

Feds file charges in sniper shootings

Eric Lichtblau and Jeffrey Gettleman
New York Times

WASHINGTON — Federal prosecutors filed a 20-count complaint in Greenbelt, Md., on Tuesday against the adult suspect in the Washington-area sniper shootings.

Some of the charges against John Allen Muhammad, 41 — discharging a firearm as part of an extortion scheme in the deaths of seven people in Maryland — make him eligible for the death penalty.

The complaint in U.S. District Court did

not name the other suspect, John Lee Malvo, 17. A juvenile can be charged with a federal capital offense but cannot be executed.

Officials are barred from discussing any charges against a juvenile and any charges would likely be brought under seal.

After the announcement of Tuesday's filing, Attorney General John Ashcroft said: "There are already people who are saying that they don't think the ultimate penalties ought to be available, whether they are editorialists or others who don't believe in the death penalty."

"I believe that the ultimate sanction ought to be available here."

The action followed the filing of murder charges by prosecutors in Virginia on Monday against the two suspects, which came as law enforcement officials in suburban Maryland, the area with the most victims, conceded that they would most likely lose control of the case.

Muhammad, an Army veteran, and Malvo now face charges in six jurisdictions in the sniper attacks that claimed 10 lives in the

Washington area. Since the two were arrested on Oct. 24, one question has been which jurisdiction would try them first.

A Justice Department official said federal prosecutors would be able to build the strongest case by stringing together all the shootings in one trial.

Federal prosecutors charged Muhammad with violating the anti-extortion Hobbs Act, alleging that he tried to extract a \$10 million ransom in exchange for ending the killings.

Bush signs broad election-reform measure

William E. Gibson
South Florida Sun-Sentinel (KRT)

WASHINGTON — President Bush signed a sweeping election-reform bill into law on Tuesday, nearly two years after the calamitous 2000 election that brought him to the White House.

The law, if fully funded by Congress, will bring more than \$170 million to Florida over the next few years to help the state and counties

meet new national election standards, congressional staffers told Florida Secretary of State Jim Smith's office on Tuesday.

Florida also can compete for additional grants, including a portion of \$100 million established to help states provide access for disabled voters.

"Counties will be reimbursed for a lot of their outlays in buying (new voting) equipment," Smith said on Tuesday between visits with county

supervisors of elections. "For the future, there's no question a lot of that money will be used for poll worker training and voter education."

In all, the law provides authority to spend \$3.86 billion over fiscal years 2003 to 2006, most of it for states to replace outmoded voting machines, train poll workers and help meet federal standards. Congress must still appropriate this money year by year, a high priority for election reformers and state officials.

States are required to set up a voter database, ensure access for the disabled and help soldiers overseas cast absentee ballots. States and localities are also required to allow voters to cast "provisional" ballots if their voting registration is in question.

The landmark legislation, called the Help America Vote Act, was inspired by mass confusion at the polls and five weeks of legal wrangling in Florida two years ago. A compromise leading to fi-

nal passage in Congress was prompted by Florida's primary in September, when some polls were closed for hours and some poll workers had trouble operating new machines.

The signing came one week before the midterm congressional elections, but its provisions do not apply until next year.

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Scientists virtually touch each other via Internet

Chris O'Brien
Knight Ridder Newspapers (KRT)

SAN JOSE, Calif. — The world got a little smaller Tuesday after scientists reached around the globe via the Internet and touched.

Or rather, the scientists — in London, Boston, and Los Angeles — picked up a virtual cube on a computer screen at the same time and pushed it around. The scientists, holding robotic arms, could feel the force being exerted by the others as well as the texture of the cube.

Though computers have been able to transmit such sensations in close quarters for several years, the distance between the scientists was a new milestone that they hope will eventually lead to new collaborative applications in telemedicine, education and art.

"I think the most important applications are the ones we don't know yet," said Mandayam Srinivasan, director of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology's Touch Lab and leader of the MIT team that developed the

technology. "When Alexander Graham Bell invented the telephone, he didn't see all the possibilities."

The breakthrough actually occurred in May and was detailed in a paper presented Oct. 9 in Portugal at the conference called PRESENCE 2002: The 5th Annual International Workshop on Presence. Tuesday marked the first public demonstration.

By adding a sense of touch, researchers hope to improve the experience of various virtual environ-

ments, which are usually limited to sight and sound. The field of research involving touch is referred to as "haptics."

The robotic arm and the software have been commercially available for several years. But the teams altered the software so the program could be used across the Internet. Despite the breakthrough, researchers said they were well aware of the limitations.

The arms have to be moved very slowly because the transmission of

signals across the Internet can often be slow and jumpy. Srinivasan said researchers will be focused on improving the network performance, the processing speed of the computers, and the software to fine tune their work.

"As the software becomes more sophisticated and computers become faster, we can have widespread virtual environments where we interact more naturally," Srinivasan said.

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