

News digest

Government blinks; Elian departure delayed

MIAMI (AP) — Elian Gonzalez's great-uncle defied the government Thursday and the government blinked, letting its deadline to collect the boy pass and agreeing to a delay that averts a law-enforcement showdown for now.

In Little Havana, thousands cheered wildly at the news.

Attorneys for Elian's Miami relatives claimed victory after a federal appeals court issued a stay blocking anyone from taking the boy out of the country. The Justice Department, though, said it had agreed to a delay of "three or four days."

The 11th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals told the government to respond to the stay by 9:30 a.m. Friday, giving great-uncle Lazaro Gonzalez's family another day with Elian at the very least. Lazaro "feels relief," family spokesman Armando Gutierrez said, "at least until tomorrow morning."

Thursday's court action capped a fluid, electrifying day that began minutes after Lazaro Gonzalez dared the government to take Elian by force. In less than 24 hours, the Miami relatives met with Attorney General Janet

Reno, publicly announced their defiance of her, allowed Elian to speak on TV and ignored a 2 p.m. deadline to deliver him to an airport for return to his father.

Last body removed, aircraft's flight recorder found

MARANA, Ariz. (AP) — Investigators hope a flight data recorder recovered from a burned MV-22 Osprey will help unravel what caused the crash and explosion that killed 19 Marines.

The so-called black box was recovered Wednesday. Investigators from the Naval Safety Center were to accompany the recorder to manufacturer Smiths Industries Aerospace in Grand Rapids, Mich., where the raw data will be analyzed.

"I think they're optimistic that because of the presence of an aircraft flight data recorder, we may actually be further ahead than we would be in a military accident," said Maj. Patrick Gibbons, a Marine Corps spokesman in Washington. "Most military aircraft do not carry such a device."

Agents break up Mexican-Jamaican drug ring

WASHINGTON (AP) — Making dozens of arrests, federal drug

agents on Thursday broke up a Jamaican-led narcotics ring that employed bribed FedEx drivers in a scheme to distribute 121 tons of Mexican marijuana to East Coast markets.

The Drug Enforcement Administration said FedEx's top officials fully cooperated with the 18-month investigation, which has led to the arrests of 101 people since it began.

The latest arrests began shortly after midnight Thursday and that by late afternoon there had been 45 arrests, 22 of them FedEx employees, DEA agents said at a news conference. Rod Benson, assistant special agent of the DEA's special operations branch said he expected an additional 10 or 15 arrests.

Agents said the arresting officers also seized two tons of marijuana in West Coast warehouses, one under control of the Mexican group and another controlled by the Jamaican traffickers. They also seized 18 firearms and more than \$4 million in cash and assets.

Donnie R. Marshall, acting DEA administrator, said that the operation marks the first time that marijuana smugglers have used a single, private, overnight-express delivery service as a distribution network.

Series of bomb threats leave workers concerned

HERMISTON (AP) — Bomb threats have stopped construction nine times in the past six weeks at an Army depot where workers are building an incinerator to destroy millions of pounds of deadly chemical weapons stored at the base.

No bombs have been found. The FBI and Army authorities have declined to comment on the investigation.

Some workers at the Umatilla Chemical Depot said they are mostly unfazed, worrying less about a leak of nerve agents than about the loss of pay.

"I'm sure that there are some that are scared. And if they found that guy, he'd be lucky to get off that site," electrician Joe Vandecar said. "But as far as feeling threatened, no, no, not a bit."

Since Feb. 28, nine threats have been called in or been broadcast over two-way radios used at the site. Each time, construction has been halted, with workers briefly evacuated to a safe area or sent home for the day.

Flag compromise passes South Carolina Senate

COLUMBIA, S.C. (AP) — State

lawmakers have taken a key step toward removing the Confederate flag from the Statehouse dome, but the NAACP said today that the move won't end a racially tinged controversy that led to a punishing tourism boycott and new scrutiny of Southern heritage.

The state Senate approved a compromise bill on Wednesday, exactly 139 years after the Civil War began when Confederate troops fired on Fort Sumter, the federal installation in Charleston harbor.

The vote was 36-7. All opponents were Republicans.

"This is one more hurdle that has been overcome," said Democratic Gov. Jim Hodges, who supports flag removal.

The bill would remove the banner from the dome and place a similar battle flag behind an existing monument honoring Confederate soldiers in front of the Statehouse.

The flag would fly from a pole no taller than 20 feet — shorter than the monument in front of it — an element added to satisfy black lawmakers and others who did not want the flag in a prominent position to passers-by. Six black lawmakers were among those voting for it.

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