

Supreme Court nears term end

WASHINGTON (AP) — Animal sacrifice and "hate crimes" are the most closely watched issues facing the Supreme Court as it nears the end of its term with 40 cases awaiting decision.

In half a dozen instances, the court is being asked to clarify the relationship between government and religion or determine government's power to curtail expression.

In one case, the question is whether a religious sect must be allowed to sacrifice animals as part of its worship services.

In another, the question is: Can judges impose extra prison time for hate crimes motivated by racial or religious bigotry? The case from Wisconsin asks whether such extra punishment violates freedom of expression.

The justices are expected to end by late June their current term, the date most memorable for Byron R. White's announced retirement and the Library of Congress' release of the late Justice Thurgood Marshall's papers.

Other cases:

• May the Clinton administration continue to intercept Haitians on the high seas and return them to Haiti without first hearing their requests for political asylum?

• Does the Constitution's ban on cruel and unusual punishment and excessive fines limit the amount of property the government may seize from convicted drug dealers?

• Is there a standard for deciding how much is too much for punitive-damage awards in personal-injury cases and other lawsuits?

• Can a congressional redistricting plan in North Carolina be judged an unlawful form of racial gerrymandering if the state Legislature drew it to comply with the federal Voting Rights Act and the Justice Department approved it?

• Must states that collected billions of dollars from retired federal workers under unlawful taxes refund the money?

• Do police have the authority to seize, without court warrants, drugs they feel while frisking someone for weapons? The justices are being asked in a Minnesota case to create a "plain feel" exception to the warrant requirement for searches,

akin to the "in plain view" exception.

As a group, the religion and speech decisions may attract the most attention.

One such case, an exotic freedom-of-worship controversy from Florida, was argued last November, before most of the 66 cases for which decisions already have been announced this term.

At issue is a local government's authority to ban animal sacrifices during worship services conducted by the Church of the Lukumi Babalu Aye in the Miami suburb of Hialeah. The church practices Santeria, an ancient African-based religion in which animal sacrifice is a central ritual.

Mainstream religions hope the court will use the case to review a 1990 ruling that gave government greater leeway to interfere with religious practices.

Public and parochial schools, often church-state battlegrounds, are involved in two other pending cases — one from New York and the other from Arizona.

The justices are to decide whether public schools in the Long Island community of Center Moriches, traditionally open to outside groups for use during off hours, may ban such access if the planned use is religious in nature.

A dispute from Tucson asks whether public school districts may provide sign-language interpreters for deaf students in religious schools without violating the constitutionally required separation of church and state.

A free speech case stems from criminal prosecutions of pornographers and drug traffickers.

The court is to decide whether the government may seize virtually all assets — buildings, cash and inventory worth an estimated \$25 million in the Minnesota case before it — from pornographers convicted of selling some obscene materials.

The scope of government regulation over commercial speech is being studied by the court in a case from Virginia and North Carolina.

The justices are to decide whether television and radio stations based in states that ban lotteries may be barred from airing commercials promoting a neighboring state's lottery. Virginia runs a state lottery, but lotteries are illegal in North Carolina.

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