

Communists back Kremlin in restructure

MOSCOW (AP) — The Communist Party Central Committee on Monday endorsed constitutional changes that critics say give the Kremlin too much power, setting the stage for approval over the objection of several restive republics.

Officials in Estonia, the tiny Baltic republic that led the challenge to Kremlin authority by declaring its sovereignty in internal policy and its right to review all new Soviet legislation, said they would stand firm despite a ruling the move was unconstitutional.

The more than 300 members of the party's policy-making body, meeting on the eve of an extraordinary meeting of the Supreme Soviet, or national parliament, declared the amendments "will mean a major step along the road of democratization of Soviet society," the official Tass news agency said.

It instructed President and Communist Party chief Mikhail S. Gorbachev to make a report on the amendments to the Supreme Soviet.

The Central Committee promised election campaigns "unlike all the previous ones as real competitiveness of candidates is introduced in the political life of the country," Tass said.

Gorbachev proposed the amendments to make the system more democratic, but the Estonians, as well as activists in Latvia, Lithuania, Armenia, and Georgia have criticized them for taking away some of the local control that Gorbachev has said he wants to foster.

They say the amendments take away the right of the 15 Soviet republics to secede, giving a new 2,250-member Congress of People's Deputies the right to determine the boundaries of the Soviet Union.

Those republics have demanded major changes in the amendments, or that they be rejected outright. Some legislators from the small republics have said they will object in the Supreme Soviet, but they most likely will be far outnumbered by deputies from much bigger republics such as Russia and the Ukraine.

The amendments were approved by the Presidium of the Supreme Soviet, the Soviet government's highest

executive body, on Saturday with unspecified changes resulting from complaints and suggestions included in more than 250,000 letters.

Gorbachev and the Presidium flatly declared Estonia's move unconstitutional.

In a speech made public Sunday night, Gorbachev accused the Estonian leadership of undermining the unity of the Soviet Union, and used the word "crisis" to describe the confrontation between Estonia and Moscow.

"Our future is not in weakening ties among the republics, but in strengthening them, in broadening cooperation," Gorbachev said in the speech, which was delivered Saturday to the Presidium of the Supreme Soviet.

Estonian Communist Party leader Vaijino Vyalas, speaking on television in the republic late Sunday, told Estonians, "We will not retreat," according to Valle Feldman of the republic's Foreign Ministry.

"Only the Estonian parliament can change the decisions of the Estonian parliament," Feldman said. "We have rights, and Moscow has rights, too."

The Central Committee said party organizations must work out several unclear points of relations between Moscow and the republics on the basis of "the course of the party for widening the rights of union republics and autonomous formations," but that the Soviet Constitution must be strictly observed.

It said that questions of ethnic relations must be fully discussed with local officials before a plenum is held next year on the subject, and expressed confidence that any problem could be worked out.

In other action, the Central Committee expelled one full member, Inamzhon Usmankhodaheyev, and two candidate members, Ismail Dzhabbarov and Akil Salimov, named by a leading magazine editor earlier this year in a bribery case.

In a speech to the Communist Party conference at the Kremlin in June, Gorbachev magazine editor Vitaly Korotich had accused four unidentified Uzbekistan officials of accepting bribes.



Jon Mostyn, a sophomore industrial distribution major, pounds the pavement over Welborn Road Monday.

Photo by Jay Janner

NASA starts 'invisible' countdown for launch of shuttle, secret payload

CAPE CANAVERAL, Fla. (AP) — NASA set an invisible countdown clock in motion Monday for Thursday's launch of space shuttle Atlantis with five military men who reportedly will deploy the \$500 million Lacrosse satellite to spy on the Soviet Union.

NASA and the Pentagon say the flight and its cargo are top-secret, but reports have circulated widely about the satellite, and even the Soviet Union has discussed the mission through its news agency, Tass.

The weather could be a problem for launch day. A preliminary forecast for Thursday called for overcast sky, brisk winds and isolated rain showers — unfavorable conditions that would prevent NASA from giving the go-ahead for liftoff.

The astronauts flew here Monday afternoon from their training base in Houston and their commander, Navy Cmdr. Robert L. Gibson, told reporters, "We're ready to go; the

crew is excited about the mission, and we're anxious to be under way." He said he hoped for good weather on Thursday.

The crew members have been instructed not to discuss their mission publicly, and when a reporter shouted a question about the flight, Gibson smiled and said, "Good to see you."

The pilot is Air Force Lt. Col. Guy S. Gardner, and the mission specialists are Col. Richard M. Mullane and Lt. Col. Jerry L. Ross of the Air Force, and Navy Cmdr. William M. Shepherd.

The countdown started shortly after midnight, but because the mission is classified, countdown displays normally monitored by the news media were blank.

NASA and the Defense Department made periodic reports that all was well but said they wanted to keep the precise progress of the count secret to hide the exact time of launch.

No information has been made public about the number or length of planned "holds," when the clock would normally be stopped.

Officials have said Atlantis will lift off sometime between 6:32 a.m. and 9:32 a.m. Thursday.

Reliable sources have said the launch will occur about 7 a.m. if weather and other conditions are adequate.

Defense Department officials contend the secrecy makes it more difficult for Soviet satellites and spy ships operating off Cape Canaveral to

monitor the flight and learn its purpose.

Critics argue that such secrecy is unnecessary because the Soviets, with their intelligence capabilities, already know a great deal about the mission.

In fact, the official Soviet news agency Tass said Sunday, "The main task of the secret mission is to put into near-Earth orbit a new generation reconnaissance satellite, code-named Lacrosse. The satellite will conduct surveillance of the territory of the Soviet Union with the help of updated radar."

UPD stakeouts during holiday net two suspected auto burglars

By Stephen Masters
Senior Staff Writer

University Police stakeouts over the Thanksgiving holiday netted two juveniles suspected of breaking into at least 11 vehicles on the Texas A&M campus.

UPD Director Bob Wiatt said officers who staked out in Parking Area 61, better known as the Fish Lot, heard glass break. He said they noticed a Camaro with its headlights turned off and two individuals running from car to car.

Both suspects are 16, he said. One is from Hearne and the other was listed as a missing person from Pasadena, Texas, he said. Authorities have since said the youth is a runaway, Wiatt said. He said he believes the parents of the runaway have been contacted.

Both are being held in the Brazos County Juvenile Detention Center for felony burglary of a motor vehicle, punishable by up to 20 years, he said. But even if convicted, the suspects will be released when they turn 18.

The names of the suspects cannot be released because they are juveniles, Wiatt said.

Because the incidents occurred over the holiday, so far only four of the owners of vandalized vehicles have been contacted by UPD.

In addition to the seven vehicles broken into in PA 61, one each in PA 24 and PA 40 behind the Commons, one in PA 39 behind Cain Hall and one on Clark Street west of the MSC were vandalized, Wiatt said. Six of the 11 vehicles broken into were Camaros, he said.

Wiatt said the suspects' Camaro was "stuffed to the gills" with several thousand dollars worth of stolen items, including equalizers, CB radios, checkbooks and a garage door opener.

"They took everything that wasn't nailed down and even some stuff that was," he said.

Wiatt estimated the damage at near \$7,000 and the value of the property recovered at about \$2,000.

In another incident Thursday, a Texas A&M student and a Sam Houston State University student were arrested for misdemeanor criminal mischief for flattening tires on four vehicles in PA 61, Wiatt said. The type of misdemeanor cannot be determined until the value of the tires is determined. The valve stems on the tires were completely removed, he said.

Both were released pending charges. The names of the two students will not be released unless charges are filed, Wiatt said.

Wiatt said two vehicles were hit by both the valve stem removers and the thieves, but said the two crimes were not related.

Wiatt said the stakeouts were initiated to prevent people from taking advantage of the decreased number of students on campus during the holiday. The stakeouts began on the night of Nov. 23 and continued through Sunday.

Christmas celebrations cancelled in Bethlehem

BETHLEHEM, Occupied West Bank (AP) — The Palestinian town where Christ was born has canceled its traditional joyous Christmas celebrations in because of the year-long revolt against Israeli occupation.

"We don't see any reason to celebrate Christmas," Deputy Mayor Hanna Nasser said Monday.

"We have to show concern for our dead and for our detainees," he said. More than 300 Palestinians have been killed and 5,000 arrested since the uprising began Dec. 8, 1987, in the occupied West Bank and Gaza Strip, which Israel captured from Jordan and Egypt in 1967. Eleven Israelis have been slain.

Six Palestinians from Bethlehem and surrounding refugee camps have been killed and hundreds are among the total of more than 7,000 wounded.

A spokesman for the Israeli military government said he was unaware of the decision and declined comment.

Cancellation would be a blow to Israel at a time when much of the world focuses its attention on Bethlehem.

Nasser told the Associated Press the town government called off all official celebrations, such as the Christmas Eve reception for Israeli and Palestinian dignitaries and the annual Boy Scout parade.

Manger Square, usually decorated with bright strings of colored lights, will remain dark and its 40-foot Christmas tree will be left bare, he said.

Last year's Christmas, when the

rebellion was three weeks old, provided a foretaste.

Mayor Elias Freij canceled the Christmas Eve reception and the Boy Scout parade was smaller, but streamers and lights went up in the square and the tree blazed with blinking neon balls.

Only about 2,500 visitors came, 75 percent fewer than in 1986.

Some were kept away by the driving rain but others apparently feared the violence.

Delta crash blamed on mechanical failure

GRAPEVINE (AP) — On the eve of a hearing by the National Transportation Safety Board, the Air Line Pilots Association announced Monday that mechanical failure, not human error, caused the crash that killed 14 people.

An airline pilots' union says federal investigators are focusing on "premature findings of pilot error" in the August crash of Delta Flight 1141.

Evidence the NTSB gathered from wreckage revealed that the plane's flaps were not in takeoff position, and NTSB investigators found the flap lever set wrong.

But pilot union representatives said it is likely that the three-person flight crew of the Boeing 727 properly set the plane's wing flaps. They said a mechanical problem set in motion a sequence of events that led to the crash.

"It would seem to us that there has been a premature and automatic finding of pilot error," Capt. Jim Gray, Delta spokesman for the Air Line Pilot's Association, said. "A finding of pilot error was probably made on the first day — the very first day."

NTSB spokesman Mike Benson said the agency has reached no conclusions.

"The hearings start tomorrow and they're going to be full and complete," Benson said Monday. "Nobody's prejudged anything."

The union argues the airplane may have had a malfunction called "split-flap configuration."

ALPA spokesman John Mazar said the wing flaps may have stuck in opposing positions — one up, one down — robbing the plane of power and lift.

Mazar said the union's theory answers many questions surrounding the Aug. 31 accident at Dallas-Fort Worth International Airport, in Grapevine.

It explains the airplane's unusually long roll before taking off near the end of the runway, the aircraft's pitch to the right, the stall of the five engine compressors and the snap the crew heard before takeoff, he said.

It also shifts blame from the pilots.

The cockpit voice recorder picked up the second officer acknowledging the proper flap setting, but NTSB officials have said the plane's outmoded flight data recorder provided little help.

Transcripts of conversations among Flight 1141's crew members

included an 18-minute social visit to the cockpit by a flight attendant while the plane was waiting for take-off.

Gray said a "quick and dirty investigation" by federal officials might result in a finding of pilot error. He also said it appears, based on indications such as the list of witnesses for this week's hearing, that NTSB officials are targeting Delta and the Federal Aviation Administration for the agency's relationship with the airline.

NTSB investigators have stressed that no conclusions will be released during the hearing. The board's final report isn't expected for six months.

Benson also said the witness list was agreed on several weeks ago by all the parties involved, including the pilots union.

Investigators already have charted the plane's wreckage and interviewed those aboard the plane and other witnesses. The plane's three engines also were analyzed.

Thirteen people died as the plane split open and the fuselage exploded in flames just off a south runway at the airport. Another man later died of injuries suffered as he tried to make his way back onto the burning plane to save his trapped wife.

But 94 others aboard the Salt Lake City-bound plane survived. That's another reason federal officials are taking such a careful look at Flight 1141.

Scrutiny of another Delta crash at D-FW Airport also resumes Tuesday in Texas. A trial to assess liability in the 1985 crash of Delta Flight 191 was to resume in Fort Worth.