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Beer companies plan attack on D.C. to battle 'sin tax'-funded health plan

THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

WASHINGTON — A thousand beer sellers inundated Capitol Hill on Tuesday hoping to avoid picking up some of the tab for President Clinton's health care plan.

Fresh from a daylong training session in which they were pumped full of statistics and arguments, the wholesalers and brewers hoped to meet with virtually every member of the House and Senate.

Their mission was to confront any increase in the excise tax on beer — a "sin tax" — before it was proposed to pay for the health care plan.

"Remember, you're not going up there to save the world" but instead to save jobs, Henry King, director of the Brewers Association of America, told the beer sellers in a private training session beforehand.

For Bo Huggins, who with his father owns a Miller-Heineken distributorship in Houston, the first stop was the office of Rep. Mike Andrews, D-Texas.

Andrews is a member of the House Ways and Means Committee, which gets the first crack at any legislation dealing with taxes, and is also a leader in the effort to impose a stiff new tax on cigarettes.

Huggins said he came away "encouraged that he (Andrews) seemed to understand the difference between tobacco and beer."

But the Houston lawmaker made no commitments, explaining to his guest that often Congress must deal with issues as they are packaged by the White House.

"I hope beer is not in the mix," Andrews said. But he noted: "The administration is struggling to pay for health care."

Clinton has promised a comprehensive health care reform package by May 5 that will, among other things, provide health insurance for the 36 million Americans currently without it.

To help pay for the plan, many anticipate the White House will propose higher excise taxes on alcohol and tobacco products — and perhaps firearms.

The beer sellers' lobbying onslaught is not the first to hit Capitol Hill since work began on the health plan. Last week hundreds of doctors lobbied lawmakers in a campaign organized by the American Medical Association.

"The guy from back home is the best lobbyist going," explained Ronald A. Sarasin, president of the National Beer Wholesalers Association, which helped organize Tuesday's campaign.

"It's extremely effective for people to come to Washington from back home. There's a message there, even if he doesn't say anything," he said.

To prepare their troops, the wholesalers and brewers spent Sunday and Monday in seminars and meetings at a hotel three blocks from the Capitol.

The impromptu lobbyists were urged to emphasize the economic impact their businesses have on local communities and to highlight the industry advertising campaigns to curb drunken driving and underage drinking.

King, in a private training session, urged the businessmen to carry their lobbying fight home and keep up a sustained attack over the next six months, when details of the health plan will be hashed out.

Military court convicts Serbs of war crimes

THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

SARAJEVO, Bosnia-Herzegovina — A military court convicted two Serbs of war crimes on Tuesday and sentenced them to death by firing squad for atrocities that included slitting the throats of POWs and raping Muslim women.

No date was set for the executions of Borislav Herak, 22, and Sretko Damjanovic, 31. Defense attorneys said they would appeal.

The commander of U.N. peacekeepers urged Bosnian authorities to turn the case — Bosnia's first war crimes trial — over to an international tribunal to avoid inflaming ethnic passions.

Herak, his head slightly bowed as the sentence was read, confessed to killing 30 war prisoners and civilians, including a dozen young Muslims he first raped.

Damjanovic claims he was tortured into falsely confessing to five murders and two rapes. The only evidence against him, his lawyer complained, is Herak's testimony.

Defense lawyers planned an appeal to the Bosnian supreme court, saying the trial produced no hard evidence and hinged on the disputed confession of one defendant.

Given a chance to speak after sentencing, Herak said, "I deserve the death penalty. I would just like to see my father one more time and to have some cigarettes."

Damjanovic said bitterly, "I just want to thank the court for this."

Asked by Judge Zlatan Teftedarija to elaborate, Damjanovic said, "This is a not a fair judgment. I am not guilty. I'd also like to have some cigarettes."

Both soldiers were convicted of crimes against civilians and genocide, based on Herak's testimony that he and Damjanovic killed people during so-called "ethnic cleansing" operations to purge Muslims from villages the Serbs took over.

World News Briefs

April vote draws Russian debate

MOSCOW (AP) — Reformist lawmakers advised President Boris Yeltsin on Tuesday not to hold his own referendum and cautioned about discontent in the army as he plots strategy in the battle with parliament.

Yeltsin's chief of staff said the president might hold a plebiscite to counter an April 25 referendum on his leadership that was approved Monday by the Congress of People's Deputies.

"I still don't know whether I should take part in the April 25 referendum or oppose it," legislator Gleb Yakunin, a Russian Orthodox priest and staunch Yeltsin supporter, told the ITAR-Tass news agency.

The four-day emergency Congress session failed to decide the fight between president and parliament, although Yeltsin's opponents did succeed in eroding his powers. The opponents fell only 72 votes short of the 689 needed to remove him from office in a vote Sunday.

Bitter attacks on Yeltsin have become a habit with the 1,033-member body. Many oppose Yeltsin's free-market reforms and Western-oriented foreign policy.

Israel authorities ban Palestinians

HADERA, Israel (AP) — Gunmen shot to death two Israeli traffic police sitting in a squad car Tuesday, and the government struck back by barring the West Bank's 1 million Palestinians from entering Israel.

Police blamed militant Arabs for the pre-dawn slayings.

The assassinations at an intersection near this town in Israel's heartland appeared to escalate a wave of Arab attacks that has claimed 13 Israeli lives in March. Twenty-six Palestinians also have been killed this month.

London abortion conflict escalates

LONDON (AP) — Authorities moved forcefully Tuesday to keep U.S.-style anti-abortion militancy out of Britain, arresting the founder of the Rescue America group and stopping a counter-demonstration.

Anti-abortionists have fire-bombed U.S. abortion clinics and harassed women clients, and an abortion opponent has been charged with murdering a doctor outside a Florida clinic. Family planning workers fear the same could happen in Britain, where abortion has been legal since 1967.

Stunned by the arrest of their leader, Don Treshman of Houston, anti-abortionists from the United States and their British allies called off a demonstration Tuesday outside the London offices of the International Planned Parenthood Federation.

But about 60 police showed up, and they arrested some 20 abortion rights demonstrators intent on confronting the Americans.

A few anti-abortionists also were arrested.

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