

Peace climb team reaches summit

SEATTLE (AP) — The scaling of Mount Everest by six climbers from the United States, China and the Soviet Union is testament to what can be accomplished through international cooperation and friendship, expedition leaders said Tuesday.

"I think the best word is ecstatic. Everybody here has got huge grins on their faces and we're very, very happy. This is really a great accomplishment," said Warren Thompson, deputy leader of the so-called "Mount Everest International Peace Climb" expedition.

Thompson spoke to a news conference here via telephone patch from base camp at the terminus of Main Rongbuk Glacier in Tibet, elevation 17,100 feet. The night before, Steve Gall of Woody Creek, Colo., Robert Link of Ashford, Wash., and two climbers each from the Soviet Union and China had reached the 29,028-foot summit of Mount Everest, the world's tallest.

The Mount Everest International Peace Climb expedition, which began in February, was billed as an attempt to foster international goodwill.

The American climbers and Sergey Arsentje and Grigory Lunjakov of the Soviet Union and Da Cheme and Gyal Bu of China reached the summit at 9:13 p.m. PDT Sunday, expedition leader Jim Whittaker said from advanced base camp at 21,325 feet.

Six to eight more climbers from the three countries were to attempt the summit this week.

A brief video containing still photographs of Sunday's ascent was played at the news conference. In accompanying audio, Gall was heard exclaiming to Whittaker via radio: "I'll be goddamned if we're not on top of the world here, buddy."

Seconds later: "It's balmy up here."

Whittaker said the six climbers reached the summit in good condition and "spent almost an hour in dead calm weather."

Thompson said the six "gave each other big hugs and slaps on the back," took photographs and planted flags from their respective countries before descending to camp.

"I think they clasped their arms around one another in joy and friendship, and I think that's exactly what we want to accomplish between nations," Thompson said.

Whittaker was asked if the expedition had accomplished the goal of fostering international goodwill. But his radio transmission broke up, so Thompson responded.

"I think the answer to that is an overwhelming 'yes.' We've got two people from each of the three countries (on the summit), and I think we'll have a few more on the summit before we leave."

The returning climbers used duffle bags to haul down debris left on the summit in previous ascents. It was a way of declaring support for the world environmental movement.

The climbers also hoped to contact their respective countries' leaders from the mountain summit but climb executive director Dianne Roberts in Seattle said she did not know if they were successful.

Whittaker, of Port Townsend, Wash., was the first American to set foot on the Mount Everest summit in 1963.

The \$1.1 million expedition features five mountaineers each from the United States, China and the Soviet Union, supported by a host of camp officials, doctors, cooks, translators and news media.

The "peace climb" was organized to coincide with this summer's Goodwill Games in Washington state and the 20th anniversary celebrations of Earth Day last month.

The climbers had hoped to reach the summit by Earth Day, April 22, but unfavorable weather and sickness delayed a summit attempt on that date.

Bill mandating family leave may be vetoed by Bush

WASHINGTON (AP) — President Bush will veto any bill requiring employers to give time off to workers with new babies or family illness, White House Chief of Staff John Sununu told business leaders Monday.

Sununu threatened any version of the pending "family leave" bill that would mandate such an employee benefit, according to business group lobbyists who attended a White House meeting with him. Alixe Glen, deputy White House spokeswoman, later confirmed he had made such remarks.

The family and medical leave act would require businesses with 50 or more employees to offer unpaid time off for the care of newborn, newly adopted or seriously ill children, as well as to deal with personal health problems or to tend ill spouses or parents.

The bill, which has bipartisan support, is scheduled for House action Wednesday. It's opposed by the U.S. Chamber of Commerce and other business lobbying groups.

Sponsors of the legislation denounced Sununu's veto threat.

"It would be most unfortunate if my party, which so strongly supports family values, were to turn its back on working families, women, children, grandma and grandpa," said Rep. Marge Roukema of New Jersey, the chief Republican sponsor.

"It's not just a mandate, it's a job security issue for working families."

Mary Tavenner, a lobbyist for the National Association of Wholesaler-Distributors, said businesses opposed the measure because of its cost and contended that many employers already offer better benefits.

Tavenner and Christine Russell, lobbyist for the U.S. Chamber of Commerce, were among the business representatives invited to Monday's White House meeting.

"He basically said the president would veto anything that is a mandated benefit," Tavenner said.

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