

Israel denies pullout of Gaza Strip was due to U.S. pressure

ap news capsules

By The Associated Press INTERNATIONAL

GAZA CITY, Gaza Strip — Israel today completed a pullout from a Palestinian-controlled slice of the Gaza Strip it had seized just a day earlier, but denied the about-face was a result of heavy U.S. pressure.

Shortly after the Israelis left, Palestinians fired six mortar shells at a Jewish settlement and an army post in Gaza, causing no injuries. Israel's brief takeover of a square mile of land in Gaza had been triggered by mortar fire on an Israeli town.

Prime Minister Ariel Sharon insisted that the withdrawal was not ordered

because of the withering criticism sounded by U.S. Secretary of State Colin Powell who said the Israeli takeover was "excessive and disproportionate."

Raanan Gissin, an aide to Sharon, said Wednesday that the decision to withdraw was already made Tuesday morning, before Powell issued his statement.

MADRID, Spain — A Spanish court ruled today against extraditing media magnate Vladimir Gusinsky to Russia to face fraud charges, his lawyer said.

Domingo Plazas said he had received a copy of the decision from a

court panel that voted 2-1 against Russia's extradition request.

Gusinsky, who was arrested Dec. 12 on a warrant issued by Russia, was not present at the court but was expected to travel to Madrid later in the day from his mansion in southern Cadiz province, Plazas said.

Russia has charged Gusinsky with misrepresenting the assets of his Media-Most empire to obtain \$300 million in loan guarantees in 1996 from state-connected natural gas monopoly Gazprom.

Gusinsky, 48, has repeatedly claimed he is a victim of political prosecution because of Media-Most's steadfast criticism of Russian President Vladimir Putin and its hardnosed reporting of the war in Chechnya, among other issues.

NATIONAL

The surging Mississippi River forced hundreds of shoreline residents to abandon homes, halted barge and rail traffic and left weary sandbaggers in four states hoping for one thing today — no more rain.

"Something like this, it might take two weeks just to get down below the flood stage," said Randy Eddy Jr., 34, from his father's home on French Island, Wis., surrounded by water, thousands of sandbags and a half a dozen pumps.

Hundreds of Wisconsin and Iowa residents were chased away from low-lying riverside areas Tuesday, unsure when they would return home.

Sixteen counties in Minnesota declared a state of emergency as did nine

in western Wisconsin. A disaster proclamation was in place for 10 Iowa counties as the floodwaters began seeping southeast, toward homes in Hampton, Ill.

JACKSON, Miss. — The banner that led Confederate troops in the Civil War will remain on Mississippi's flag, as voters rejected warnings the symbol is racist and an obstacle to economic development.

By nearly a 2-1 margin, Mississippi residents voted Tuesday to keep their current state flag, defeating a proposed alternative that would have replaced the Confederate emblem in the upper left corner with a cluster of 20 stars.

With all precincts reporting, 488,630 voters, or 65 percent, favored keeping

the 1894 flag, while 267,812 voters, or 35 percent, wanted to replace it.

"I don't think black people were upset with the flag," said Robert Crook, a former state senator. "There was no hue and cry, no boycotts."

Opponents continued their criticism of the Confederate symbol, which they denounced as racist.

"The flag — outside of a symbol of racism — is an advertisement," said Tony Gaylor, a lawyer who was one of about a dozen people at Hal and Mal's Restaurant in Jackson for a post-election party. "As long as the state continues to advertise itself as racist, it will be seen as racist."

"We can only hope that one day the state of Mississippi will be dragged into the 21st century, into progress," he said.

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