

House vote eases law on gun control

WASHINGTON (AP) — The House voted overwhelmingly Thursday to weaken the gun control law passed in the aftermath of the assassinations of Robert Kennedy and Martin Luther King Jr. but retained a ban on interstate handgun sales.

The vote came after hundreds of uniformed policemen roamed the Capitol as lobbyists.

The key vote was 286-136, and the House followed with a 292-130 tally to formally send the legislation to the Senate.

The Senate, which passed a bill last year to allow interstate handgun sales and ease other controls, can accept the House bill or insist on a House-Senate conference.

For weeks, the legislation produced high drama, climaxing with police from 21 states arriving in uniform to confront the experienced lobbying teams from the National Rifle Association and allied groups.

In the end, both sides can claim victory on the bill sponsored by Rep. Harold Volkmer, D-Mo. — but the gun lobby more so.

NRA chief lobbyist Wayne LaPierre pointed to the bill's lifting of an interstate sales ban for rifles and shotguns and federal guarantees that all lawfully held weapons can be taken — unloaded and inaccessible — across state lines.

The NRA also approves, he said, of provisions that would make it more difficult to prosecute unintentional gun law violations, allow dealers to transfer guns from inventories to their private collections, and force the government to return seized weapons after an acquittal.

Handgun control groups and police organizations can point to the interstate sales ban, adopted 233-184 in an amendment that reversed a defeat on the issue on Wednesday, and a unanimously adopted prohibition on future possession or transfer of machine guns. Both measures were proposed by Rep. William Hughes, D-N.J., who championed the gun control forces' cause on the House floor.

The Volkmer bill was adopted with 128 Democratic and 158 Republican votes, while 118 Democrats and 18 Republicans were opposed.

Hubert Williams, president of the Police Foundation, commented after the vote, "The core of the Volkmer bill was interstate sales, and they lost on that one. There are still many defects. On the whole, it is bad legislation."

He said police officers strongly disagreed with the interstate transportation provisions, with a reduction in the number of federal inspections of gun dealers and the transfer of guns to dealers' private collections.

Oregon's congressmen voted unanimously to adopt the bill easing restrictions, but voted against the amendment to maintain a ban on interstate sales of handguns.

Another aircraft carrier sent to form battle group

WASHINGTON (AP) — The Navy dispatched a second aircraft carrier to sea in the Mediterranean Thursday, but sources said the Pentagon had yet to order a military strike against Libya in retaliation for recent terrorist attacks.

Should such orders be issued, however, the Navy is in position to form a two-carrier battle group that would include 16 combat ships and more than 160 airplanes, the sources said. It would take about two days to move such a battle group to the Libyan coast, said the sources who discussed the situation only on the ground they not be identified publicly.

The Pentagon officially declined comment on the position of the Navy ships. But officials who requested anonymity said the carrier Coral Sea — its orders to return home canceled — had departed port in Malaga, Spain, early in the day Thursday.

The Coral Sea is steaming eastward toward the central Mediterranean, but is still far to the west of Libya, the sources said.

The Coral Sea had been scheduled to depart Malaga for the Atlantic Ocean and home, having completed a standard 6-month deployment that began Oct. 2. But the Pentagon confirmed Wednesday night that those orders had been scuttled for "an indefinite period."

Military commanders say they must have at least two carriers in the Mediterranean to support any military operation against Libya, the sources said.

By getting under way, the Coral Sea joined the carrier America in operating within the Mediterranean. The America ended a liberty call at Livorno, Italy, on Wednesday.

The America had been scheduled to make another port call at Cannes, France, but those orders were also canceled. The vessel is currently in the Tyrrhenian Sea, to the north of the island of Sicily, sources said.

"Both carriers are heading in the direction of the central Mediterranean, but they haven't formed up in a battle group yet," said one official.

Former secretary to guru to face additional charges

PORTLAND (AP) — Ma Anand Sheela, the former secretary to Indian guru Bhagwan Shree Rajneesh, agreed Thursday to be prosecuted on charges ranging from attempted murder to electronic eavesdropping.

In a hearing before U.S. District Judge Edward Leavy, Sheela dropped her objection to the federal government's request to expand the West German extradition order that sent her back to Oregon.

The extradition order covers federal immigration charges and state charges accusing her of attempting to murder Rajneesh's physician. West Germany must give its permission for U.S. authorities to try Sheela on any other charges.

Sheela, 36, also is accused of giving glasses of poisoned water to two Wasco County officials, causing a food poisoning outbreak that sickened more than 750 people, creating the largest electronic eavesdropping system in Oregon history and plotting a fire that damaged the county planning office.

She spoke quietly Thursday when she said to Leavy, "I agree to the speedy extradition

order."

Her attorney, Stephan Houze of Portland, declined to comment on why Sheela changed her mind about the additional charges. He said Leavy had ordered lawyers in the case not to comment publicly, although no gag order was issued.

Assistant U.S. Attorney Robert Weaver said Thursday's hearing "was in the context of negotiations that have been ongoing and that will continue to be ongoing."

Assistant U.S. Attorney Barry Sheldahl said that while his office continues to negotiate with Houze, it was too early to speculate whether a plea bargain was possible.

"I think it's way too premature," he said. "I don't think we expect an answer from the Germans for 60 days or so."

Sheela, a native of India, and several other sect leaders abruptly left their central Oregon commune in September. She was arrested in West Germany last October on the U.S. charges and was extradited to Oregon in February.

She has been jailed since her return and is scheduled for trial on 33 counts of immigration fraud May 5.

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