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China bans electronic pets from schools

BEIJING (AP) — Worried that a craze over hand-held video games will distract children from their studies, China has banned electronic pets from schools, state-run media reported today.

The State Education Commission issued the ban Wednesday, noting that the games had already adversely affected some students, the Xinhua News Agency reported. Effective Sept. 1, the start of the semester, the toys will be banned from all schools, it said.

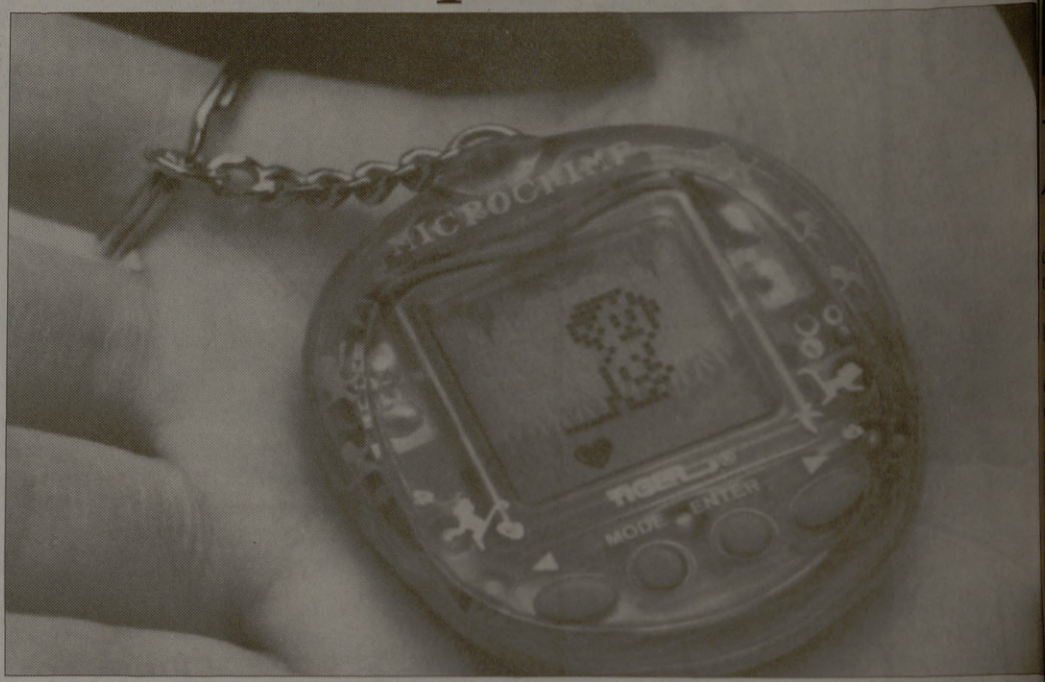
School officials will confiscate any games they find, and students caught carrying them to exams will have their test scores canceled, it added.

The government also plans educational activities to convince children of the disadvantages of the electronic pets, which "die" if not given constant attention.

Some schools in Thailand, the Philippines, Hong Kong and South Korea also have banned the games for the same reason.

While the original Tamagotchi was an electronic chicken, its wild success has led Japanese toymaker Bandai to produce electronic cats, dogs and dinosaurs as well.

The State Education Commission's order prohibits sales people from marketing the electronic pets or any other types of video games or toys in schools, Xinhua said.



A MicroChimp virtual pet, programmed and cared for by its owner, is displayed in New York. School officials in China are confiscating the toy, and students caught carrying them to exams will have their test scores canceled.

Police in Stockholm discount connection between attacks, letters

STOCKHOLM, Sweden (AP) — Police say claims of responsibility for bombs at two Swedish stadiums apparently did not come from the perpetrator.

But failure to catch the person threatening more attacks has anxiety high a week before the decision is made on who will host the 2004 Olympics.

The bombs — one Monday at New Ullevi Stadium in Goteborg and one Aug. 8 at Stockholm's old Olympic Stadium — are widely believed to be protests of the Swedish capital's bid for the game.

At least 10 arson fires, most against sports facilities, also are believed by many to be related to the Olympics.

Two letters sent from Sweden to The Associated Press bureau in London claimed the bombs and fires were the work of a shadowy extremist group called "We Who Built Sweden." Police say it is not clear if it exists as an organized group.

The latest letter, received Wednesday, threatened to turn Stockholm into a "war zone" if the city wins next Friday's vote by the International Olympic Committee. Stockholm is one of five finalists for the games.

"Our assessment is that in all likelihood this has nothing to do with the fires or the explosions," Stockholm police spokesman Claes Cassell told the newspaper Dagens Nyheter for a story Thursday.

"These are racists who are seizing the chance to get their confused thoughts publicized," he said. The letters have included inflammatory racial terms.

The letters also have complained that hosting the Olympics would be a waste of taxpayer money at a time of declining social services and high unemployment.

Guard levels have been increased at major sports facilities throughout the country — including at the bomb-scarred Olympic Stadium, where tens of thousands of people are to gather next Friday to await word on the IOC decision.

Prime Minister Goeran Persson expressed confidence in the police Wednesday despite their failure to solve the crimes. But frustration clearly is high and only was aggravated by the announcement that a key machine needed to analyze the bomb residue was broken.

Officials also were dismayed that news of the attacks has received wide attention overseas.

"A contact I have in Buenos Aires thinks the whole damn city has blown up," Mayor Mats Hulth was quoted as saying in Thursday's Aftonbladet newspaper.

Buenos Aires, Argentina, is one of Stockholm's competitors for the games, along with Rome; Athens, Greece; and Cape Town, South Africa.

Russia launches communications satellite

MOSCOW (AP) — Russian space forces launched an American communications satellite yesterday, sending it into orbit on a Proton-K booster from the Baikonur cosmodrome.

The rocket carrying the 3.6-ton satellite blasted off before dawn today from the Central Asian launching site, Russian news agencies said, citing the space forces' command.

The PAS-5 satellite was constructed by the U.S. Hughes and the Swedish Sparco companies for the American PanAmSat company.

American PanAmSat plans to use the satellite for TV broadcasts to Latin America, the Caribbean and some southern regions of the United States, the Interfax news agency said.

Arafat praises lifting of Bethlehem siege

HEBRON, West Bank (AP) — Yasser Arafat welcomed yesterday Israel's lifting of the monthlong siege of Bethlehem and said Israel must now end its blockade of the West Bank and Gaza Strip.

In Bethlehem, a Palestinian security official said two suspects have been arrested in connection with a July 30 suicide bombing by Islamic militants in a Jerusalem market.

However, the report was later denied by another Palestinian official. He said Palestinian police in Bethlehem have arrested suspects in connection with a bomb factory discovered in the area last month, but said the detainees had no links to the Jerusalem blast.

Israel's closure was imposed after the bombing and bars all Palestinians, including some 100,000 workers, from entering Israel.

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has said he would only ease the travel ban once the Palestinians did more to rein in the militants, particularly the Hamas group that Israel blames for the market bombing.

It was likely, however, that Israel would ease the restrictions to improve the climate before next month's visit to the region by U.S. Secretary of State Madeleine Albright.

In one conciliatory step, Israel lifted the monthlong siege of Bethlehem on Wednesday. During that time, Bethlehem's 80,000 residents were barred from leaving, and many pilgrims could not visit the city's birthplace of Jesus.

Israel had imposed the siege on Bethlehem amid suspicions that Hamas was behind the bombing. The two bombers were identified.

The first Palestinian, a security official who spoke on condition of anonymity, said Palestinian police arrested two suspects in the bombing in the past week in Bethlehem. The information was passed on to the Americans, who relayed it to the Israelis, he said.

Israel has said that even if the bombers came from abroad, they were likely helped by Hamas activists in the West Bank. Asked yesterday about the lifting of the Bethlehem siege, Arafat said: "It's a step, but it is not enough."

The Palestinian leader, who toured a brick factory today, complained that overall closure constituted collective punishment of the Palestinians.

Mexican stocks post second sharpest fall

MEXICO CITY (AP) — Mexican stocks posted their second sharpest fall this year as investors rejected the local stock market, which fell below an important resistance level amid Wall Street losses and growing concern over emerging markets.

The market's key IPC index closed down 123.50 points or 2.5 percent to 4,789.33 points. At the end of 1996, the IPC stood at 3,361.03.

Volume totaled 1.54 billion pesos on 75.5 million shares traded.

The Dow Jones Industrial Average on Wall Street, meanwhile, slipped 1.2 percent to 7,694.43 points.

Traders said in Thursday's session an important technical level of 4,800 was broken.

Trader blamed the IPC's tumble on concern about emerging markets. The sharpest fall this year was July 21, when the IPC fell 2.8 percent to 4,590.22 amid nervousness over Brazil and Asian currency concerns.

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