

Defense Of Marriage Act Could Be Struck Down

WASHINGTON (AP) — In a major gay rights case, the Supreme Court indicated Wednesday it could strike down the law that prevents legally married gay couples from receiving a range of federal benefits that go to other married people.

Justice Anthony Kennedy, often the decisive vote in close cases, joined the four more liberal justices in raising questions about a provision of the federal Defense of Marriage Act that is being challenged at the court.

Kennedy said the law appears to intrude on the power of states that have chosen to recognize same-sex marriages. Other justices said the law creates what Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg called two classes of marriage, full and "skim-milk marriage."

The federal law affects a range of benefits available to married couples, including tax breaks, survivor benefits and health insurance for spouses of federal employees.

It still is possible the court could dismiss the case for procedural reasons, though that prospect seemed less likely than it did in Tuesday's argument over gay marriage in California.

Syrian Rebels Increasing Weapon Supplies

AMMAN, Jordan (AP) — Mideast powers opposed to President Bashar Assad have dramatically stepped up weapons supplies to Syrian rebels in coordination with the U.S. in preparation for a push on the capital of Damascus, officials and Western military experts said Wednesday.

A carefully prepared covert operation is arming rebels, involving Jordan, Saudi Arabia, Turkey and Qatar, with the United States and other Western governments consulting, and all parties hold veto power over where the shipments are directed, according to a senior Arab official whose government is participating. His account was corroborated by a diplomat and two military experts.

The Arab official said the number of arms airlifts into Jordan and Turkey has doubled in the past four weeks. He did not provide exact figures on the flights or the size of the cargo. Jordan opened up as a new route for the weapons late last year, amid U.S. worries that arms from Turkey were going to Islamic militants, all four told The Associated Press in separate interviews. Jordan denies helping funnel weapons to the rebels.

The two military experts, who closely follow the traffic, said the weapons include more powerful, Croatian-made anti-tank guns and rockets than the rebels have had before.

3 Senators Promise Immigration Overhaul

NOGALES, Ariz. (AP) — A group of influential U.S. senators shaping and negotiating details of an immigration reform package vowed Wednesday to make the legislation public when Congress reconvenes next month as negotiations reopened between union workers and business groups over visas for low-skilled workers.

The visa talks were left in limbo Friday as Congress went into recess, but the senators said both sides had signaled they were open to compromise and were finalizing details Wednesday.

The reassurances came after the four senators — Republicans John McCain and Jeff Flake of Arizona and Democrats Chuck Schumer of New York and Michael Bennet of Colorado — toured the U.S.-Mexico border in Arizona to get a firsthand look at security issues affecting the region. They are all members of the so-called Gang of Eight — a bipartisan group that has spent recent weeks trying to craft proposed immigration legislation.

The trip came as the lawmakers wrap up a bill designed to secure the border and put 11 million illegal immigrants on a path to citizenship.

Water

From Page 1

Carlson said the committee intentionally includes viewpoints that will likely conflict.

"It'll be uncomfortable," he said. "But if we hash it all out and come out with a plan, hopefully we'll have buy-in from the 28 members and the people they represent, so they're supporting a 20-year plan rather than fighting it."

The bill has drawn support from a variety of groups representing sportsmen, the Nebraska Farm Bureau Federation, environmental groups and others.

"There's a desperate need to invest in water in Nebraska," said Lee Orton, a spokesman for the Nebraska Water Coalition, which represents rural water districts, municipal water organizations, businesses and irrigators. "So many states out west have done so already. Nebraska is way behind the curve."

The bill is LB517.

Holmes Offers Guilty Plea For Theater Shooting

BY DAN ELLIOTT AND P. SOLOMON BANDA
Associated Press

Colorado theater shooting suspect James Holmes has offered to plead guilty and serve the rest of his life in prison to avoid the death penalty — a deal that would bring a swift end to the sometimes wrenching courtroom battle and circumvent a prolonged debate over his sanity.

Prosecutors haven't said whether they would accept the offer, and victims and survivors of last summer's massacre were divided on what should be done.

Melisa Cowden, whose ex-husband was killed in the theater, said Wednesday she was resolutely opposed to a plea deal.

"He didn't give 12 people the chance to plea bargain and say, 'Let's see if you're going to shoot me or not,'" said Cowden, whose two teenage daughters were with their father when he was killed.

"No. No plea bargain," she said.

The attack during a crowded night showing of "The Dark Knight Rises" left a dozen people dead and 70 injured.

Prosecutors have said Holmes planned the assault for months, casing the theater complex in the Denver suburb of Aurora, amassing a small arsenal and rigging potentially deadly booby-traps in his apartment.

Then on July 20, he donned a police-style helmet and body armor, tossed a gas canister into the theater crowd and opened fire, prosecutors said.

The plea offer, made by Holmes' lawyers on his behalf sometime before March 12, was disclosed at a defense court filing on Wednesday. It was made public just days before the prosecution was set to announce whether

they would seek the death penalty.

The filing didn't include the specifics of the offer. It said only that Holmes would agree to life in prison without parole — instead of the death penalty — and didn't mention any other concessions.

Pierce O'Farrill, who was shot three times, said he would welcome an agreement that would imprison Holmes for life. The years of court struggles ahead would likely be emotionally stressful for victims, he said.

"I don't see his death bringing me peace," O'Farrill said. "To me, my prayer for him was that he would spend the rest of his life in prison and hopefully, in all those years he has left, he could find God and ask for forgiveness himself."

Tom Sullivan, whose son Alex was killed, said he has wanted prosecutors to pursue the death penalty. But he said he wouldn't object to a plea agreement if it avoided a lengthy court battle — and if Holmes got no privileges in prison.

"That was kind of a sore point with us," he said, referring to privileges such as outside exercise or listening to music. "We didn't think this kind of person should have any kind of privileges except the bare essentials."

Holmes, a former graduate student at the University of Colorado, Denver, had seen a psychiatrist at the school before the shootings.

His lawyers have said he was taken to a hospital psychiatric ward in November because he was considered a threat to himself. Holmes was held there for several days and spent much of the time in restraints.

In their court filing, Holmes' lawyers again said they were exploring a plea of not guilty by reason of insanity and would mount a

vigorous defense if prosecutors rejected the plea offer and the case goes to trial.

Holmes was widely expected to enter an insanity plea at his arraignment on March 12, but his attorneys told District Judge William Sylvester they had too many questions about the constitutionality of Colorado's death penalty and insanity statutes to advise Holmes on how to plead.

Sylvester then entered a plea of not guilty on Holmes' behalf but said he could change it later to insanity if he chose.

The judge scheduled the trial to start Aug. 5, setting aside four weeks.

Doug Wilson, who heads the state public defenders' office, told The Associated Press Wednesday that prosecutors haven't responded to the offer. He didn't know whether prosecutors had relayed the offer with any victims as required by state law.

Prosecutors declined to comment on Wednesday.

Dan Recht, a past president of the Colorado Criminal Defense Bar, said prosecutors likely started talking to victims long ago.

"The defense, by making this public pleading, is reaching out to the victims' families," Recht said.

Also Wednesday, Sylvester denied a request from New York-based Fox News reporter Jana Winter to delay a Monday hearing where she has been ordered to testify about her sources for a story about Holmes.

Winter cited unnamed law enforcement officials saying Holmes sent drawings that foreshadowed the attack to a psychiatrist. Holmes' lawyers contend that whoever spoke to Winter violated a gag order.

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