

News in brief

**Plant accident kills two workers**

CHANNELVIEW (AP) — Two men died early Tuesday in an accident at a chemical plant east of Houston.

The contract workers were found dead at 3:15 a.m. inside a 22-by-27-foot boiler at the Equistar Chemicals LP plant near Interstate 10, plant spokesperson David Harpole said.

East Harris County men Charles "Butch" Perkins, 51, and Brian Turner, 37, had been performing routine sandblasting inside the boiler when last contacted by a co-worker stationed at the entrance, Harpole said.

"What typically is done when you have workers in a confined space is, you have another worker who stays outside the confined space outside the entry," Harpole said. "That worker is there to make sure the oxygen line doesn't become tangled."

When the workers inside failed to respond, the third worker informed emergency personnel. Plant officials are not sure how much time passed between the loss of communication and the discovery of the men, Harpole said.

He said the boiler unit does not handle chemicals and officials have no reason to suspect any release of hazardous materials.

Investigators are concentrating on the men's air supply.

"They were being provided with breathing air because of the nature of the space they were in and because of the sandblasting operation. What went wrong to create this tragedy, we just do not know at this time," he said.

**Woman stabbed, husband suspected**

ABILENE (AP) — A woman was stabbed 47 times, but survived and was reported in serious condition Monday at Hendrick Medical Center, authorities said.

Linda Barrientes, 33, was attacked about 2 a.m. Sunday outside her home, Abilene police detective Jay Hatcher said.

An arrest warrant was issued for her husband, Gilbert Barrientes, 30, who had still not been found by police late Monday.

"It would be an understatement to say it's extremely fortunate she survived this," Hatcher said. "She was stabbed all over — back, chest, eye, face, legs. A couple of people drove up at the end of the attack, called police and scared the guy off."

She was found lying on the street. We're not talking about superficial stab wounds. There was a range of vengeful stabbing motions that should have killed her."

**Tax break for condoms draws fire from governor**

AUSTIN (AP) — A new, \$160 million state sales tax break on over-the-counter medicines will include condoms, the state comptroller said Tuesday.

The decision immediately drew fire, and Gov. George W. Bush's office said the GOP presidential candidate does not approve. "This is a terrible idea. The Legislature did not intend for that tax exemption to be promoting promiscuity, yet that's exactly what it's doing," said Cathie Adams, president of the Texas Eagle Forum.

Comptroller Carole Keeton Rylander, acting under a law passed by the 1999 Legislature, listed prophylactics among some 100,000 items that will be exempted from the 6.25 percent state sales tax and local sales taxes beginning April 1.

Eligible items include allergy products, antacids, cold remedies, eye care products and dressings for wounds.

Rylander said Tuesday the law dictates what items — including condoms — are tax-free.

To qualify, a product must be a drug, medicine, article or substance used in diagnosis, cure, mitigation, treatment or prevention of disease or suffering. It must be intended for human use and have a National Drug Code number issued by the U.S. Food and Drug Administration, she said.

"It's not a matter of interpretation, it's a matter of the law," Rylander said.

Republican Gov. George W. Bush, who proposed the tax break idea during his re-election campaign, never wanted condoms included, said his spokesperson, Linda Edwards.

"Governor Bush never wanted condoms to be exempt. But we understand that FDA regulations say condoms prevent disease, and under the Texas law a drug or medicine that has a National Drug Code must be exempt," Edwards said.

But others, including the Texas Family Planning Association's Peggy Romberg, said making condoms tax-free is a good idea.

"We're talking about public health here. They prevent the spread of sexually transmitted disease — HIV and AIDS — and should be looked at as a preventative product and a public health product," Romberg said.

"It's perfectly appropriate that they be excluded from the tax. It's unfortunate that extremist groups have been successful in distracting people like the governor from what should be the main concern of the state — public health and well being of its citizens," she said.

The Eagle Forum's Adams said exempting condoms from the sales tax flies in the face of the consistent message teenagers need to hear about sexual activity.

"Our teen-agers need a solid message. This is something that's very consistent with Governor Bush's message of teaching children [sexual] abstinence until marriage," she said.

"I understand the FDA has listed them, but look who's leading our federal government — a man who doesn't know how to define 'is.' If this is coming from them, I think it should be challenged."

The condom controversy aside, Rylander said the tax break should save Texas families about \$160 million during its first full year, 2001. That's around \$17 per family annually, spokesperson Mark Sanders estimated.

"Exempting over-the-counter medicines from the sales tax is long overdue," Rylander said. "Prescription drugs have been tax-exempt since the state sales tax was enacted in 1961. Paying sales tax on nonprescription medicine is a bitter pill to swallow"

**"I understand the FDA has listed them, but look who's leading our federal government — a man who doesn't know how to define 'is.' If this is coming from them, I think it should be challenged."**

— Cathie Adams president of the Texas Eagle Forum

**Prison officials say inmate used dental floss to escape**

HOUSTON (AP) — A Texas inmate and suspected gang member accused of killing a rival used dental floss or a similar, coated string to painstakingly cut his way out of his cell, state prison officials say.

Inmate Antonio Lara a suspected member of the prison gang Hermanos de Pistoleros Latinos, is accused of crawling out from under his cell bars and killing Roland Rios as he was being escorted by guards to the shower, said Alfred M. "Mac" Stringfellow, Texas Board of Criminal Justice chairperson.

Stringfellow said he did not know how many steel bars Lara managed to cut through at the Coffield Unit of the Texas Department of Criminal Justice near Palestine, or how long it took.

"He was very dedicated at doing this," Stringfellow told the *Houston Chronicle* in Tuesday's editions. "They are very resourceful people. That's all they have is time, so they can sit there and saw away until they finally are able to cut through it."

Lara, 26, is serving a 15-year sentence for attempted murder, robbery and aggravated assault out of Webb County.

Stringfellow said Lara coated the nylon string with toothpaste or another abrasive in order to cut through metal bars. Rios, 41, was serving a 10-year term for aggravated robbery and injury to a child from Nueces County. Prison officials said he was a confirmed member of the Texas Syndicate gang.

Rios' stabbing death resulted in confinement of some 122,000 Texas prison inmates to their cells in a rare systemwide lockdown to collect contraband and try and prevent further gang warfare from erupting.

Texas Department of Criminal Justice spokesperson Glen Castlebury said wardens at units across the state began gradually allowing some inmates out of their cells on Monday. He did not know how many prisoners remained in lockdown status, or how many weapons or other contraband was found.

Castlebury said portions of some units have been released, but there were no units totally freed from lockdown status. He said that would not happen until midweek.

Stringfellow did not know if the March 16 killing was a gang-ordered hit or personal spat between Lara and Rios.

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