

BRIEF
STATE

INDIANAPOLIS

WellPoint's profits
increase 23 percent

A year of strong enrollment growth forecast to continue through 2007 lifted WellPoint Inc.'s fourth-quarter profits by 23 percent, the nation's largest health insurer reported Wednesday.

The licensee of Blue Cross and Blue Shield plans in California, New York, Ohio and 11 other states said its earnings rose to \$801.1 million, or \$1.28 per share, during the three months ended Dec. 31. That compared with \$652 million, or \$1.04 per share, during the fourth quarter of 2005, when WellPoint Inc. closed on its purchase of WellChoice Inc.

The latest results include a penny per share in net realized investment gains, compared with a penny per share in investment losses a year ago. Operating revenues during the fourth quarter rose 29 percent to \$14.3 billion, compared with \$11.1 billion during the year-ago period, the company said.

Revenues grew 29 percent to \$14.56 billion compared with \$11.29 billion during the last quarter of 2005. The growth was led by a 30 percent gain in health care revenues to \$13.77 billion.

BRIEFS
NATION

ATLANTA

Home Depot lowers
salary for top executive

The Home Depot Inc. is paying new Chief Executive Frank Blake a fraction of what it paid his predecessor, Bob Nardelli, and has taken the unusual step of promising Blake no severance package if he leaves.

But executive compensation experts don't expect the decision announced Wednesday by the world's largest home improvement store chain to set a trend in corporate America, despite the ire that hefty salaries have drawn among investors.

"I wish it were a trend," said Lowell Peterson, a New York labor attorney who is familiar with executive compensation issues. "I suspect it's unique to Home Depot because the pay and severance package given to Nardelli was so out of line."

Atlanta-based Home Depot said in a regulatory filing that Blake could earn as much as \$8.9 million in total compensation this year.

NEW ORLEANS

New Orleans in need of
teachers after Katrina

Some of New Orleans' most desperate, run-down schools are beset with a severe shortage of teachers, and they are struggling mightily to attract candidates by appealing to their sense of adventure and desire to make a difference. Education officials are even offering to help new teachers find housing.

"There's been an incredible outpouring of sympathy toward New Orleans. We feel we're trying to say, 'Here's a clear path to go down if you want to act on that emotion,'" said Matthew Candler, chief executive of the nonprofit New Schools for New Orleans, which is trying to recruit teachers.

The school system in New Orleans was in desperate condition even before Hurricane Katrina struck 17 months ago, with crumbling buildings, low test scores and high dropout rates.

After the storm, some of the worst of the worst public schools were put under state control, and those are the ones finding it particularly hard to attract teachers. The 19 schools in the state-run Recovery School District have 8,580 students and about 540 teachers, or about 50 fewer than they need — a shortage so severe that about 300 students who want to enroll have been put on a waiting list.

AUSTIN, Texas

Prosecutors: DeLay can be
charged with conspiracy

Prosecutors attempting to restore a conspiracy charge against former House Majority Leader Tom DeLay argued Wednesday that the language of Texas law means he can be charged with conspiring to violate the election code.

But lawyers for DeLay and two co-defendants told the Court of Criminal Appeals the law is clear in their view — that conspiracy was added to the state election code after prosecutors allege the crime happened.

"Historically, there have been limitations on the use of conspiracy laws," said DeLay's attorney, Dick DeGuerin of Houston.

Travis County District Attorney Ronnie Earle's office is appealing lower court rulings that threw out the charge accusing DeLay and Republican fund-raisers Jim Ellis and John Colyandro of conspiring to violate the Texas election code and its ban on corporate campaign contributions.

Panel dismisses troop buildup

Foreign relations committee: Bush's strategy not in national interest

By DAVID ESPO

THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

WASHINGTON

In a calculated snub of President Bush, the Democratic-controlled Senate Foreign Relations Committee dismissed plans for a troop buildup in Iraq on Wednesday as not in the national interest of the United States.

"The president has made his decision," Vice President Dick Cheney fired back, a response that made it clear the administration would go ahead anyway. "We need to get the job done."

The committee vote, 12-9 along party lines, capped hours of debate in which Republicans and Democrats vented their frustration and anger, both with the administration and their own past unwillingness to change the course of a war that has claimed the lives of more than 3,000 U.S. troops.

"There is no strategy. This is a pingpong game with American lives," said Republican Sen. Chuck Hagel of Nebraska.

"This Congress was never meant to be a rubber stamp," added Sen. Barbara Boxer, D-Calif., "Read the Constitution. The Congress has the power to



Senate Foreign Relations Committee members, Sen. Chuck Hagel, R-Neb., left, and Sen. Richard Lugar, R-Ind., take part in a debate on an Iraq war resolution Wednesday on Capitol Hill in Washington.

declare war. And on multiple occasions, we used our power to end conflicts."

Hagel was the only one of 10 committee Republicans to support the nonbinding measure. Several of the panel's 11 Democrats said they favored stronger legislation to register their opposition to the war.

In the wake of midterm election losses, Bush announced two

weeks ago that he would order an additional 21,500 troops into the war zone. In Tuesday night's State of the Union address, he implored skeptical lawmakers to give the strategy a chance.

Bush got his answer in less than 24 hours, the timing dictated by Democrats, and Sen. Joseph Biden, D-Del., the panel's chairman, said tougher measures were likely to follow.

"Unless the president demonstrates very quickly that he is unlikely to continue down the road he's on, this will be only the first step. ... I will be introducing ... constitutionally legitimate, binding pieces of legislation. We will bring them up," he said.

Taken together, the committee's vote and Cheney's response suggested the Democrats and the White House are on a collision course, lawmakers drafting ever-stronger measures to change policy in Iraq, and the president exercising his prerogatives as commander in chief and his veto pen.

"We are moving forward," Cheney said in an interview with CNN in which he was asked about the troop buildup. "The Congress has control over the purse strings. They have the right, obviously, if they want, to cut off funding. But in terms of this effort, the president has made his decision."

The vice president added: "We've consulted extensively with them. We'll continue to consult with the Congress. But the fact of the matter is, we need to get the job done."

Inside the Senate committee, all Republicans but Hagel

opposed the measure, denying Democrats the strong bipartisan vote they had sought.

Biden, who has announced he intends to run for president in 2008, said the legislation is "not an attempt to embarrass the president. ... It's an attempt to save the president from making a significant mistake with regard to our policy in Iraq."

Democrats intend to bring the measure to the Senate floor for a vote next week, and Biden said he is willing, in the interim, to make changes in the hopes of gaining additional Republican support.

Some committee Republicans sought unsuccessfully to temper the measure before it was approved. Additionally, more than a half-dozen GOP lawmakers in the Senate have signaled interest in an alternative that merely expresses disagreement with the president's policy rather than deeming it not in the national interest.

"The thing that I'm deeply concerned about is putting American troops in the middle of this — the cross-hairs of this sectarian battle before the Iraqis" deliver on a series of promised reforms, said Sen. Norm Coleman, R-Minn.

U.S., Iraqi troops kill 30 Sunni militants, capture 27

By KIM GAMEL

THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

BAGHDAD, Iraq

U.S. and Iraqi troops battled Sunni insurgents hiding in high-rise buildings on Haifa Street in the heart of Baghdad on Wednesday, with snipers on roofs taking aim at gunmen in open windows as Apache attack helicopters hovered overhead.

Iraq said 30 militants were killed and 27 were captured.

New details also emerged about the downing of a private U.S. security company helicopter on Tuesday, with U.S. and Iraqi officials saying four of five Americans who died in the incident were shot execution-style. Violence was unrelenting in Iraq on Wednesday, with at least 69 people killed or found dead, including 33 tortured bodies found in separate locations in Baghdad.

With President Bush pushing a plan to increase troop strength in Iraq, government spokesman Ali al-Dabbagh said the latest joint raid was aimed at clearing the Haifa Street area of "terrorists and outlaws" targeting residents. He promised such operations would continue as U.S. and Iraqi troops prepare for a broader security crackdown to

stanch the sectarian bloodletting that has turned Baghdad into a battlefield.

At 5 a.m. Wednesday, Iraqi army and American troops moved into the Sunni stronghold to launch targeted raids in a third bid this month to clear the neighborhood of militants. Armored vehicles massed along Haifa Street, where a median with trees separates four lanes of traffic lined by tall apartment houses built by Saddam Hussein for loyalists and dissidents from other Arab countries, mainly Syria.

The U.S.-Iraqi force faced fierce resistance from insurgents using hand-grenades, rocket-propelled grenades and small arms from the high-rises, the American military said. The explosions were so loud they could be heard across the capital. Black smoke rose from the area, located on the west bank of the Tigris River about a mile north of the Green Zone, site of the U.S. and British embassies as well as the Iraqi government headquarters.

At one point, U.S. and Iraqi forces rushed into an office building on the edge of Haifa Street and told all the employees to go home as they fanned out and sent snipers to the roof, according to Jabbar al-Mashhadani, a Cultural Ministry spokesman.

The U.S. military said the combined force in the operation, dubbed Tomahawk Strike II, detained seven suspected insurgents and seized heavy weapons, including many rocket-propelled grenades, anti-tank rounds and 155 mm artillery rounds. The Iraqi Defense Ministry said 30 insurgents were killed and 27 were captured, including four Egyptians and a Sudanese.

At least one civilian was killed and seven were wounded, hospital and police officials said.

The military reported separately that an American soldier was killed Wednesday in clashes near the city's center, but officials declined to give more specifics or say whether the death was connected to the Haifa

Street fighting. Two U.S. Marines also were reported killed on Tuesday during combat in Anbar province, the military said.

Haifa Street, a major avenue in central Baghdad, was built in the late 1970s and cuts through the neighborhood where Saddam attended school as a teenager and where he once lived with his maternal uncle and future father-in-law.

It has been the site of repeated clashes, including a major battle Jan. 9, just three days after Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki announced his new security plan for pacifying Baghdad. Fighting broke out again about a week later.

A bronze statue of Iraq's late King Faisal on horseback sits at one end of the broad avenue. During a visit to the neighborhood after the 1991 Gulf war, residents complained to Saddam about their poverty, prompting him to order homes demolished and new apartment complexes built.

Just off Haifa Street is a square where a large statue for Saddam's cousin and brother-in-law, Adnan Khairallah, still stands. It was widely believed that Saddam was behind Khairallah's death in a helicopter crash in 1989 because the defense minister was becoming too popular.

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Police say
mother called
family during
abduction

By TOM COYNE

THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

ELKHART

A man accused of abducting his ex-girlfriend and their four children allowed her to call her family during the ordeal, and she used a code word to let relatives know she was in danger, police said.

The ex-boyfriend, Jerry White, is accused of bursting into Kimberly Walker's home Saturday, shooting one man and kidnapping Walker and the children, ages 16 months to 9 years old. On Tuesday, police found the family safe at a motel near Walker's home and arrested White.

White had been convicted of attacking Walker in the past, so when Walker contacted relatives, they knew by a code word established before the abduction that she was not all right.

"When she didn't respond properly, we knew this wasn't something she was willingly doing," Detective Sgt. Bill Wargo said Wednesday.

Wargo would not say when the family established the code or how long it had been in use. But records show White and Walker had a troubled past.

In August 2004, White was sentenced to 18 months in prison in Illinois after being convicted of attacking Walker, said Tandra Simon, a spokeswoman for the Cook County State's Attorney's office.

A witness said White grabbed Walker at a bus stop in Chicago, hit her, tied her hands and forced her inside a van, where he choked her. White was convicted of felony domestic battery.

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