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4A AGGREGATED Monday, April 19, 2004

PEOPLE IN THE NEWS

Hamas leader Rantisi assassinated

TEL AVIV, Israel (AP) — Hamas leader Abdel Aziz Rantisi, one of the highest-profile and most vocal voices of the violent Islamic group, was assassinated in an Israeli airstrike Saturday. He was 56.

He served as Hamas leader in Gaza for less than a month before Israel killed his predecessor, Hamas founder Sheikh Yassin, in a similar helicopter strike on March 22.

Rantisi rejected any accommodation with Israel, following Hamas ideology that calls for the destruction of the Jewish state in the Middle East.

A pediatrician by profession, Rantisi was readily available to eight journalists and was one of the most recognizable Hamas leaders.

Rantisi, Yassin and other men founded Hamas in 1987. The group grew into one of the largest militant Islamic factions in the early 1990s, at the time Israeli-Palestinian peace talks were stalled.

Hamas opposed, and often neared suicide bombings in the West Bank. During the current conflict, it has lasted more than three years, the group has killed hundreds of Israelis in bombings and shootings.

Rantisi was targeted by the Israeli air force in June of last year. He leaped from his jeep as a helicopter missile pounded the vehicle. He was injured by machine gunfire.

Body of missing North Dakota student found

CROOKSTON, Minn. (AP) — The body of a missing North Dakota student, Dru Sjodin, was found Saturday, revealed by a volunteer search in an area where volunteers searched several times during the five months she had been missing, searchers said Saturday.

Sheriff Mark LeTexter said he told volunteers, "Dru's body was found. An official identification ceremony were scheduled, he said."

Scores of volunteers from the search on Saturday for the 21-year-old University of North Dakota student, who had last been seen Nov. 22 at the Grand Forks mall where she worked.

While a handful of Sporadic searches continued through the winter, official searches had been halted in December because of severe weather and resumed this month.

Bob Heales, a private investigator who has coordinated searches for the Sjodin family, said the body was found in a ravine near a road northwest of Crookston.

Sjodin's father, Allan, said it had been "a devastating day."

"We were waiting for her to be found and when that call came, I stopped living for a second," he said at a press conference.

Volunteers had been searching the ravine "probably a dozen times" but the area had been covered with snow, Heales said.

Chris Lang, Sjodin's boyfriend, said he remembers searching the area, but "the drifts were 10 feet high."

"It's just kind of a relief," Lang said after learning the body had been found. "I was sure it was going to happen."

"Now I know she's been at peace for a long time," Lang said.

Lang was the last person to have heard from Sjodin, she spoke to him by cell phone after leaving the Victoria's Secret store where she worked.

Convicted sex offender Rodriguez Jr., 51, of Crookston has pleaded not guilty to kidnapping Sjodin, of Pequot, Minn. He was arrested in December and is jailed in Crookston, on \$5 million bail.

Neither Minnesota nor North Dakota has capital punishment, but federal law allows a death penalty for murder committed during a kidnapping. At a court hearing last month, investigators filed that blood matching Sjodin's DNA was found in Rodriguez's car that matches the body discovered near Sjodin's home.

Heales said Sjodin's family felt relieved Saturday that Sjodin had been found.

"Dru's coming home is what we've wanted from the beginning," he said. "We need to go through life without where she was."