

U.S. envoy starts fresh attempt in Mideast

By Associated Press INTERNATIONAL
JERUSALEM — U.S. envoy Anthony Zinni met Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon today, at the start of a fresh attempt to prod Israelis and Palestinians into moving forward with a truce plan both sides accepted in principle last year.

Shortly before the two met for breakfast at Sharon's sheep farm in southern Israel, troops stormed a West Bank village in Palestinian-controlled territory killing at least one Palestinian, witnesses said.

The Israeli military said it sealed off Tel village, near the town of Nablus, while it hunted suspected Palestinian militants as part of its "war against terror."

Zinni, who met Israeli security officials shortly after he arrived Thursday afternoon, is expected to remain in the region four days.

SYDNEY, Australia — Authorities arrested two more teen-age arson suspects today as erratic winds and dry air fanned wildfires that have destroyed homes and wreaked havoc across Australia's most populous state.

The arrests of a 14-year-old boy and a 15-year-old girl brought the number of people detained on suspicion of starting fires that have burned for nearly two weeks in New South Wales to 23, including 15 juveniles.

Firefighters and weather forecasters

ap news capsules

predicted that the blazes, which have destroyed homes and crops and forced thousands of people to evacuate, could still be burning next week.

About 100 blazes were burning around Sydney and throughout New South Wales. No deaths have been recorded since the "Black Christmas" fires started Dec. 24, but about 170 houses have been destroyed and hundreds of thousands of acres of land have been blackened by the blazes.

Officials say almost half of the fires have been set deliberately, and the New South Wales government has promised to punish arsonists, emphasizing that youth is not an excuse.

NATIONAL

BIRMINGHAM, Ala. — A former Ku Klux Klansman who state psychologists testified was faking mental problems has been ruled competent to stand trial for the murder of four black girls killed in a 1963 church bombing.

Circuit Judge James Garrett handed down the decision Thursday, reversing his own ruling last year that Bobby Frank Cherry was mentally incompetent.

In a two-sentence order, Garrett said the retired trucker "has been restored to competency." The judge, without any detailed explanation, said his finding was based on legal briefs and on a

recent hearing, at which psychologists testified about Cherry's mental condition.

Garrett scheduled a Jan. 18 proceeding to set a trial date.

Cherry's attorneys, Mickey Johnson and Rodger Bass, did not immediately return phone messages seeking comment.

"We believed all along that he was competent," said Doug Jones, a former U.S. attorney who has served as chief prosecutor in the case.

The church, a rallying site for advocates of public school desegregation, was bombed on Sept. 15, 1963, as the four girls prepared for a youth day service.

Two other former Klansmen were convicted of murder in the blast, one last year and one in 1977.

CRAWFORD, Texas — Before returning to Washington next week to focus on the economic recession, President Bush is getting to see his portrait hung in the Texas state Capitol, his stepping stone to the White House.

The president and first lady Laura Bush were interrupting their ranch holiday and flying by helicopter today to Austin for the unveiling of Bush's gubernatorial portrait by Fort Worth

artist Scott Gentling.

The president returns to work this Thursday they would not go ahead with a court-ordered retrial because they no longer had enough evidence. One of the only two witnesses against Melendez has recanted and the other is now dead, said Chip Thullbery, administrative assistant state attorney.

Defense attorneys said the true killer, a now-deceased man named Vernon James, confessed to at least four investigations or attorneys, but none of those admissions was allowed in court.

WASHINGTON

WASHINGTON — Lawyers for Sen. Robert Torricelli say the "false accusations" of a one-time friend and supporter were at the center of a three-year federal probe into the political and personal finances of the New Jersey Democrat.

In her final week in office, Mary Jo White, the U.S. attorney in New York City, said she decided against criminal charges after an exhaustive investigation by her office, the FBI, the Internal Revenue Service and the Customs Service.

Prosecutors referred their information to the Senate's ethics committee which will begin its own noncriminal inquiry.

Toricelli called the referral routine and said it "will yield the same result."

Toricelli's poll numbers declined during the investigation, which began

as an inquiry into his 1996 Senate campaign and expanded to include his personal finances. He complained last year that federal investigators had leaked to the press damaging and inaccurate allegations about him.

WASHINGTON — A threatening letter containing a powdery substance brought emergency crews running to Sen. Tom Daschle's Capitol office, but the majority leader says the material does not contain anthrax like the letter sent to him on Oct. 15.

He described the letter opened Thursday as "a copycat mailing" that was similar in message and tone to the previous letter.

"It said 'this was anthrax, death to America,' something to that effect, and 'stop the bombing' was the only phrase that was new," Daschle told reporters.

The "stop the bombing" apparently referred to the American air campaign in Afghanistan, which had not yet swung into high gear at the time the anthrax-tainted letter was postmarked in October.

Daschle, who was not in the room at the time, said the new letter was opened Thursday morning in the Capitol barely 20 feet from the Senate chamber. Congress is currently in recess.

Discovery of the letter in Daschle's second-floor suite of offices prompted officials to briefly quarantine some areas of the Capitol, but the building was not evacuated.

Stores exceed holiday expectations

SALES, from Page 1

not hurt his business too badly. He says in tough times, people tend to buy higher quality clothes and wear them longer.

Koza says a slow economy is always a concern, but he thinks Wal-Mart is a stable enough company, with a good enough customer base, that his store won't suffer. He pointed out people

might tend to go to his store in a recession because of its low prices.

Stores in Goodland weren't the only ones to exceed holiday expectations this holiday season. Roesch said Alco, which has stores in 17 states, was up four percent in sales. That's not fantastic, he said, but it is better than experts expected any retail store to do this season.

Wal-Mart as a whole also raised sale

revenues this year. Its corporate website reported sales for the last three weeks in December were either on target or better, and that November same-store sales were up 4.3 percent.

The *Denver Post* attributed Wal-Mart's success this season to sales and specials. It also reported clothing stores across the nation did not do as well, including Banana Republic, Gap and Old Navy. Lunsway confirmed

this, saying that, nationally, the past season was tough for clothing retailers.

The good news for businesses is that experts expect the recession, which began in March, to end soon. The Livingston Survey, a survey of economists' expectations overseen by the Federal Reserve Bank of Philadelphia, predicts the economy will recover by the middle of this year, and will grow rapidly in 2003.

Sedgwick county prosecutor resigns after rulings

WICHITA — A Sedgwick County prosecutor who has seen new trials ordered for four convictions she handled has resigned, the district attorney said.

The prosecutor, Denise Donnelly-

Mills, will remain on the county payroll until probably later this month, when her vacation and sick leave are used up, District Attorney Nola Foulston said Wednesday.

Kansas appellate courts have or-

dered new trials for three convictions handled by Donnelly-Mills, and Foulston ordered a new trial in a fourth case, all four in the last year and for prosecutorial misconduct. Donnelly-Mills has been on medical leave and was moved last year from trying criminal cases to the juvenile division.

She "will no longer be employed after the conclusion of her sick leave, which was approved by the county, and the conclusion of her vacation time,"

Foulston said. "The fact of the matter is that Denise has determined that she is going to resign from the office."

Donnelly-Mills did not comment Wednesday. A man who identified himself as her husband said she was not available.

Foulston said Donnelly-Mills, who joined the district attorney's office in 1990, was a good lawyer with solid ethical standards, despite the last year's troubles.

Study clears way for aquifer recharge

WICHITA (AP) — A \$5 million study recently completed by the U.S. Geological Survey clears the way for the city of Wichita to recharge the Equus Beds aquifer with water from the Little Arkansas River.

The study, paid for by the city and the USGS, examined 400 different pollutants and decided the water was clean enough to use — if the city treated the river water and used caution.

The city hopes to deposit into the aquifer 65 billion gallons of river water, the same amount held by Cheney Reservoir. The water could then be withdrawn later from the aquifer during a drought.

For the past five years the city has been experimenting with taking water out of the Little Arkansas River and pumping it into the Equus Beds.

and the conclusion of her vacation time,"

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Commissioners to discuss repairs of arts center

The Goodland city commissioners plan to discuss how to pay for repairs to the Carnegie Art Center when they meet at 5 p.m. Monday at the city building.

The city may apply for a grant through the state, but they must first get authorization to repair the building from the Kansas Historical Society.

Even though the city owns the building, any repairs or modifications have to be approved by the so-

ciety because it is a registered historical landmark.

The commissioners will also discuss bids for a plaster patching project at the arts center.

City Manager Ron Pickman wants to schedule a workshop session to discuss the solid waste problems the city has faced lately.

Pickman will also discuss City Hall Day, a legislative conference at the state Capitol to be held Monday, Jan. 24.

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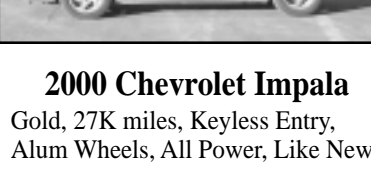
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