

NATION/WORLD DIGEST

Feds Conducting Probe Into Mine Explosion

WASHINGTON (AP) — Federal prosecutors said Friday they are investigating whether there was "willful criminal activity" by the company that operates the West Virginia mine where 29 workers died in an accident last month.

The U.S. attorney's office for the Southern District of West Virginia said in a letter that investigators are looking into actions by the mine's operator, Performance Coal, and its directors, officers and agents.

The letter, obtained by The Associated Press, asks the Labor Department to hold off pursuing dozens of civil cases against Performance for alleged mine safety violations.

Performance is a subsidiary of Massey Energy Co., which owns the Upper Big Branch mine.

Last month, federal law enforcement officials said the FBI had interviewed nearly two dozen current and former employees of Massey in the probe. But the Justice Department declined to publicly confirm there was a criminal investigation.

Palin: Obama Would Ban Guns If He Could

CHARLOTTE, N.C. (AP) — Former Alaska Gov. Sarah Palin warned NRA members Friday that President Barack Obama wants to gut the Second Amendment and told a separate gathering that "mama grizzlies" will help Republicans win this November, sweeping away the Democratic agenda.

Palin, a potential 2012 presidential candidate, told National Rifle Association members during their annual meeting that the only thing stopping Obama and his Democratic allies from trying to ban guns is political backlash.

"Don't doubt for a minute that, if they thought they could get away with it, they would ban guns and ban ammunition and gut the Second Amendment," said Palin, a lifelong NRA member who once had a baby shower at a local gun range in Alaska. "It's the job of all of us at the NRA and its allies to stop them in their tracks."

Palin, the GOP's 2008 vice presidential nominee, also praised tea party activism as a "beautiful movement," drawing a rousing applause from thousands of NRA members who gathered in an arena used by the NBA's Charlotte Bobcats.

During an event earlier Friday in Washington sponsored by an anti-abortion group, she challenged Republican women to help the GOP "take this country back" and elect anti-abortion lawmakers. She praised female leaders of the tea party movement and invoked the 2008 acceptance speech where she compared herself to a pit bull.

Boy Discovers Family Died In Plane Crash

TRIPOLI, Libya (AP) — Relatives broke the news to a Dutch boy who is the sole survivor of a plane crash in Libya that his parents and brother died in the disaster, as authorities said the 9-year-old would return home on Saturday.

Rescuers found Ruben van Assouw still strapped in his seat and breathing in an area of desert sand strewn with the plane's debris. His father, mother and 11-year-old brother are believed to have been among the 103 people on board who were killed Wednesday when their flight from South Africa crashed short of the runway in Tripoli.

Since then, he has been undergoing treatment at a Tripoli hospital, with an aunt and uncle who rushed in from Amsterdam at his bedside.

On Friday, his aunt and uncle released a statement saying they had told the boy of the deaths of his parents, Trudy and Patrick van Assouw, and his brother, Enzo.

"Under the circumstances Ruben is doing well. He sleeps a lot. Now and then he is awake and then he is alert," they said in the statement.

Jobs Involved In Lost iPhone Investigation

SAN FRANCISCO (AP) — Brian Hogan's world closed in fast almost as soon as he sold the next-generation iPhone he found in a Silicon Valley bar to a popular technology Web site for a stack of \$100 bills, according to court documents released Friday.

By April 19, Hogan's roommate was cooperating with investigators. Apple's top lawyers were meeting with police to press for criminal charges and Steve Jobs himself was personally demanding the iPhone's return.

The saga began March 25, when Apple engineer Robert "Gray" Powell left the iPhone prototype in the bar area of Redwood City's Gourmet Haus Staud restaurant, according to a sworn statement by San Mateo Sheriff's Detective Matthew Broad that was unsealed Friday.

Broad's 10-page statement was used to obtain a search warrant for the home and car of Jason Chen, an editor with the technology website Gizmodo.

It said Gizmodo paid Hogan \$5,000 for the device, cracked it opened and posted images of it on April 20 despite a phone call from Jobs the day before demanding website editors return the gadget. Gizmodo promised Hogan an additional \$3,500 bonus if Apple formally unveiled the device by July, according to Broad.

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Shuttle Atlantis Soars On Final Voyage

BY MARCIA DUNN
AP Aerospace Writer

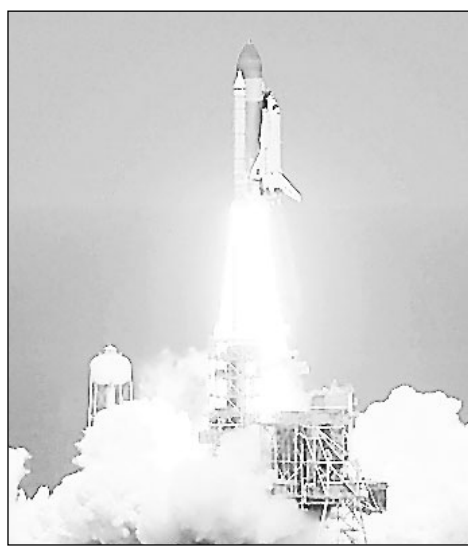
CAPE CANAVERAL, Fla. — Space shuttle Atlantis thundered away on its final voyage to orbit Friday, hoisting an experienced crew of six and a full shipment of space station gear.

Atlantis sped through a perfectly clear afternoon sky, blazing a trail over the Atlantic before huge crowds eager to catch one of the few remaining shuttle launches. More than 40,000 guests — the biggest launch-day crowd in years — packed the Kennedy Space Center.

The shuttle's destination is the International Space Station, which was soaring over the South Pacific at the time of liftoff. The shuttle should catch up with the orbiting complex and its six residents Sunday morning.

A piece of orbiting junk, however, was threatening to come too close to the space station. If necessary, Mission Control will order up a maneuver so the station can dodge the debris the night before Atlantis' arrival. The docking will not be delayed, even if the station has to move out of the way of the unidentified piece, NASA officials said.

"Good luck, godspeed and have a little fun up there," launch director Mike Leibach told the astronauts just before liftoff. He said he was speaking on behalf of all those who



RED HUBER/ORLANDO SENTINEL/MCT
Space shuttle Atlantis thundered off its launch pad at Kennedy Space Center into cloudless skies on Friday and headed to the International Space Station on the 32nd and final planned mission of its 25-year career.

have worked on Atlantis since construction began in 1980.

"Like you said, there are thousands of folks out there who have taken care of this bird for a long time," replied commander Kenneth Ham. "We're going to take her on

her 32nd flight, and if you don't mind, we'll take her out of the barn and make a few more laps around the planet."

The astronauts — all repeat space fliers and all men — couldn't resist a little humor before they got down to business. They showed up for their steak and cheeseburger breakfast wearing blue and black smoking jackets, white shirts and black bow ties.

This 12-day mission is the last one planned for Atlantis, the fourth in NASA's line of space shuttles. Only two flights remain after this one, by Discovery and Endeavour. NASA plans to end the 30-year program by the end of this year.

Atlantis — which rocketed into orbit for the first time in 1985 — is loaded with fresh batteries and a Russian-built compartment for the space station. The 20-foot-long module is crammed with food, laptop computers and other U.S. supplies.

Ham and his men will install the compartment on the space station, and carry out three spacewalks to replace six old batteries and hook up an antenna and other spare parts.

Alexey Krasnov, chief of the Russian Space Agency's piloted program, said it was a miracle that Atlantis took off without any delays.

"It looks like that Atlantis is telling us, 'Please use me again. I am capable,'" he said, smiling. "Maybe two-thirds of the launches were postponed by the weather or hardware ... and today it worked exactly as planned."

Only a few small bits of insulating foam were seen coming off the fuel tank during liftoff, nothing significant, officials said.

Congress Close To Deal To Pay For Tax Cuts

WASHINGTON (AP) — Congress is finally getting around to extending more than 50 popular tax breaks that expired at the end of last year, including money savers for homeowners, businesses and shoppers in states with no income tax. Lawmakers want to raise taxes on investment fund managers to help cover the cost.

Legislation combining the tax breaks with more aid for people who have been unemployed for long stretches is expected to come up for a vote in the House next week. The bill would extend unemployment benefits for up to 99 weeks in many states and subsidize health insurance premiums for laid-off workers through the end of the year.

Details are still being worked out, but lawmakers also plan to

expand a federal bond program that subsidizes local infrastructure projects, and to protect doctors from a scheduled 21 percent cut in Medicare payments.

The tax breaks would be retroactive to Jan. 1 but would again expire at the end of December. They include a property tax deduction for people who don't itemize, lucrative credits that help businesses finance research and develop new products, and a sales tax deduction that mainly helps people in states without income taxes.

Delays in extending the tax breaks have left thousands of businesses unable to plan for their tax liabilities. Delays in passing a long-term extension of emergency unemployment benefits has forced thousands of laid

off workers to live month to month with no certainty of income. Unemployment benefits for many will start to run out June 2, unless Congress acts.

Congress routinely extends the tax breaks each year — the House and Senate have already passed competing versions for 2010. But lawmakers have been unable to agree on how to pay for them.

House and Senate negotiators said this week they are close to a deal that would increase taxes on investment fund managers

and some multinational companies. Also on the table: Requiring lawyers, doctors and other service providers to pay Medicare taxes on income they receive through their businesses.

The overall cost of the bill will likely top \$100 billion, with the unemployment benefits and health insurance subsidies adding to the budget deficit.

The tax increases could raise more than \$50 billion over the next decade, though lawmakers cautioned they are still working on the details.

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(We apologize if anyone was inadvertently left out, your support is greatly appreciated.)

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