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Eight U.S. helicopters sent to Persian Gulf

WASHINGTON (AP) — The Navy prepared for a second convoy operation in the Persian Gulf on Wednesday as the Pentagon ordered eight helicopters airlifted to the region for minesweeping duties, officials said.

The officials, who demanded anonymity, said the RH-53D Sea Stallion helicopters would operate off an amphibious helicopter carrier in the gulf but would not be available for service before next week.

Meanwhile, it has been decided to proceed with the second convoy of Kuwaiti oil tankers, and that operation will start no later than Friday, the sources said.

A Navy team of underwater demolition specialists was combing the waters around the Iranian-controlled island of Farsi on Wednesday, 120 miles south of Kuwait, searching for additional mines in advance of the next convoy.

The Kuwaiti tanker Bridgeton, re-registered to fly the American flag, struck a mine in those waters

Friday while sailing with Navy warships in the first escort operation.

According to the Pentagon, mines had never before been detected in the area.

Reagan administration officials believe Iran planted the mine, but say they cannot prove it.

Although the Bridgeton was able to complete its trip, and will carry at least a partial load of oil on the return journey, the mine strike convinced the Pentagon that it had no choice but to increase the amount of U.S. minesweeping equipment in the Persian Gulf, one Pentagon official said.

While the 18-man Navy diving team can effectively disable any mines that are found, its ability to hunt such mines is extremely limited, the source added.

The situation is further complicated by the United States' failure so far to enlist the assistance of other countries in sweeping for mines.

Last week's convoy operation was

the first under a decision by President Reagan to extend military protection to 11 Kuwaiti oil tankers.

Reagan has said the escort work is essential to protect the flow of oil from the gulf to the West.

The plan has been roundly criticized on Capitol Hill, however, as likely to draw the United States into the Iran-Iraq war.

Kuwait — a strong ally of Iraq — has seen its ships become a special target of Iranian forces.

Robert Sims, the Pentagon's chief spokesman, declined to discuss any details of the military operations Wednesday, but he confirmed reports that more mines had been found near Farsi Island.

"Yes, there are mines in that area," Sims said. "But I'm not sure of the numbers or of the locations and that's the sort of thing that our mine counter-measures people who are there will attempt to determine."

Sources said no additional mines had been located since Tuesday, leaving the number found and "neutralized" at seven.

Congress approves bill to raise limit of U.S. debt

WASHINGTON (AP) — Congress passed an emergency increase in the national debt limit on Wednesday, averting what the Treasury chief said would be a "global economic and financial crisis."

The swift action came as progress was reported in bipartisan talks on reviving the Gramm-Rudman budget balancing law.

The House, by 263-155, approved a bill increasing the national debt limit to \$2.32 trillion through Aug. 6. The Senate followed suit Wednesday evening by voice vote, allowing the Treasury to borrow for the first time since July 17, when an earlier temporary debt law expired.

The Treasury has been paying its bills in cash, but Treasury Secretary James A. Baker III warned that the coffers would be empty by Friday and the government would be in default for the first time in its history.

"Default would produce global economic and financial crisis of major proportion," Baker said in a letter to Congress.

The interim debt bill was designed to keep the government solvent until lawmakers reach agreement on a long-term debt bill. In anticipation of the stopgap borrowing authority, the Treasury on Wednesday tentatively scheduled two securities auctions for Thursday and a third on Friday.

The House last month approved a new debt ceiling of \$2.565 trillion, enough to last through September 1988. That legislation has been held up, however, as the target for an amendment in the Senate to revive the Gramm-Rudman budget-balancing law.

Both Republicans and Democrats have said they favor imposing automatic spending cuts to enforce Gramm-Rudman's deficit-cutting program. That was part of the original 1985 law, but the Supreme Court said last year the provision was unconstitutionally drafted.

The two parties had disagreed on how to overcome the court's objections.

The Senate last week killed initial proposals from each party. Sen. Lawton Chiles, D-Fla., chairman of the Senate Budget Committee, and Sen. Pete V. Domenici of New Mexico, the committee's senior Republican, were negotiating Wednesday in hopes of a compromise.

Byrd said he thought agreement was possible this week. Then, House and Senate approval would be needed before the legislation could go to President Reagan's desk. House members have proposed alternatives which differ from those under consideration in the Senate.

Clements announces plan to give prisoners AIDS tests

HOUSTON (AP) — All Texas prison inmates soon will be subject to mandatory AIDS testing, Gov. Bill Clements says.

But state prison officials say such testing could not begin for months, and the issue — which must be decided by the Texas Board of Corrections — won't even be considered until the August board meeting.

Officials noted testing the entire prison population would cost at least \$760,000 and might not prove conclusive.

Clements made his comments Tuesday in Traverse City, Mich., during the National Governor's Association meeting.

"We are right now in the process of putting together a program on the prison system where we will start

testing for AIDS on a mandatory basis," Clements said. "We will screen our present (prison) population. We will also probably shortly have a program of entrance and exit."

Al Hughes, prison board chairman, said it could be a month before the board takes up the issue of AIDS testing. He said the department could not immediately start the mandatory testing of all inmates.

Prison employee union representatives demanded mandatory testing last week after four guards at the Texas Department of Corrections Beto I Unit in Anderson County were exposed to the AIDS virus while struggling with a suicidal inmate.

Clements said the AIDS screening would indicate if convicts were spreading the disease while in prison.

Clements did not say what, if any, action would be taken for inmates who test positive for the AIDS virus.

Identification of an inmate as an AIDS carrier could lead to attacks from other prisoners, Hughes said.

"There's been evidence in other states that prisoners killed another prisoner because he had AIDS," he said. "It's a deep-seated problem, and we'll have to face it."

Clements' comments came shortly after the governors unanimously adopted their first policy statement on acquired immune deficiency syndrome.



Pipe Scenes

Photo by Robert W. Rizzo

Carlos Davis drives a sheepfoot roller over what will be the foundation for the new campus parking garage. The roller packs the dirt in a step done before strength tests can be performed.

NASA chooses A&M to study space commercialization

By Kirsten Dietz
Senior Staff Writer

Texas A&M's Texas Engineering Experiment Station has been designated by NASA as one of seven new research centers to study the commercialization of space and one of two centers to concentrate on the cost-efficient generation of power in space.

NASA awarded A&M a five-year research grant worth \$1 million a year. The center also will receive annually about \$600,000 from industry, \$250,000 from A&M and \$200,000 from TEES.

The Center for Commercial Development of Space Power, headed by Dr. Alton D. Patton, an A&M electrical engineering professor, will conduct the research, which will focus on the development and deployment of cost-efficient systems to supply power to space vehicles.

Patton said he doesn't know exactly when the research will begin, but he said it will be after Oct. 1, when the government's fiscal year begins. The time depends on contract negotiations with industry partners, he said.

He said this type of research is necessary because a power system

must be developed to support the activity and allow man to live in space if man is to sustain his presence there to set up manufacturing facilities.

The required power for this long-term habitation is much greater than the power now required for today's short-term missions, he said. So, Patton said, a new, cheaper power source needs to be developed. Currently, the weight of the power source needed to launch the craft adds to the cost of the launch. The reduction in cost will come from reducing the weight of the power source, he said.

"Every ounce you can save is worth something," he said.

The research will concentrate on the various forms these systems could take, Patton said.

One thing the center will explore is if it is economically feasible to develop a station in space to send power to each craft instead of having a power system on each spacecraft, he said.

While the bulk of the research will be done at A&M, some will be done by TEES researchers at the University of Texas at Arlington, Prairie View A&M and Lamar University.

"Our research activity will span all departments of the engineering col-

lege, chemistry and physics," Patton said.

He stressed that the TEES researchers and those from private industry will collaborate closely on projects, and many projects will be initiated by the companies.

"We're not just going to be working in an ivory tower," he said.

In fact, Patton said, the center will have to be primarily supported by industry after the five-year grant runs out.

"It is our goal during the five years to build industrial support from the outset and add partner industries in coming years as industry contributions scale up as NASA support scales down," he said.

Industrial partners now include: Gulf State Utilities, Potomac Electric Power Co., General Electric Co., Lockheed Missiles and Space Co., TRW Inc., ENTECH Inc., Arthur D. Little Inc., Martin Marietta Inc., Ford Aerospace Inc., Solar Energy Research Institute, Electric Power Research Institute, ComSat Corp., Ferranti International Controls, Eagle-Picher Inc. and E-Systems.

The other institution directly focusing on space power is Auburn University. There now are 16 NASA-affiliated centers.

Meese defends investigation of Iran-Contra affair

WASHINGTON (AP) — Attorney General Edwin Meese III, confronted by skeptical lawmakers, unflinchingly defended his inquiry into the Iran-Contra affair Wednesday.

Meese said he took offense at suggestions the investigation was less than thorough.

Several senators on the Iran-Contra committees said Meese's questioning of CIA Director William J. Casey and National Security Adviser John Poindexter in November was too general.

The senators said the questions failed to elicit important information about their involvement.

Meese handled most of the interrogation calmly on his second and last day as a witness, but he bristled when Sen. George Mitchell, D-Maine, said he found it "difficult to accept" some of Meese's actions.

"It may be strange to you," the attorney general responded.

"It may strike you that truth being stranger than fiction but I take offense at the idea that it's hard to accept, because what I told you is the absolute truth of what happened," Meese said.

"And if there is any question in your mind, I want to get that settled right now," he said.

Mitchell said, "Well, no, as I just said, it's hard to accept."

Mitchell also questioned Meese's failure to quickly seal and guard records in Lt. Col. Oliver North's office and thereby prevent document-shredding that North has testified he did later.

Sen. Daniel K. Inouye, D-Hawaii, asked why Meese didn't ask "the \$64,000 question" — about diversion of Iranian arms-sales profits to the Nicaraguan Contras —

when he interviewed Casey on Nov. 22, hours after Justice Department investigators had found a memo that described the diversion.

Meese replied, "Because I didn't know what that information that had been discovered meant yet."

I made the decision instinctively, I think, as any lawyer would, not to talk with anyone about something that important until such time (as) I knew what I was talking about."

Questioning by lawmakers also brought out that from Nov. 21, when Meese received his fact-finding assignment from the president, until his Nov. 23 interview of North, the attorney general had people taking notes at every interview he conducted.

But following the Nov. 23 interview with North confirming the Contra diver-

sion, Meese took no notes and no aide accompanied him on the next two days when he talked about the diversion with a number of top administration officials, including the president.

Others whose questioning by Meese is not reflected in notes include Vice President George Bush, White House Chief of Staff Donald Regan, former National Security Adviser Robert McFarlane and Casey, who died last May.

Under questioning by Mitchell, Meese acknowledged that he left his note-taker, aide John Richardson, in the car outside Casey's home while the attorney general went inside to talk to the CIA director the morning of Nov. 25.

Meese drew a distinction, calling the earlier meetings "interviews where we were seeking to elicit a great deal of infor-

mation and in which notes were important to record information."

He said the later questioning of many of the same people amounted to "casual conversations."

Meese said he didn't take notes at his Nov. 24 interview of Poindexter — who admitted knowing about the diversion — because the national security adviser confirmed information the attorney general had learned earlier.

Inouye told Meese that the testimony the committee has received in nearly 11 weeks of hearings "has been confusing and contradictory."

"There is no question here that Colonel North was not honest with you, that Admiral Poindexter lied to you and yet you have indicated to us you were convinced at that time they were truthful," Inouye said.