Today	Tuesday	Wednesday
High: 53	High: 54	High: 56
Low: 43	Low: 40	Low: 39
Precip: 80%	Precip: 50%	Precip: 10%

IN BRIEF

Sharon moves toward Gaza disengagement

JERUSALEM - Israel's Cabinet approved a compensation plan Sunday for settlers who will be uprooted by Ariel Sharon's plan to withdraw from the Gaza Strip and part of the West Bank, handing the prime minister an important victory two days before a showdown in parliament over the pullout.

Meanwhile, a team of Tunisian doctors examined Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat, who is recovering from the flu, and pronounced him "OK," despite speculation he might be suffering from something more serious.

The compensation program, approved 13-6, is a key part of Sharon's "unilateral disengagement" plan, which calls for a complete withdrawal from Gaza and four West Bank settlements next year.

The Cabinet victory, though expected, gave Sharon important momentum in the run-up to a far more important test Tuesday, when the Knesset votes for the first time on the entire withdrawal plan. Sharon also is expected to win that vote, but he needs a strong majority to marginalize his opponents.

Zarqawi group claims killing of 50 Iraqis

BAGHDAD, Iraq — In their boldest and deadliest ambush yet, insurgents waylaid three minibuses carrying U.S.-trained Iraqi soldiers heading home on leave and massacred about 50 of them — forcing many to lie down on the ground and shooting them in the head, officials said Sunday. Some accounts by police said the rebels were dressed in Iraqi military uniforms.

Pro-Russian party falters in Lithuanian vote

VILNIUS, Lithuania — A new pro-Russian populist political party stumbled in elections Sunday, apparently failing to get enough support to win a stake in the government in the second and final round of parliamentary elections, a vote marked by record low turnout.

The Labor Party's strong first-round showing prompted the country's more established political parties to band together in an effort to defeat Labor, which they feared would steer Lithuania from its pro-Western track and back toward Moscow.

With more than 99 percent of the votes counted, 28 of the 66 seats up for grabs went to the largest traditional parties, the Social Democrats, the New Union, the Conservative Fatherland Union and Liberal Center Union, according to early estimates by the state Election Commission.

The final results will be announced Oct. 31, and the first session of the new parliament is scheduled to convene Nov. 15.

The Labor Party, led by Russian-born businessman Viktor Uspaskich, won 16 seats, but analysts said that may not be enough for it to get a stake in a new coalition government.

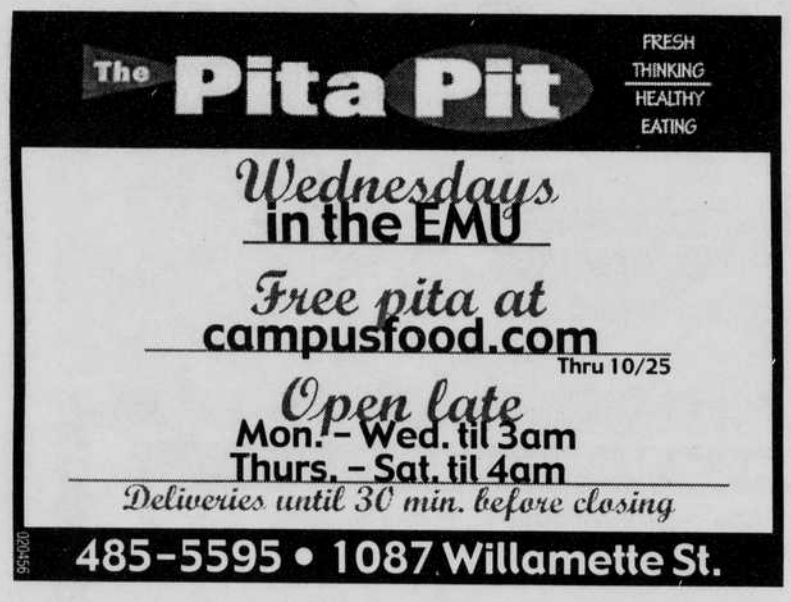
Army faces probe on deals with Halliburton

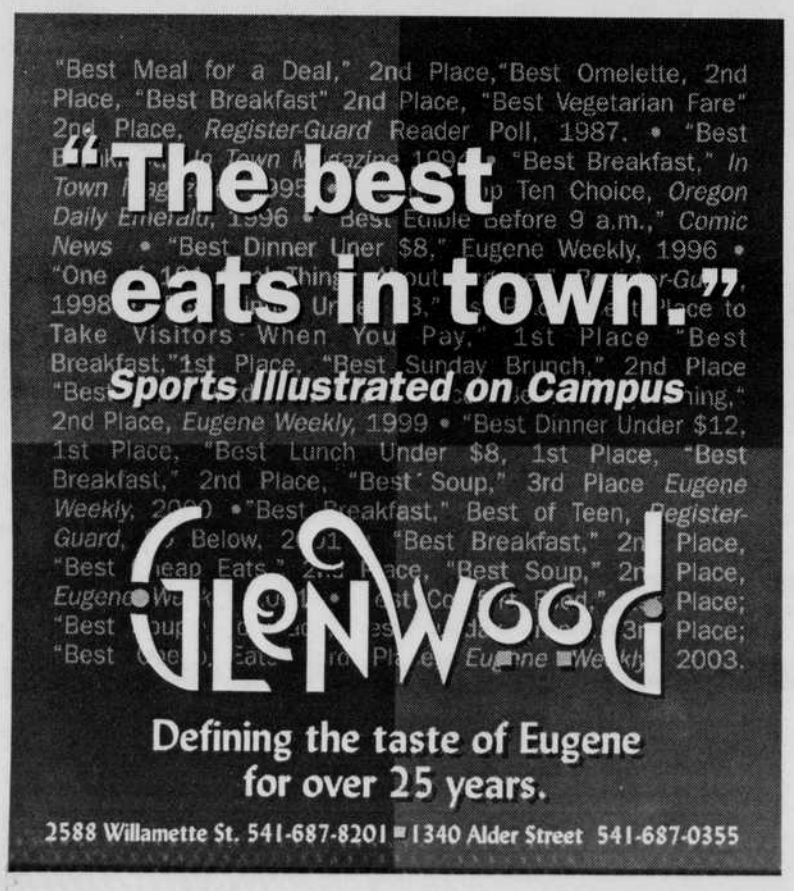
WASHINGTON — The Army has agreed to a Pentagon investigation into claims by a top contracting official that a Halliburton subsidiary unfairly won no-bid contracts worth billions of dollars for work in Iraq and the Balkans, according to Army documents obtained Sunday. The complaint alleges that the award of contracts to KBR, the Halliburton subsidiary, without competition to restore Iraq's oil industry and to supply and feed U.S. troops in the Balkans puts at risk "the integrity of the federal contracting program as it relates to a major defense contractor."

Democrats lose ruling on Michigan ballots

DETROIT — A judge's order requiring some provisional ballots in Michigan to be counted even if they are cast in the wrong precinct was put on hold Sunday, the second time in as many days that a federal appeals court dealt a setback to Democrats who wanted to ease voting restrictions. A 6th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals panel in Cincinnati issued a stay of a lower court ruling that had reversed Michigan's policy for counting provisional ballots, saying it will hear an appeal of the issue quickly. On Saturday, the same three-judge panel had rejected a similar ruling out of Ohio.

— The Associated Press





Iran nears completion of uranium conversion plant

Facility designed to convert powdered uranium into enrichment stage is 70 percent operational, reports say

BY ALI AKBAR DAREINI
THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

TEHRAN, Iran — A uranium conversion facility in Iran is nearing completion, a top official said Sunday, only days after European countries offered a deal in which Iran would reportedly have to give up all nuclear activities.

State-run radio quoted Mohammed Ghannadi, second in charge of the Atomic Energy Organization of Iran, saying the Isfahan uranium conversion facility in central Iran was nearing completion.

"The Isfahan UCF facility is operational by 70 percent right now," Ghannadi told 21 lawmakers during a visit to the plant, which Iranian officials said was inaugurated in March.

Ghannadi was quoted as saying 21 of 24 workshops have been commissioned at the facility, which converts uranium powder called yellow cake into hexafluoride gas, a stage prior to enrichment. He did not elaborate.

In talks Thursday in Austria, envoys from Britain, France and Germany offered civilian nuclear technology and a trade deal to the Iranians reportedly in return for Iran permanently giving up all uranium enrichment activities — technology that can be used to produce nuclear fuel or nuclear weapons.

"The proposal by the Europeans is unbalanced," Foreign Ministry Spokesman Hamid Reza Asefi told a news conference on Sunday. "However, the Europeans have chosen the correct path of dialogue."

Iran's nuclear program is now a matter of national pride, and is one of the few issues on which hard-liners and reformists agree. The conservative-dominated parliament is drawing up a bill requiring the government to resume uranium enrichment, the only stage in the nuclear fuel cycle that Iran says it is not yet carrying out.

Britain, Germany and France have warned that most European countries will back Washington's call to refer Iran's nuclear dossier to the U.N. Security Council for possible economic sanctions if Iran doesn't give up all uranium enrichment activities by the Nov. 25 meeting of the International Atomic Energy Agency.

Iran, Asefi said, was still studying the European proposal.

"We think we have to reach a solution acceptable to both sides so

IRAN, page 5

Columbia's military destroys large stockpile of land mines

Colombian President Alvaro Uribe urges land mine removal advocate Queen Noor to 'be our ambassador'

BY DAN MOLINSKI
THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

BOGOTA, Colombia — Colombia's armed forces blew up 6,800 stockpiled land mines Sunday as President Alvaro Uribe, Queen Noor of Jordan and dozens of mine blast victims watched on large screens, launching an effort to eventually rid the country of the weapons.

The queen, U.S. Ambassador William Wood and other dignitaries gathered in Bogota's main plaza as the land mines were destroyed in eight thunderous explosions in a rural area near the northern city of Barranquilla.

The unprecedented act was aimed at underscoring Colombia's commitment to destroying all state-owned mines, Uribe said, even though Marxist rebels who have battled the government for 40 years have increasingly used them.

"Be our ambassador, Queen Noor, and tell the world ... that the Colombian government is destroying its mines," Uribe said.

The queen sat next to Uribe and applauded as each explosion took place. Dozens of land mine victims and soldiers wounded in Colombia's civil war also were present and Juanes, a Colombian pop star, performed "Suenos" (Dreams), a song from his new best-selling album that deals with the everyday life of a Colombian soldier.

"(Colombia) has been ravaged by internal conflict," Queen Noor later said. "And it is unique in the world for being (in conflict) and at the same time destroying its stocks of land mines. ... It takes a lot of courage for the armed forces to take these kinds of decisions."

Land mines have become a huge problem in Colombia, where government troops and allied militia fighters are battling two leftist rebel groups. Each faction has planted land mines. As a result, the Andean nation has the fourth-largest number of annual casualties from mine blasts, behind Chechnya, Afghanistan and Cambodia.

Anti-personnel mines have killed or injured some 560 people in Colombia this year, up from just 29 in 1990, according to the office of Vice President Francisco Santos. Sixty percent of this year's victims were government soldiers.

Queen Noor has made the reduction of land mines in Third World countries one of her main platforms for peace in recent years.

The queen, who was born Lisa Najeeb Halaby in Washington D.C. in 1951, is the widow of King Hussein of Jordan, who died five years ago. She planned to visit mine blast victims in southwest Colombia on Monday.

Colombia in 2000 ratified the Ottawa Convention that calls for banning and destroying all land mines worldwide by 2009. After Sunday's blasts, Colombia will have completed the first phase of the agreement, which calls for destruction of stockpiled mines. However, the military will retain several hundred mines for training purposes.

For the second phase, Colombia's government said it will destroy thousands of government-planted mines that remain in the ground, ready to explode.