



Top Stories From the State, Nation and World

IN THE NEWS

Shalala Asks Legislators To Regulate Tobacco

WASHINGTON - Taking a new tack, Health and Human Services Secretary Donna Shalala urged lawmakers to approve government regulation of tobacco because it's "a political winner."

"It's an election year. Are you for protecting kids or aren't you?" Shalala said in an interview Wednesday.

In an open letter to congressional leaders to be published Thursday, Shalala said Congress should "pick up the flag" following a Supreme Court ruling that current law doesn't allow the Food and Drug Administration to regulate tobacco.

In a tongue-in-cheek gesture signifying that Cabinet secretaries don't usually hand out political advice to lawmakers, whose decisions might help or hinder their agencies, the op-ed letter is written as a memo from "Anonymous." It will be published Thursday in the Capitol Hill newspaper Roll Call.

President Clinton called on Congress to give the FDA power to regulate tobacco after the March 21 Supreme Court ruling.

Anti-tobacco members of Congress have pledged to revive legislation and presidential contenders Vice President Al Gore and Texas Gov. George W. Bush have both said Congress should act to reign in cigarette makers and tobacco advertisements aimed at children.

But Republicans in Congress have aggressively fought previous efforts to regulate the tobacco industry.

Senate Majority Leader Trent Lott, R-Miss., one of four congressional leaders to whom Shalala addressed the letter and the lawmaker who has final say on what legislation gets to the Senate floor, has said he opposed FDA regulation of tobacco.

"I don't think they do a very good job with what they're doing now without more requirements being dumped on them," Lott said after the Supreme Court ruling.

Japanese Select Mori As Next Prime Minister

TOKYO - Ruling party insider Yoshiro Mori took control as Japan's new prime minister Wednesday, squelching speculation he would call early elections and promising to plow ahead with his predecessor's economic recovery plan.

The election of Mori by Parliament resolved a leadership crisis in the Japanese government triggered Sunday when Prime Minister Keizo Obuchi suffered a stroke and went into a coma. Obuchi remained hospitalized on life support.

At his first news conference as prime minister, Mori brushed off suggestions that opposition pressure would force him to call a general election before July, when leaders from the Group of Eight nations will hold a summit in Japan.

Mori, the former second-in-command in the Liberal Democratic Party, said bolstering the economy and preparing for the summit were his priorities, not elections.

The government must call elections by October.

"I have other major tasks to carry out and I have to make sure that I execute those tasks in a proper manner," he said.

Mori, 62, took office with a promise to keep up the policies of Obuchi, who mounted a huge public spending campaign to jar Japan out of recession. He kept Obuchi's Cabinet intact, with all the ministers the same except for the top spot.

Mori said his first job would be to end Japan's decade-long stretch of malaise and especially to boost private consumption, long considered the central weak spot in the economy.

"I will be following the path of Prime Minister Obuchi," Mori declared. "I will finish what he has started and left unfinished."

A former trade minister, Mori won solid majorities in votes Wednesday in both houses of Parliament following his installment earlier in the day as president of the LDP. He and his Cabinet were sworn in by Emperor Akihito.

Mori emerged as the most viable replacement as prime minister shortly after Obuchi's stroke. LDP secretary-general, Mori had a solid power base.

Reviving Japan's economy will be Mori's major challenge. Thanks to a tremendous public spending spree, the economy has shown signs of improvement, but unemployment is stubbornly high and growth has been weak. There is also mounting concern about the bur-

geoning fiscal deficit.

In Japan's financial markets, the dollar rose slightly against the yen on Wednesday and stock prices slipped. Traders said the political situation was not much of a factor because most analysts believed economic policy would not change.

Prosecutors Investigate Weapon Manufacturers

HARTFORD, Conn - Prosecutors in at least six states are investigating whether the gun industry is illegally trying to punish Smith & Wesson for agreeing to make its weapons more child-proof.

More than 20 subpoenas have been issued for firearms manufacturers, distributors and others, Connecticut Attorney General Richard Blumenthal said Wednesday.

The federal government is also looking at the issue, he said. A call to the Justice Department was not returned.

"Exercising corporate responsibility should not be reason for your competitors to put a bull's eye on your back," said Nathan Barankin, a spokesman for California Attorney General Bill Lockyer.

Smith & Wesson agreed in March to include safety locks with all handguns - external locks at first and internal ones within two years.

Also, new guns will not accept magazines holding more than 10 rounds of

ammunition.

In addition, the company agreed to invest in "smart gun" technology that allows only the owner to pull the trigger and to eliminate advertising that might attract children or criminals.

In exchange, a number of municipalities, states and the federal government agreed not to sue Smith & Wesson over gun violence.

Gun groups and Smith & Wesson competitors protested the agreement. And the Gun Owners of America urged its 200,000 members to boycott Smith & Wesson and to ask their dealers to stop carrying the company's products.

Netscape Distributes New Internet Browser

LOS ANGELES - The chairman of America Online personally unveiled the latest version of the Netscape Web browser Wednesday along with a new crop of compatible consumer appliances to connect users to the Internet.

Netscape 6 is faster and far more flexible than other Internet browsers, Steve Case said in a speech touting the new browser and appliances at the Internet World 2000 conference.

Whether it can regain any of the market share lost to Microsoft's dominant Internet Explorer remains to be seen.

The new Netscape browser is designed to be easily adapted for use in set-top boxes, cellular telephones and other devices. Also, users can modify its

on-screen appearance and some functions to suit their personal tastes.

The appliances, to be built by San Diego-based Gateway Inc., include a wireless notebook-sized device, dubbed the Internet Pad that, like a cordless telephone, can be carried around the house while linked to the Web.

"These new initiatives are part of our AOL anywhere strategy of embedding the efficiency and convenience of the Internet into people's everyday lives," Case said. "It's nothing less than the start of the second Internet revolution."

Census Bureau Tries To Increase Response

WASHINGTON - In Jackson, Miss., Census Bureau officials organized a 12-hour radiothon. In parts of North Carolina, enumerators are visiting families who were forced out of their homes by Hurricane Floyd and are still living in emergency housing.

And beginning Wednesday, new radio ads will be heard in those states, plus nine others and the District of Columbia, urging people to fill out and send back their forms. It's all part of an effort to raise census participation rates in states - particularly in the South - that trail the national average.

"The states that lag behind the general response rate are generally clustered in the South and Southwest," Census Director Kenneth Prewitt said at a news conference Tuesday. "It suggests the

very same sort of demographic and attitudinal characteristics that led to lower response rates in 1990."

As of Tuesday, the national response rate was 55 percent. Eleven states below the mark that are targets for improvement are: Florida, Georgia, North Carolina, South Carolina, Alabama, Mississippi, Louisiana, Texas, Oklahoma, New Mexico and West Virginia.

In many of the states, Census officials say part of the problem is visiting hard-to-reach rural communities. Other rural households get sporadic mail delivery or only receive mail through a post office box. Census forms are only mailed out or dropped off at homes with street addresses.

"I'm not surprised to see more rural counties lagging behind bigger cities and urban areas for two reasons - the way we deliver the questionnaires, and it's sometimes harder to reach the rural areas," said Betty Hardy, regional Census director in Charlotte.

In North Carolina, where the response as of Tuesday was 49 percent, Hardy said they were trying to locate families displaced by flooding from Hurricane Floyd.

MCI WorldCom, Sprint Merger Raises Queries

WASHINGTON - The proposed marriage between two of the nation's top three long-distance carriers had sup-

porters and opponents jousting Wednesday over this question: What's in a name?

When it's a brand name, it's important, say consumer advocates concerned that a proposed merger between the well-known MCI WorldCom and Sprint will curtail competition.

MCI and Sprint officials say that names aside, there are hundreds of long-distance competitors that are making headway in attracting new customers. In a recent FCC filing, the companies asserted that even after their deal, 98 percent of Americans would have at least three long-distance carriers to choose from.

"The genie is out of the bottle in terms of competition," said Michael H. Salsbury, MCI WorldCom's general counsel, at a Federal Communications Commission forum on the deal Wednesday.

"The customer base is increasingly well-educated, very price sensitive and willing to switch carriers."

Several panelists still questioned whether that vibrant market really exists for residential consumers - who may still lean toward the top three brands rather than a sea of upstarts.

"There is no doubt that the market is changing significantly, but one cannot disregard the market as it exists," said Gene Kimmelman, co-director of the Washington office of the Consumers Union.

-Associated Press

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