

Independence still questionable in Quebec

TORONTO (AP) — It's nearing decision time for Quebec's separatist-minded government.

Six weeks of public hearings on what form of government a future independent Quebec should take have ended. Now the ruling Parti Quebecois has two big calls to make: When to call a referendum on independence and what question to ask.

Polls consistently show that support for independence falls short of a majority, somewhere between 40 and 45 percent.

In order to avoid a political embarrassment, the Parti Quebecois has to devise a question on sovereignty that it can win.

Quebec observers say Premier Jacques Parizeau will probably have to come up with a more acceptable question, push back the date of the referendum, or both. No date has been announced, but the referendum had been widely expected in June. Parizeau promised it only for sometime this year.

Since colonial days, many French Canadians have felt like second-class citizens in their own country. Many of Quebec's 7 million people believe the only way to preserve their culture and language is to secede.

Before the Parti Quebecois ousted the Liberals in provincial elections last September, Parizeau campaigned for independence, frequently offering a simple question: "Do you agree that Quebec becomes a sovereign nation on ...?"

He since has backed off that very clear question for a much more complex one.

Marcel Masse, head of the Montreal sovereignty commission, one of 18 that had public hearings, told reporters he did not think residents were ready to approve the present question — which asks voters to accept or reject a long draft law outlining the principles of separation.

Camille Laurin, a Parti Quebecois member, said what he heard during the hear-

ings was that the party should devise another question.

Still, Parizeau has little room to maneuver. He can change the question in an effort to win "soft nationalists" — those who prefer to retain some links with Ottawa — but it still has to be about separation.

"It's natural that there is some rethinking to do, because that is what they [the commissions] were for," said Alain Noel, a political scientist at the University of Montreal.

Daniel Johnson, the former Quebec premier now leading the anti-independence fight in the province, says playing with the question won't fool anybody.

"I suspect that people who favor separation want to increase the confusion," Johnson said.

Among the "soft nationalists" are people like Mario Dumont, a former Liberal who is now in Quebec's parliament as head of his own Democratic Action Party.

Dumont has suggested a separate Quebec with close ties to Canada, something along the lines of the European Union.

"I think at heart, the majority of Quebecois are federalist," Dumont told The Associated Press.

However, a referendum on "sovereignty-association," similar to what Dumont proposed, failed in 1980 by a 60-to-40 percent margin.

In New York on Friday, Canadian Finance Minister Paul Martin, himself a Quebecois, told bankers that Quebec's uncertain political future posed no threat to those thinking of investing in Canada.

"If you follow the Quebec debate, the support for separatism is decreasing with every poll," he said, calling any threat from separatist rumblings "virtually nil."

The reports of all 18 sovereignty commissions are to be sent to Parizeau by mid-March, and a final report is due at the end of March.

Russian forces continue to bombard Chechnya

SAMASHKY, Russia (AP) — A day after seizing a key stretch of road in southwest Chechnya, Russian forces kept up the pressure Monday with rockets and artillery on the nearby rebel-held town of Achkhoy Martan.

Cars, buses and trucks full of refugees fled Achkhoy Martan and neighboring Samashky, 20 miles west of the devastated capital of Grozny.

The Russians control most of

northern Chechnya. On Sunday, they captured a road linking Achkhoy Martan and Samashky, signaling an imminent ground assault on the south of the breakaway republic.

Russian forces entered Chechnya on Dec. 11 to crush an independence drive in the Caucasus Mountains region. Thousands of soldiers and civilians have been killed in the war, which is hugely unpopular

at home and abroad.

In the latest sign of international displeasure, the European Union delayed signing a major trade deal with Moscow because of continuing concern about the fighting in Chechnya.

"We don't want to isolate Russia, but... we need a peaceful and rapid solution to the Chechen crisis," French Foreign Minister Alain Juppe said

Monday.

Juppe will lead a EU mission to Moscow later this week to push for changes it wants before the trade deal can go ahead. They include greater access to Chechnya for humanitarian agencies, an expanded role for the 53-nation Organization on Security and Cooperation in Europe in mediating the conflict, and a willingness by Russia to talk to the rebels.

In Chechnya, Russian troops attacked Achkhoy Martan with rockets and artillery. Four helicopter gunships floated above the town, providing air support.

Rebel fighters tried to calm residents of Samashky who fear they will be killed by the Russian bombardment. Many people have already fled to other villages in Chechnya or to neighboring Ingushetia.

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Chinese government increases military funds

BEIJING (AP) — China's government on Monday announced a 21 percent increase in its military budget, whose rapid growth despite the end of the Cold War is making its Asian neighbors uneasy.

Spending on the armed forces rose 22.5 percent last year amid tensions over competing claims by China and five other nations to the Spratly and Paracel islands in the South China Sea.

Military spending will be the fastest growing major area of the \$75.7 billion draft budget announced by Finance Minister Liu Zhongli on the second day of the annual

meeting of China's legislature.

The overall budget will grow by 9.3 percent over last year, with a deficit of \$7.9 billion.

The military's share of that would climb to \$7.5 billion. Foreign analysts believe the armed forces also get money from other government budgets, weapons exports and sales by military-run factories.

Liu did not explain the increase, but But Premier Li Peng said Sunday the People's Liberation Army should "make further efforts to become a revolutionary, modern and regular army with increased combat

effectiveness and defense capabilities."

The 1995 draft budget includes an increase in spending on agriculture to the equivalent \$5.3 billion, a 13.7 increase over 1994.

Combined with agricultural-related spending in other areas, total spending on the farm sector amounts to nearly \$8.3 billion, Liu said.

Lagging agricultural production was a key contributor to China's inflation rate of 24.4 percent last year. Li, the prime minister, has declared improving farm production a priority in 1995.

AIDS problems addressed at international conference

CAPE TOWN, South Africa (AP) — Prudence Mbele was studying at Cape Town University when she discovered she had the virus that causes AIDS.

That ended her studies. School officials, concerned that she would spread the infection to other students, forced her to leave in 1992. Now Mbele is a South African AIDS educator.

Mbele's experience was echoed by delegates from Europe, Asia and North and South America who addressed

the International Conference for People Living with HIV and AIDS.

The five-day meeting, which began Monday, was attended by more than 500 people with acquired immune deficiency syndrome or HIV, the virus that causes the disease, from 82 countries.

For the first time, the seventh annual conference was being held in Africa, the site of nearly three-quarters of the 4.5 million cases of AIDS recorded since the

late 1970s.

Deputy President Thabo Mbeki, opening the conference, said AIDS hits South Africa's most vulnerable citizens, and helping them was part of the government's redevelopment program.

Mbeki said the regions in South Africa hardest hit by AIDS "are those in which, before the advent of the democratic order, were most affected by social and violent conflict."

President Nelson Mandela's

black-led government, which took over after elections last April ended apartheid, has pledged to include health reform in its efforts to improve the lives of impoverished blacks.

Mbeki called on the industrialized world to help developing countries fight AIDS — and Erwan Fouere, the European Union envoy to South Africa, responded with a \$14 million package to support AIDS programs in South Africa.

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