

Today	Saturday	Sunday
High: 55 Low: 39 Precip: 0%	High: 51 Low: 33 Precip: 50%	High: 49 Low: 31 Precip: 30%

IN BRIEF

Senators vote to limit class action lawsuits

WASHINGTON, D.C. — The Senate approved a measure Thursday to help shield businesses from major class action lawsuits like the ones that have been brought against tobacco companies, giving President Bush the first legislative victory of his second term. Under the legislation, long sought by big business, large multi-state class action lawsuits could no longer be heard in small state courts. Such courts have handed out multi-million-dollar verdicts. Instead, the cases would be heard by federal judges, who have not proven as open to those type of lawsuits.

The Senate passed the bill 72-26, and it now goes to the House. Bush called the bill a strong step forward.

"Our country depends on a fair legal system that protects people who have been harmed without encouraging

junk lawsuits that undermine confidence in our courts while hurting our economy," Bush said in a statement released in Pennsylvania, where he was promoting his Social Security proposals.

Abbas fires 20 officers after truce violations

RAMALLAH, West Bank — Reacting forcefully to Hamas rocket and mortar fire in the Gaza Strip in defiance of a cease-fire with Israel, Palestinian leader Mahmoud Abbas dismissed his top security commanders Thursday and sent a message to the militants that he will not tolerate further truce violations.

Among about 20 senior officers who lost their jobs were the top two commanders, Brig. Gen. Abdel Razeq Majaidie, chief of public security, and police chief Saeb al-Ajed, security officials said, a clear sign that Abbas is serious about enforcing the two-day-old truce. Hamas claimed responsibility for salvos of rockets and mortars — 30 mortars and 26 rockets, one of the biggest barrages in four years of violence — aimed at two Israeli settlements in southern Gaza, Neve Dekalim and Gedid. The Israeli military said there were no casualties. Israeli TV stations showed video of minor damage to some houses.

Hamas said the barrage was retaliation for the death of two Palestinians

Wednesday. One blew himself up with a bomb he was apparently trying to plant, and the other was shot by Israeli soldiers as he approached a settlement.

House votes to make states verify citizenship at DMV

WASHINGTON, D.C. — Hoping to keep drivers' licenses out of the hands of terrorists, the House voted Thursday to make states verify that applicants are U.S. citizens or legal immigrants. Republicans pushed the measure through on a 261-161 vote despite protests from governors and state motor vehicle departments that it would be too costly and would require them to take on the role of immigration officers.

The bill also would make it easier for judges to deport immigrants seeking political asylum if they think they might be terrorists.

"Common sense says we should not allow suspected terrorists to be able to stay inside our borders if they could harm us," said House Speaker Dennis Hastert.

The measure was rejected by Congress and the White House in December as part of a bill reorganizing intelligence agencies in response to flaws found after the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorism attacks. It was revived with newly won support from the Bush administration.

Jessica Simpson denies split with Nick Lachey

NEW YORK — Jessica Simpson is denying rumors of an impending split with husband Nick Lachey — again. After tabloids ran pictures of Lachey, 31, surrounded by cheerleaders at a Super Bowl party in Jacksonville, Fla., and reports of a dinner with ex-girlfriend Jordana Jarjura, Simpson said their difficulties have been greatly exaggerated.

"I trust Nick totally, and he trusts me," Simpson told Us Weekly magazine in an issue hitting newsstands Friday. "We are committed to our relationship."

Simpson said she was unaware of Lachey's meeting with Jarjura, and while it was "innocent," it was also a learning experience. "There are lessons to be learned," Simpson said. "Now Nick and I will tell each other about something like this ahead of time." The stars of MTV's "Newlyweds: Nick & Jessica" have been beset by tabloid speculation on their marriage's imminent doom. But Simpson, 24, said even when they are in different places, they are close.

NHL players' association still in lockout after talks

NEW YORK — The NHL and the players' association broke off talks Thursday as the clock ticked down to a weekend deadline for saving what little is left of the season.

"It was a pointless meeting," NHL Chief Legal Officer Bill Daly said after the four-hour session. "We're not going to pick up the phone this weekend," union Senior Director Ted Saskin said. "We're done."

It was the second straight day of meetings in Toronto aimed at ending the lockout, but the first full session since Commissioner Gary Bettman told the union Wednesday that a deal would need to be ready by the weekend to save the season. If the deadline was set to pressure the players' association to give in to the league's salary-cap demand, it hasn't worked so far.

"We were not deadline hunting in any way," Saskin said. Daly said the union brought nothing new to Thursday's meeting.

—The Associated Press

# North Korea announces nuclear weapon possession

BY BURT HERMAN  
THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

SEOUL, South Korea — North Korea boasted publicly for the first time Thursday that it has nuclear weapons and said it will stay away from disarmament talks, dramatically raising the stakes in the 2-year-old dispute. The Bush administration called on Pyongyang to give up its atomic aspirations so life can be better for its impoverished people.

North Korea's harshly worded pronouncement posed a grave challenge to President Bush, who started his second term with a vow to end North Korea's nuclear program through six-nation disarmament talks.

"We ... have manufactured nukes for self-defense to cope with the Bush administration's ever-more-undisguised policy to isolate and stifle the (North)," the North Korean Foreign Ministry said in a statement carried by the state-run Korean Central News Agency. The agency's report used the word "nukes" in its English-language dispatch.

Previously, U.S. negotiators said North Korean officials claimed in private talks that they had nuclear weapons and might test one. The North's U.N. envoy also said last year the country had "weaponized" plutonium from its pool of 8,000 nuclear-spent fuel rods.

But Thursday's statement was the first claim directly from North Korea's state media that it has a nuclear weapon, confirming the widely held beliefs of international experts that the country has one or two atomic bombs. North Korea is not known to have performed any nuclear tests, and it kicked out U.N. inspectors in 2002, so there is no way to verify its claims.

The United States and South Korea, the North's main rivals, played down the revelation and urged the North to return to the six-nation talks that began in 2003 and also include China, Japan and Russia. Analysts suggested the move by North Korea may be a negotiating tactic aimed at getting more compensation in exchange for giving up its nuclear weapons program.

Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice said North Korea should return to negotiations.

"The world has given them a way

out, and we hope they will take that way out," she said wrapping up a trip to Europe. "The North Koreans have been told by the president of the United States that the United States has no intention of attacking or invading North Korea."

"The message is clear: Give up these aspirations for nuclear weapons, and you know life can be different," Rice said, adding that it was the same message Libya understood in renouncing its nuclear ambitions.

In a clear overture to North Korea to help foster the nuclear talks, Bush refrained from direct criticism of the country in last week's State of the Union address. He mentioned the North only in a single sentence, saying Washington was "working closely with governments in Asia to convince North Korea to abandon its nuclear ambitions."

Bush previously branded the North part of an "axis of evil" along with Iran and Saddam Hussein's Iraq.

Still, Pyongyang on Thursday seized on comments by Rice last month in which she labeled North Korea one of the "outposts of tyranny" in the world.

"The U.S. disclosed its attempt to topple the political system in (North Korea) at any cost, threatening it with a nuclear stick," North Korea's Foreign Ministry said. "This compels us to take a measure to bolster its nuclear weapons arsenal in order to protect the ideology, system, freedom and democracy chosen by the people in (North Korea)."

The statement said the Bush administration was trying to "mislead" the world in calling for resuming the six-party talks while also seeking "regime change" in North Korea.

"This is nothing but a far-fetched logic of gangsters as it is a good example fully revealing the wicked nature and brazen-faced double-dealing tactics of the U.S. as a master hand at plot-breeding and deception," the statement said.

South Korea urged its neighbor to rejoin the talks and said it maintains its previously stated estimate that North Korea has enough plutonium to build one or two nuclear bombs.

"We once again urge North Korea to rejoin the six-party talks without

conditions so that it can discuss whatever differences it has with the United States and other participants," said South Korean Foreign Ministry spokesman Lee Kyu-hyung.

Both Rice and White House spokesman Scott McClellan played down any significance of North Korea's announcement that it has nuclear weapons, saying it was "rhetoric" that has been heard before.

"We remain committed to a peaceful diplomatic resolution to the nuclear issue with regards to North Korea," McClellan said aboard Air Force One en route to North Carolina. "It's time to talk about how to move forward."

The United States now must rely on China and South Korea, its allies with more direct influence over the North, to entice North Korea to negotiate.

"The question now is whether Washington is able to persuade and cajole Seoul and Beijing to bribe and pressure North Korea to resume the six-party talks," said Gary Samore of the London-based International Institute for Strategic Studies. "The U.S. has absolutely no influence, except through other countries."

Last week, Michael Green, the U.S. National Security Council's senior director for Asian affairs, traveled to the region to relay Bush's desire to restart the diplomatic process to the leaders of China, South Korea and Japan.

North Korea did leave an opening to return to the table, saying it would stay away until "we have recognized that there is justification for us to attend the talks and there are ample conditions and atmosphere to expect positive results." North Korea's economy has been ravished by famine and natural disasters, and it relies on outside aid to feed its people.

"Even if threats and declarations are made, it's in every party's interest to have negotiations," said Peter Beck, Seoul-based director of the North East Asia project for the International Crisis Group think tank. "Certainly this is a dark day for the negotiating process, but I don't think all is lost."

The CIA has estimated that with a highly enriched uranium weapons program and the use of sophisticated high-speed centrifuges, North Korea could be making more.

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