

BRIEFS
NATION

WASHINGTON
Fed: Community banks in good fiscal health

The rapid growth in commercial real-estate loans made by community banks bears watching, even as these mostly smaller, local banks remain in good overall financial health, Federal Reserve Chairman Ben Bernanke warned Wednesday.



BERNANKE

"In most local markets, commercial real-estate loans have performed well," Bernanke said. "Our examiners tell us that lending standards are generally sound" and are not comparable to the lax standards that contributed to the savings and loan crisis two decades ago, he said.

The growth of commercial real-estate loans "raises the possibility that risk-management practices in community banks may not have kept pace with growing concentrations and may be due for upgrades in oversight," he said.

TEXAS
Fewer teen abortions tied to parental notification

Abortion rates declined significantly among Texas girls — though some got riskier abortions later in pregnancy — after the state enacted a parental notification law, researchers say.

Researchers at Baruch College at City University of New York studied the records of teen abortions and births for the two years before the Texas law took effect on Jan. 1, 2000, and for three years afterward.

Abortion rates dropped for girls ages 15 through 18. But the drop was more pronounced among the younger girls. Their rates fell 11 percent to 20 percent more than the rate among the 18-year-olds did.

WASHINGTON
Federal bill could erase state food-safety laws

Consumer groups are fighting federal legislation giving Washington veto power over food-safety laws in the states.

They say more than 200 such state laws, ranging from those prohibiting sales of raw milk to warnings about eating raw seafood, would be wiped away by the legislation.

The food industry, which is pushing for the change, says the measure aims to establish a unified national policy for food labeling by requiring states to gain approval from the U.S. Food and Drug Administration for any food-safety laws.

The measure is already co-sponsored by 226 members of the House, and is expected to pass when it comes up for a vote.

WASHINGTON
Key senator questions health savings accounts

The Senate's top tax writer cast doubt Wednesday that lawmakers can enact President Bush's proposals to expand health savings accounts during this election year.

Senate Finance Committee Chairman Charles Grassley, R-Iowa, said Republicans and Democrats have pointed to problems in health care and said that the answer is more tax subsidies. "Instead of charging down that path, however, we need to take a step back," he said.

Grassley also said any effort to expand the health savings accounts, which few Democrats support, would need special protections sometimes given to tax bills. Those protections block opponents from filibustering a bill. Lawmakers do not plan to give tax cuts those special protections this year.

Bush makes visit to Gulf Coast

President looking to allocate funds for Louisiana

By NEDRA PICKLER
THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

NEW ORLEANS

Six months after Hurricane Katrina, President Bush got a close-up look Wednesday at the mountains of debris, abandoned homes and boarded-up businesses that he said are shocking reminders of the pain and agony New Orleans endures still.

In the devastated Lower Ninth Ward, few residents were around to tell Bush how they felt. But two young women held up a sign for his motorcade that said, "Where's my government?"

The president scaled down the enthusiastic assessment he made on his last trip to New Orleans in January, when he suggested this city would be a great place for



AP PHOTO

President Bush views debris in the Lower Ninth Ward in New Orleans, La., on Wednesday during a visit for a progress report.

Americans to bring their families and have their conventions. This time, Bush discussed the hard work ahead.

He said Congress must come forward with money for rebuilding New Orleans and its broken levee system.

"I'm getting a view of the progress that is being made," Bush said. "There's still a lot of work to be done, no question about it."

A key House panel was set on Tuesday to approve \$4.2 billion in flexible community development funds for hurricane-related housing projects, but lawmakers dedicated that money to all states affected by Katrina.

Bush said Congress must allocate all that money just to help compensate Louisianans whose homes were damaged or destroyed.

Bush also criticized Congress'

earlier diversion of \$1.5 billion in levee-rebuilding money to non-New Orleans-related projects, saying lawmakers "shortchanged the process" of rebuilding the city. He said Congress must reverse the decision, even as lawmakers were poised to do so.

The House bill, part of a \$19.1 billion measure for new Katrina relief spending, provides \$1.5 billion in various Army Corps of Engineers water projects, chiefly for rebuilding New Orleans' levee systems.

Some independent experts have suggested that the Army Corps of Engineers is taking shortcuts and using shoddy materials to meet the president's June 1 deadline to rebuild the levees.

The agency denies those allegations and Bush said the levees will be "equal or better than what they were before Katrina."

"We fully understand that if the people don't have confidence in the levee system, they're not going to want to come back," Bush said.

"People aren't going to want to spend money or invest."

102 Dublin priests suspected of abuse

By SHAWN POGATCHNIK
THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

DUBLIN, Ireland

The Roman Catholic Church in Ireland, rocked for a decade by sex scandals, on Wednesday made its biggest admission yet: 102 of its Dublin priests, past and present, or 3.6 percent of the total, are suspected of abusing children.

The disclosure comes a week before the government convenes a probe into how church and state authorities conspired to cover up decades of child abuse within the Dublin priesthood.

"It's very frightening for me to

"I know that the vast majority of priests don't abuse ... that they're extremely upset and offended by what's happened."

Archbishop Diarmuid Martin
a Vatican diplomat assigned to Dublin to address the abuse problem

see that in some of these cases, so many children were abused. It's very hard to weigh that up against anything," said Archbishop Diarmuid Martin, a Vatican diplomat assigned to Dublin in 2003 to

address the problem in Ireland's largest Catholic congregation.

Since his appointment, the archdiocese has been going over the personnel records of more than 2,800 priests who have worked in Dublin since 1940.

The conclusion: 102 are suspected of abusing children, 32 have been sued, and eight have been convicted of criminal offenses.

While the church has been on the legal and moral defensive in the United States during recent years, the sense of uproar and disillusionment has been more profound in Ireland, a predominantly Catholic country that once exported priests worldwide.

Here, church and state were intertwined until the 1970s, a breakup being accelerated by the abuse fallout.

Wednesday's report said Dublin church officials had positively identified at least 350 abuse victims and "a possible further 40 persons who may have been abused but who it is not yet possible to identify or trace."

Martin discussed the findings in private over the past few weeks with groups of Dublin priests.

"I know that the vast majority of priests don't abuse, that they do good work, that they're extremely upset and offended by what's happened," he said.

If punished by U.N., Iran promises U.S. harm, pain

By GEORGE JAHN
THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

VIENNA, Austria

Iran threatened the United States with harm and pain Wednesday if the U.S. tries to use the U.N. Security Council as a new and potent lever to punish Tehran for its suspect nuclear program.

Washington warned that Tehran has enough nuclear material for up to 10 atomic bombs.

The rhetoric reflected the intensity of the debate at a meeting of the International Atomic Energy's 35-nation board over a critical report on Iran's nuclear program.

The meeting ended late Wednesday, formally opening the path to Security Council action that could range from a mild statement urging compliance to sanctions or even military measures.

But Mohamed ElBaradei, the head of the IAEA, the U.N. nuclear

watchdog, cast approaching Security Council involvement as a continuation of diplomacy with Iran.

ElBaradei also suggested that Washington might need to talk to Tehran directly if negotiations reach the stage of focusing on security guarantees to Tehran in exchange for concessions on its nuclear program.

"Once we start to discuss security issues my personal view (is) that at one point the U.S. should also be engaged into a dialogue," ElBaradei told reporters.

Tehran and Washington broke diplomatic relations shortly after Iranian radicals seized the U.S. Embassy and took diplomats there hostage in 1979.

While the United States has swung support behind negotiations with Iran conducted in recent months by Russia and by France, Britain and Germany, it has refused direct contacts.

Iran claims its nuclear program is peaceful and only aimed at generating electricity, but an increasing number of countries have come to share the U.S. view that Tehran is seeking to develop atomic weapons.



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