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Four U.S. soldiers killed in Kuwait helicopter crash

By Chris Tomlinson
THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

KUWAIT CITY (AP) — A U.S. Army Black Hawk helicopter on night training crashed Tuesday in the Kuwaiti desert, killing all four crew members. The Kuwaiti military said sandstorms were reported in the area at the time the chopper went down. The aircraft, which belonged to the Army's V Corps, was part of the force that has massed in this Persian Gulf emirate for a possible invasion of Iraq.

The Pentagon identified those killed Tuesday as Spc. Rodrigo Gonzalez-Garza, 26, of San Antonio; Chief Warrant Officer Timothy W. Moehling, 35, of Florida; Chief Warrant Officer John D. Smith, 32, of Nevada; and Spc. William J. Tracy, 27, of New Hampshire.

Based out of Germany for the past year, Rodrigo Gonzalez was a crew chief on Black Hawk helicopters and was one of several siblings involved in military service. He had been in Kuwait for three weeks. His twin brother, Ricardo, an Army combat medic, is stationed at Fort Drum, N.Y.

"I loved him. I love him," his father,

Ramiro Gonzalez Sr., said in Wednesday's San Antonio Express-News. "What happened hurts. There are no words for this."

"I can't say what is just or what isn't," he said. "You can't hold the government accountable for what happened."

Veronica Valadez, 32, of San Antonio said her brother asked in a telephone call Friday for a water backpack, boots, chocolate and candies.

"Unfortunately, he never saw them," she said.

Kuwait army spokesman Col. Youssef al-Mulla said the helicopter went down in bad weather. Sandstorms and high winds were reported overnight and continued Tuesday afternoon.

The UH-60 Black Hawk crashed about 1 a.m. near Camp New Jersey about 30 miles northwest of Kuwait City, an Army statement said.

The helicopter was part of the 158th Aviation Regiment, 5th Battalion, of the 12th Aviation Brigade based in Giebelstadt, Germany. The group is attached to V Corps' 11th Attack Helicopter Regiment, which is part of some 9,000 troops from the corps deployed as part of the recent U.S. buildup.

It includes a headquarters unit commanded by Lt. Gen. William Wallace.

V Corps spokesman Bill Roche said from the corps headquarters in Heidelberg, Germany, that it was still too early to speculate about a cause of the crash.

"A V Corps safety team is already on site, and then additional people are coming in from the U.S. Army Safety Center in Fort Rucker, Ala.," Roche said.

The bodies are expected to be brought back to Germany, Roche said.

The helicopter was one of two V Corps helicopters participating in the exercise. The other returned safely.

On Jan. 30, an MH-60, an adapted version of the Black Hawk, crashed in a training mission seven miles east of Bagram Air Base in Afghanistan. Four members of an elite aviation regiment were killed.

More than 70,000 U.S. troops are training in the Kuwaiti desert in preparation for a possible invasion of Iraq. President Bush has threatened to use force to disarm Baghdad of weapons of mass destruction if it does not do so voluntarily according to U.N. resolutions. Iraq denies it has such weapons.

Consumer confidence falls to lowest level in nearly a decade

By Rebecca Gomez
THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

NEW YORK — Consumer confidence plunged in February to its lowest level in nearly 10 years, dragged down by the prospect of war with Iraq.

The Consumer Confidence Index fell almost 15 points to 64.0 — its lowest reading since October 1993 — from 78.8 in January, the Conference Board reported Tuesday. Analysts were predicting a reading of 77.0.

"On all fronts, it's jitters about the upcoming war with Iraq," said Josh Feinman, chief economist for Deutsche Asset Management in New York.

The Dow Jones industrials fell as much as 138 points to a fresh four-year low before staging a late-day rally on bargain hunting. The Dow rose 51.26 points to close at 7,909.50, while the Nasdaq composite index gained 6.6 points at 1,328.98.

Economists closely track con-

sumer confidence because consumer spending accounts for two-thirds of U.S. economic activity.

"The gloom is deepening," said economist Oscar Gonzalez of John Hancock Financial Services in Boston. "A stagnant job market, rising oil prices, slumping stock prices and the threat of war with Iraq, all of these seem to be pressing down heavily on consumers."

Still, Americans continued their home-buying frenzy last month as the housing market remained one of the few bright spots in the economy.

Sales of previously owned homes surged in January to their best month ever, at a seasonally adjusted annual rate of 6.09 million, the National Association of Realtors said Tuesday. That represented a strong 3 percent increase from December and defied analysts' expectations that home sales would dip slightly to a rate of 5.80 million.

"It's mortgage rates," said David Lereah, the association's chief economist. He said low

mortgage rates are "the fuel for the housing engine."

The average, fixed-rate 30-year mortgage dropped to 5.92 percent in January — the lowest level since the early 1960s. The average in December was 6.05 percent.

Low mortgage rates pushed sales of both new and existing homes to record levels last year. And, last week, the government reported that construction of new homes and apartments posted a 16-year high in January.

Economists say potential home buyers see houses as an attractive investment compared with the turbulent stock market.

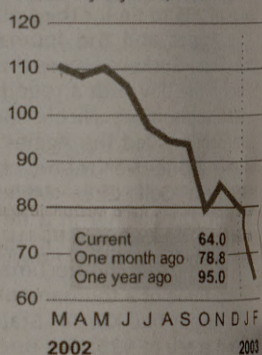
The national median home price in January was \$160,400, up 6.7 percent from the same month a year ago.

With the United States moving closer to war, the Consumer Confidence Index was down for the third straight month in February, as those surveyed expressed more worries about the job outlook and

Consumer confidence

Here is a look at the Consumer Confidence Index from a survey of 5,000 U.S. households.

Seasonally adjusted, 1985=100



SOURCE: The Conference Board

their incomes.

The Present Situation Index, which gauges consumers' sentiment about current business conditions, dropped to 61.6 in February from 75.3 in January.

The latest time the index fell to such lows was in November 1993, when it slumped to 59.2.

NEWS IN BRIEF

Bernard Law begins testimony

BOSTON (AP) — Cardinal Bernard Law began testifying Tuesday before a grand jury investigating whether criminal charges should be filed against him or any other top church officials for their handling of priests accused of sexual abuse.

Law resigned as Boston archbishop in December after enduring a year of revelations that he and top aides reassigned priests who were known molesters to different parishes.

Reilly's office would not comment on Law's testimony Tuesday. Reilly has been publicly

critical of church officials, but has also acknowledged the difficulty in bringing criminal charges against them.

"There was a cover-up. There was an elaborate scheme," Reilly said in December. But "it is very difficult under the criminal laws of this state to hold a superior accountable for the acts of another."

New York tallies homeless

NEW YORK (AP) — More than 1,000 volunteers ventured out on to the streets of Manhattan in below-freezing temperatures early Tuesday to help the city count its

homeless.

The effort was New York City's first official attempt to come up with an official tally. "We believe that if you have a problem, you have to know what it's all about in order to solve it," said Commissioner Linda Gibbs, who heads the Department of Homeless Services.

Advocates say homeless numbers are at record highs. More than 38,000 homeless people slept nightly in city shelters as of last month, 7,400 more than the previous year, according to the Coalition for the Homeless. "We believe that there is more we can do," Gibbs said.

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