

# GOP rejects benefit limits

President's proposed Social Security cuts not well received

By DAVID ESPO  
THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

## WASHINGTON

Congressional Republicans on Wednesday shunned President Bush's election-year call to cut Social Security benefits, and one committee chairman accused the administration of seeking to end "a pittance for widows and widowers."



BUSH

"I have no plans to pursue these proposals," said GOP Sen. Charles Grassley of Iowa, chairman of the Senate Finance Committee.

The budget that Bush submitted to Congress on Monday proposes eliminating a \$255 lump-sum death benefit that has been part of Social Security for more than 50 years. It also urges Congress to cut off monthly survivor benefits to 16- and 17-year-old high school dropouts.

If approved, the two proposals would save a combined \$3.4 billion over the next decade, according to administration estimates.

Based on early reaction, or lack of it, prospects for congressional passage seemed remote.

Democrats hastened to criticize the proposals Tuesday and continued their attack into a second day.

Both Senate Majority Leader Bill Frist, R-Tenn., and House Speaker Dennis Hastert, R-Ill., were quick to applaud Bush's overall budget proposals Monday, but their aides declined repeated requests over two days for comments on the president's suggested change in Social Security.

Rep. Bill Thomas, R-Calif., chairman of the House Ways and Means Committee, also offered no reaction.

Sen. Jon Kyl, R-Ariz., a member of the Senate GOP leadership, said, "I haven't looked at that," adding he was unable to offer an opinion.

As the Finance Committee chairman, Grassley has jurisdiction over Social Security, and he made clear the administration's proposals would not be on the year's agenda.

"The administration didn't consult with me on these proposals. Even if someone had, I'd be hard-pressed to give them a second look," he said in a statement.

"I can't see how ending a pittance for widows and widowers, and modest benefits for kids who have lost a parent, would be good policy decisions," Grassley said.

Bush's budget also renewed his call for a complete overhaul of Social Security, including creation of personal savings accounts and a reduction in future benefits promised to younger workers.

Despite congressional majorities strengthened in the last elections, Republicans flinched from his proposals a year ago, and legislation failed to make it to the floor of either the House or Senate.

## BRIEFS WORLD

CAIRO, Egypt

### Hamas restricts Abbas in changing government

Hamas warned Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas on Wednesday not to make changes in the government without consulting it, the first clear sign the Islamic militant group plans to play hardball as both sides begin to jockey for positions in the new leadership.

Exiled political leader Khaled Mashaal reiterated that Hamas would not bow to Arab and international pressure to recognize Israel and that the group, once in power, would not act to prevent militant attacks on the Jewish state.

Mashaal took the tough stance after three days of talks between Hamas leaders and Egyptian officials — the group's first diplomatic foray seeking Arab support since it scored a surprise victory in Palestinian elections on Jan. 25.

Hoping to avert a collapse of the peace process, Egyptian officials had said ahead of the talks that they would urge Hamas to recognize Israel and build a coalition government with Abbas' more moderate Fatah party.

But Mashaal, who is based in Damascus, and other Hamas leaders appeared confident in their strength, offering at most a continuation of the truce in anti-Israeli attacks that they called a year ago.

PORT-AU-PRINCE, Haiti

### Vote count gets under way in Haiti

Guarded by U.N. troops, mules carrying sacks of ballots trotted down from mountain villages Wednesday as authorities began the slow process of collecting and tabulating election results.

Scores of U.N. peacekeepers patrolled quiet streets of the capital, Port-au-Prince, as Haitians eagerly awaited the returns from Tuesday's vote, the first since a bloody uprising ousted former President Jean-Bertrand Aristide two years ago.

The polls, guarded by the 9,000-strong U.N. force, were fraught with delays early in the day but largely free of the violence that has plagued the capital since Aristide fled.

The leading contender heading into the vote was Rene Preval, a 63-year-old agronomist and former president widely supported by Haiti's poor masses. The shy, soft-spoken Preval, Haiti's only



AP PHOTO

A Haitian electoral worker marks ballot boxes before they're transported to the tabulation center. Supervising is a Canadian Police officer, right, a day after the elections in Port-au-Prince, Haiti, on Wednesday.

leader to finish his elected term, is a former ally of Aristide, who is in exile in South Africa.

Preval's closest rivals include Charles Henri Baker, 50, a wealthy garment factory owner, and Leslie Manigat, 75, who was president for five months in 1988 until the army ousted him.

LAGOS, Nigeria

### First African outbreak of bird flu strain reported

Africa's first outbreak of the deadly bird flu virus was reported Wednesday in a large commercial farm in Nigeria that raised chickens, geese and ostriches, and 46,000 birds were slaughtered.

International health officials called for help to prevent the spread of the disease on the world's poorest continent, where governments are ill-equipped to combat it.

Nigeria said the outbreak was on a farm in Jaji, a village in the northern state of Kaduna. Agriculture Minister Adamu Bello told reporters the deadly H5N1 strain of the virus was detected in samples taken Jan. 16 from birds on the farm.

Nigeria, Africa's most populous nation with 130 million people, said it would work aggressively to halt the flow of any sick birds to unaffected zones. But farmers accused the government of being slow to respond.

Alex Thiermann, an expert with the Paris-based World Organization for Animal Health, said it was not known how the virus entered Nigeria, but migratory waterfowl likely played a role because the country is on a major flyway.

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