone number.

TSA spokesman Mark Hatfield

said the agency was reviewing its procedures.

"Following an event like this, the results usually include adjustments and improvements in the procedures," he said.

The TSA's Contact Center was set up in May to handle communications to the agency. When an overt threat is received, operators are trained to notify a TSA investigator or security official, who then decides whether to refer it to the FBI or take other action, Hatfield said.

The center fields about 5,700 complaints, queries, compliments and threats each day. Heatwole's e-mail did not fall into the overt category because he never threatened harm, Hatfield said.

Now, call center workers will be trained to look for words or phrases that might fall outside the definition of overt but could signal a security threat, Hatfield said.

The incidents followed reports that aviation security still has substantial gaps more than two years after the Sept. 11, 2001, terror attacks. Significant weaknesses in testing and training TSA screeners were cited in recent reports by the Homeland Security Department's inspector general and the General Accounting Office, Congress's investigative arm.

The inspector general's investigators recently carried knives, a bomb and a gun through Boston Logan International Airport's boarding procedures without being detected.

Both hijacked airliners that crashed into the World Trade Center took off from Logan.

STATE

Beaufort man might get death penalty

BEAUFORT, S.C. (AP) — A Burton man convicted Monday of killing two Beaufort County sheriff's deputies who responded to a domestic dispute last year must now fight for his life.

A jury of eight women and four men returned the guilty verdicts against Abdiyyah ben Alkebulanyahh, 41, on Monday. The sentencing phase in the death penalty trial was to begin Tuesday.

The jury, which heard nine days of testimony, deliberated about four hours Sunday before breaking for the night. They resumed Monday morning.

After the jury left the courtroom, Alkebulanyahh, who is serving as his own lawyer, asked Circuit Judge Daniel Pieper to overturn the verdict and find him not guilty. He also made a motion for a new trial. Both requests were refused.

Georgetown Steel forced to shut down

GEORGETOWN (AP) — Georgetown Steel's 465 workers won't be returning to work anytime soon after the plant's owner decided Monday he couldn't restart operations and will file for bankruptcy.

The company, one of Georgetown County's biggest employers and taxpayers, lost \$15 million this year and couldn't scrape together the money to keep its operations going.

"Unless somebody were to step up tomorrow with \$10 million to \$15 million in cash, I think it is most likely that we will declare bankruptcy," Daniel K. Thorne, chairman of Midcoast Industries, said Monday evening. "We will file for Chapter 11, but I am not optimistic" of reopening the plant.

Two plead guilty in drug-feud killing

COLUMBIA (AP) — Two Columbia residents pleaded guilty to charges tied to the shooting death of a Lexington County man last year.

Paul Edward Keith, 30, was shot to death in what police say was a feud about a drug deal at a funeral.

Quincy M. McCoy, 21, was originally charged with murder. He pleaded guilty Monday to voluntary manslaughter, first-degree burglary and other charges before his trial started. He faces up to life in prison, prosecutor Tav Swarat said.

Sanford appoints Bowers to panel

COLUMBIA (AP) — A Columbia lawyer has been appointed to the state Election Commission.

Gov. Mark Sanford named Karl Bowers Jr. to the five-member panel Monday for a term that ends September 2004.

The commission is responsible for overseeing election laws in South Carolina.

Bowers is a lawyer with Nelson, Mullins, Riley and Scarborough and a legal officer in the South Carolina Air National Guard.

NATION

Muhammad opts to act as own lawyer

VIRGINIA BEACH, VA. (AP) — Cleared to defend himself against capital murder charges, John Allen Muhammad fired his lawyers and told jurors he had "nothing to do with" last year's Washington-area sniper attacks, surprising legal experts and raising the possibility that he could cross-examine shooting survivors and his alleged accomplice.

In a rambling but adamant 20-minute opening statement Monday, Muhammad, wearing a suit and tie, told the jury the evidence "will all show I had nothing to do with these crimes."

Fla. Senate debates fate of dying woman

TALLAHASSEE, FLA. (AP) — Florida House lawmakers stepped into the contentious battle over the fate of a brain-damaged woman slowly starving to death, voting the governor new powers to restore her feeding tube.

The Florida Senate scheduled a vote Tuesday on a House-passed bill to let Gov. Jeb Bush intervene in the case of Terri Schiavo, one of the nation's longest and most bitter euthanasia cases.

Schiavo has been at the center of a court battle between her parents, Bob and Mary Schindler, and her husband, Michael Schiavo. The parents want Terri Schiavo to live, and her husband says she would rather die.

Sex abuse victims to reveal details

BOSTON (AP) — By agreeing to participate in an \$85 million settlement with the Boston Archdiocese, clergy sex abuse victims like Alexa MacPherson face a painful task: sharing the details of their molestation.

A mediator was scheduled Tuesday to begin listening to each victims' story and then deciding the amount the person will receive, within the range of \$80,000 to \$300,000 set by the agreement.

The move comes after Roman Catholic church officials said Monday they had received signed agreements from more than 80 percent of 552 plaintiffs in clergy abuse lawsuits, a threshold set in the agreement.

Washington teacher strike ends in court

EVERETT, WASH. (AP) — Striking teachers in Marysville voted to obey a judge's order and go back to work, ending the longest teachers' strike in state history.

The vote Monday night was 420-181 to begin teaching classes Wednesday, the first of this school year for the district's 11,000 students, said Rich Wood, a Washington Education Association spokesman.

"It is time for all the adults to grow up and start looking at their obligations to these children," Snohomish County Superior Court Judge Linda C. Krese said earlier Monday, upset that four days of court-ordered negotiations failed to yield a contract.

WORLD

IRA confirms new disarmament act

BELFAST, NORTHERN IRELAND (AP) — The Irish Republican Army has agreed to get rid of more of its weapons in hopes of boosting Northern Ireland's 1998 peace accord, the outlawed group announced Tuesday.

The IRA statement represented a breakthrough in efforts to revive a joint Catholic-Protestant administration for this British territory. Hours before the IRA move, Britain confirmed that a long-delayed election for the province's legislature would proceed Nov. 26.

Asia-Pacific leaders push for security

BANGKOK, THAILAND (AP) — Tying the terror fight to economic growth, Pacific Rim leaders closed out an annual summit clouded by worries about the North Korean nuclear crisis — and at least one missile test by the North.

The 21-member Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation forum said it would work to "dismantle fully and without delay transnational terrorist groups that threaten the APEC economies."

The APEC nations vowed to work against the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, an apparent reference to the North Korean nuclear weapons stand-off, though the APEC statement did not specifically mention the reclusive, communist North.

Russia sends crew to space station

MOSCOW (AP) — A Russian spacecraft filled in for the second time since the U.S. shuttle program was grounded this year after the Columbia disaster, delivering a three-man crew Monday to the International Space Station.

A top Russian space official warned, however, that funding problems could jeopardize future missions.

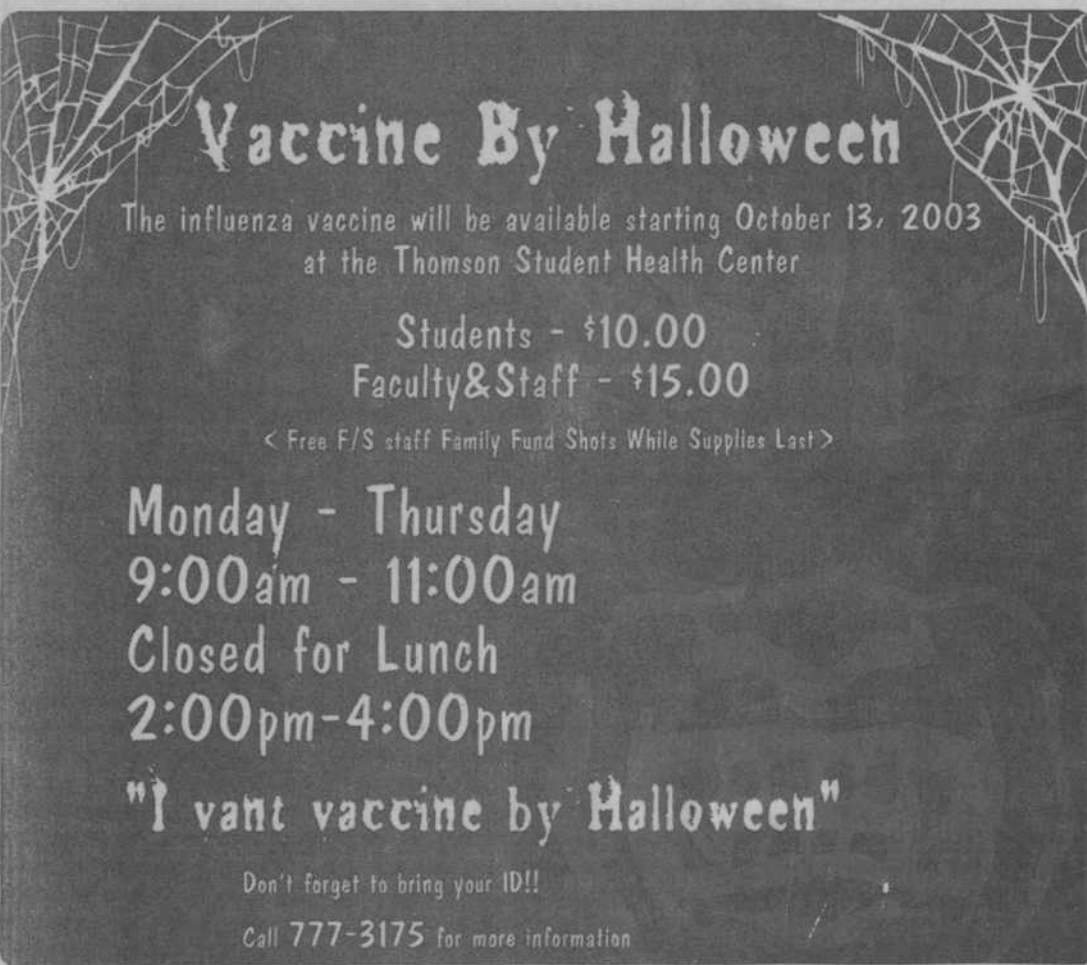
American Michael Foale, Russia's Alexander Kaleri and Spain's Pedro Duque entered the space station after the autopilot docking of their spacecraft, two days after the Soyuz blasted off from Kazakhstan.

Bush seeks Asia's help in terror war

SINGAPORE (AP) — President Bush pressed for more Asian help in the war on terror Tuesday, carrying his appeal to Singapore after winning a pledge from regional leaders to curb illicit weapons.

Bush failed to win explicit endorsement by the 21-nation Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation forum for a new U.S.-led diplomatic initiative to end a yearlong nuclear standoff with North Korea. And North Korea's firing of a short-range missile — possibly two — appeared to undercut progress toward an agreement.

However, the leaders called for resumption of multinational negotiations to resolve the impasse. The call was made by Thai Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra, who chaired the annual APEC summit, and he spoke with the other leaders flanking him.



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