




Today  High: 58 Low: 37 Precip: 0%	Saturday  High: 53 Low: 34 Precip: 50%	Sunday  High: 50 Low: 27 Precip: 40%
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IN BRIEF

Ustav celebrates Indian culture, aids tsunami relief

The Students of the Indian Subcontinent will be hosting Utsav on Saturday night in the EMU Ballroom. Last year, about 500 people, including 100 from the Portland area, attended the event, which celebrates Indian culture with a dinner, skits and musical performances.

SIS will be accepting donations for tsunami relief at the event. The event costs \$5 for students and \$7 for community members. The dinner starts at 5:30 p.m., and the show begins at 8 p.m.

— Jared Paben

Semi-formal ball to honor black leaders, entertainers

The Black Student Union plans to recreate Harlem, the city where so many black leaders, musicians and performers got their start, on a small scale tonight, BSU member Patricia Haggerty said.

The semi-formal event is dubbed "Harlem Nights, A Night Out on the Town. Celebrating the Journey to the Big Apple." The ball will feature backdrops of cultural references important to the history of Harlem. Haggerty said she believes this is an important event, not limited to music and dancing.

"Even though this is a ball, it has a lot of meaning behind it," Haggerty said. "It's supposed to make us think of the heritage we come from."

According to Gothamcenter.org, a NYC history Web site, black musicians called Harlem "The Big Apple," referring to making it big in music. There was a club called "The Big Apple" in 1930s Harlem where many early jazz musicians performed.

The dress code at tonight's event, which starts at 10 p.m. and lasts until 2 a.m. at the Red Lion Hotel, is also reminiscent of Harlem nightclubs of the 1930s and 1940s, BSU Co-Director LaTina Lewis said.

"Back in the Harlem Renaissance they dressed up to hear jazz and poetry," Lewis said. "The guys wore zoot suits, and the ladies wore dresses." She added that BSU wanted everything about the evening to have a Harlem nightclub feel.

This year's ball will be limited to students 18 years old and older and is free to all University students, but donations will be accepted. The semi-formal dress code will be strictly enforced, Lewis said.

— Sheldon Traver

Bush discusses benefits involved in free, fair trade

WASHINGTON, D.C. — Contending that Americans benefit from free trade, President Bush said Thursday he would keep pursuing liberalization agreements around the world, even as critics say his policies have resulted in record trade deficits and millions of lost jobs.

Bush's pledge came in his annual economic report to Congress, a 438-page document that argued that his economic policies, ranging from making his first-term tax cuts permanent to overhauling Social Security, will lead to greater prosperity.

"I believe that Americans benefit from open markets and free and fair trade, and I am working to open up markets around the world and make sure that the playing field is level for our workers, farmers, manufacturers and other job creators," Bush said in his message to Congress.

— The Associated Press

Delays on visa applications decline

BY JUSTIN POPE
THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

The State and Homeland Security departments have reduced from months to weeks the time it takes foreign students and scholars trying to travel to the United States to clear a key visa review, according to a new government report.

The findings are welcome news for education leaders, though they have cautioned streamlining the visa process will not, on its own, reverse the trend of declining interest among foreigners in attending American colleges and universities.

Amid complaints from higher education groups and major business leaders, including Bill Gates, that visa hassles were discouraging foreign students from attending American schools, a Government Accountability Office investigation last year found average delays of 67 days for applicants to clear a security check for scientists known as Visa Mantis. Some delays were considerably longer, and some applicants waited as long as 12 weeks just to get an interview to start the process.

In a follow-up report to be released Friday, the GAO finds the average wait following the interview has now fallen to 15 days, according to a source who has been briefed on the findings and spoke on condition of anonymity.

The report credits the overall improvement to better technology, coordination among agencies and policy changes, such as priority interviews for student applicants. It cautions that problems remain and some scholars still face considerable delays.

The report comes just a week after

the government announced it would allow international students to keep their Visa Mantis clearance for the duration of their studies, up to four years — a change that will likely further reduce delays. Reapplications from those who previously had been cleared were a major bottleneck, and a source of anxiety for applicants, who worried they might be unable to get back to school if forced to return home in an emergency.

Peggy Blumenthal, vice president for educational services at the Institute of International Education, praised U.S. embassies for making an improved visa process a top priority. Still, public relations challenges remain, she said.

"Even more important than the actual wait times, which have improved, is combating the perception abroad by students that the situation is the same as it was shortly after Sept. 11," she said. "Students right now are going on what they heard from their cousin or friend or neighbor who applied three years ago."

About 600,000 foreigners study in the United States, but international graduate student applications fell 32 percent last year, according to an IIE survey. Another survey released in November found the number of first-time foreign enrollees in American graduate schools was down 6 percent — the third straight decline after a decade of growth.

Universities depend on international students for teaching and research help, particularly in the sciences. In some fields, including engineering, foreigners comprise more than 50 percent of students. More than 75 percent of their funding comes from abroad, and they

Student visa application delays reduced

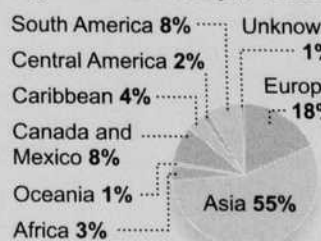
A General Accounting Office investigation last year found an average delay of 67 days for foreign student applicants pursuing science to clear security checks. A follow-up report to be released Friday, found the average wait following the interview has dropped to 15 days.

Visa processing durations from transmission to response for 67 case applications, 2003*

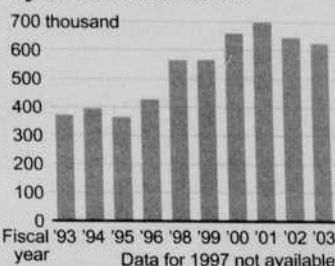
19 aps.	21	7	4	15
1-20 Days	21-40	41-60	61-120	121-220

* Students pursuing science
** One application was resent. It took more than 420 days based on the original mailing date.

Non-immigrant students by region of citizenship, FY 2003



Non-immigrant students by class of admission



SOURCES: U.S. General Accounting Office; U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services AP

contribute \$12 billion annually to the U.S. economy, according to IIE.

Visa delays may prove the most easily solvable of the challenges facing U.S. schools. Students from China and India who have traditionally gone to the United States are finding better domestic options and are encountering aggressive marketing by schools in Britain, Australia and New Zealand.

"Competition is hot and heavy," Blumenthal said. Gates, the Microsoft founder, and other business leaders, including GE Chief Executive Jeff Immelt, have recently raised the issue,

saying it could harm the ability of American companies to recruit the talent they need.

Rep. Sherwood Boehlert, R.-N.Y., chairman of the House science committee, which requested the report, praised the State Department for moving quickly.

"This is very good news," he said. "Particularly in the aftermath of 9/11, we want to separate those who are interested in coming into the country to do harm and the vast majority who are coming into the country to study, serve as faculty members or attend a scientific conferences. They all enrich the country."

Israel calls for halt to destruction of Palestinians' houses

BY KARIN LAUB
THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

JERUSALEM — Israel's defense minister ordered a halt Thursday to the controversial policy of demolishing the homes of Palestinian suicide bombers and gunmen after an internal army review concluded it has not deterred attackers but has inflamed hatred.

Since the 1967 Middle East War, Israel has razed more than 2,400 Palestinian homes as punishment or deterrence, leaving thousands of people homeless, including 675 houses destroyed in the past four years of fighting, according to the Israeli human rights group B'tselem.

Human rights groups have condemned the demolitions as collective punishment and a violation of international law and long have demanded that they be halted.

The army review found the practice has inflamed hatred. The Haaretz newspaper said there were no more than 20 cases in which the threat of demolition deterred attackers or pushed their families to turn them in. Militant groups compensate families of attackers and help them rebuild, weakening possible deterrence.

House demolitions, along with other army practices, such as targeted killings of Palestinian militants, were suspended after Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon and Palestinian leader Mahmoud Abbas declared a truce last week.

In announcing the halt to house demolitions, the military said in a

statement that Defense Minister Shaul Mofaz decided to accept the recommendation of army Chief of Staff Lt. Gen. Moshe Yaalon to "stop exercising the legal right to demolish terrorists' houses as a means of deterrence."

A military official said that while the practice had a deterrent effect in some cases, the army "weighed if the deterrent was strong enough in order to continue the policy of the demolition of houses, and the chief of staff ... concluded especially when there's more quiet, it's not the time to use this policy."

B'tselem says the Israeli military has destroyed a total of more than 4,000 Palestinian homes during the current conflict, most in operations to clear away buildings used by militants as cover for attacks or to widen security roads. Those practices were not included in Thursday's decision.

In the Gaza Strip, 2,991 homes were destroyed or damaged beyond repair in the last four years, leaving some 28,483 people homeless, according to the U.N. Relief and Works Agency.

Amnesty International, a leading human rights group, praised Thursday's decision but said it did not go far enough.

"The overall number of houses that have been demolished in the last four years is in excess of 4,000, and out of those, the category announced today was a fairly small category," said Donatella Rovera, the human rights group's researcher on Israel and the Palestinian territories.

China to dispatch envoy to N. Korea to break stalemate

BY ELAINE KURTENBACH
THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

BEIJING — China said Thursday it will send a top communist party official to North Korea for talks with its longtime ally in an effort to break a stalemate over the North's nuclear program, but Beijing urged patience in its dealing with the volatile country.

U.S. and South Korean envoys visited Beijing to seek help in persuading the isolated North to rejoin six-nation nuclear talks that were suspended in June. Those talks include the United States, the two Koreas, China, Russia and Japan.

China, the North's biggest backer and a major source of aid to the impoverished country, has been wary of openly testing its influence with Pyongyang.

China urged patience with the unpredictable North, which has rejected calls to return to the six-nation talks, accusing Washington of hostility. Last week, Pyongyang announced it has produced nuclear weapons. The claim could not be independently verified.

"We are of the view that we should not resort to sanctions or pressure in international relations," Foreign Ministry spokesman Kong Quan said at a regular briefing. "Further complicating the issue will

compromise the safety and security of the region."

Kong confirmed that Wang Jiarui, head of the communist party's international department, would visit North Korea this week, but he did not give specific dates.

Meanwhile, South Korean officials said they believed China could do more to win over the North.

"I think China has a much bigger card to play than we expect. The question is whether it will play it," South Korea's ambassador to China, Kim Hajoong, said at a news conference Thursday in Seoul.

China, which hosted three earlier rounds of nuclear talks that resulted in little progress, has consistently said it favors a nuclear-free Korean peninsula.

Though China helped defend North Korea in the 1950-53 Korean War, Beijing worries that a nuclear-armed North would raise tensions in the region and prompt Japan and South Korea to develop atomic weapons.

While working to resolve the standoff, "the Chinese side requires that the DPRK side and United States show more flexibility and sincerity," Kong said, using the acronym for the North's formal name, the Democratic People's Republic of Korea.

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