

Direct hit
Three Kings' adds new twists to Gulf War
Movies, E1

Money men
Bradley outduels Gore on the fund-raising circuit
Nation, A11

Life cycles
Kristin Armstrong on the long road to parenthood
Life & Arts, F1

Forecast
High 84 Low 47
Mostly sunny. Details, B12

Austin American-Statesman

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Arrests likely in yogurt shop killings

Police have 4 suspects in 1991 deaths of 4 teens

By LAYLAN CORLEW American-Statesman Staff

Police are preparing to arrest four suspects in Austin's most haunting crime of the past decade, the 1991 slaying of four teenage girls at a North Austin yogurt shop.

Police declined official comment Thursday night, but people close to the investigation say two suspects have given confessions detailing what happened the night of Dec. 6, 1991, when Jennifer Harbison, 17, Harbison's sister, Sarah, 15, Eliza Thomas, 17, and

Major events in the yogurt shop case.

Any Avers, 13, were killed. The suspects, now all adults, do not live in Austin, said a high-ranking law enforcement official who spoke Thursday night on condition of anonymity. Two suspects live in Texas and two live elsewhere in their family members, however, have appeared before a Travis County grand jury. With Dec. 6, 1991, when Jennifer Harbison, 17, Harbison's sister, Sarah, 15, Eliza Thomas, 17, and



more time to checking out old tips, and steady work by a dedicated group of detectives led to the recent break in the case. The high-ranking official said no arrests have been made because "you don't want to solve just part of the case. We know if we had arrested two of them right away, the other two would clean up. We have to bring all four to justice." Investigators questioned one of

For years, unsolved murders 'ripped a hole in Austin's soul'

By BOB BANTA American-Statesman Staff

They could have been anyone's daughters. Even though Jennifer and Sarah Harbison, Eliza Thomas and Any Avers died in a strip shopping center in North Austin, their murders awakened the unspoken anxieties of parents everywhere.

The event sparked fears everywhere that no one is safe from a random killer. "A crime like this can create a panic," said E. Mark Warr, a University of Texas criminologist interviewed two weeks after the

deaths. "It suggests that the risk of being 'retained' has suddenly increased, at least as we understood the danger all along."

Eight years later, with reports that police have finally arrived at four suspects, they believe killed the girls, the pain of what happened that December night still burns in the hearts of the public. "It ripped a hole in Austin's soul," Travis County District Attorney Ronnie Kirk said Thursday night. His office would prosecute any charges. Not since Charles Whitman

New Circle C development can use older water rules

High court ruling may not have big impact at subdivision

By RAHMI K.M. HAUMTZ American-Statesman Staff

Portions of the Circle C Ranch subdivision in Southwest Austin can be developed under 14-year-old water-quality regulations, the Texas Supreme Court ruled Thursday in a 4-4 decision. But the decision allowing construction under runoff and density rules much less stringent than current standards might not have much practical impact at Circle C, which has long been a focus of criticism by environmental activists opposed to extensive development in the Barton Springs watershed.

The state Legislature this spring granted developers throughout Texas the right in certain cases to pursue projects under older rules — basically the same relief the court has narrowly granted. In addition, a water-quality protection plan being drafted by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, largely in response to the Legislature's action, could render moot both the court ruling and the new state law. Federal rules would override local or state rules deemed by the service to be inadequate to protect the endangered Barton Springs salamander. The small amphibians live only in Barton Springs and other spring outlets in Zilker Park.

The court's action is nonetheless a victory for Circle C Land Corp., a unit of Austin-based Stratus Properties Inc. Stratus owns about 1,000 acres on which it has said it intends to develop office, retail and multifamily projects. Single-family residential development at Circle C is overseen by a separate ownership group represented by Gary Bradley, a longtime local developer.

The legal question concerned a 1987 state law that said a project must be governed by the rules in effect when the first permit application was filed. Justice Greg Abbott, writing for the majority, said that must mean that four subdivision applications filed by Circle C Land in 1986 fall under the rules in effect at that time. The city and the Save Our Springs Alliance argued that the law should not apply to permit applications

Japan on alert after radiation leak



Power plant workers in Japan check the radioactivity level of a boy Thursday after a radiation leak at a uranium processing facility in Tokamura. The plant was not designed to block the escape of radiation, the company said.

900,000 told to stay indoors after workers poured too much uranium into tank

By HOWARD W. FRENCH The New York Times

TOKYO — In the worst accident in Japan's troubled history with nuclear power, an out-of-control chain reaction at a fuel processing plant about 50 miles northwest of Tokyo spewed high levels of radiation into the air beginning Thursday morning. Thirty-five people were exposed, three of whom were seriously injured, and 300,000 nearby residents were ordered to stay indoors.

The mistake reportedly caused a flash of blue light inside the plant, owned by Sumitomo Metal Mining Co. Scientists said the flash may have been the result of a fast chain reaction of radiation, the company said.

The plant was not designed to block the escape of radiation, company officials said. Tokyo Electric Power Co. rushed 800 pounds of sodium bicarbonate to the plant but the workers said they had no way of getting close enough to the processing tank to dump the radiation-absorbing powder onto it.

When initial efforts to stop the reaction failed, the government ordered residents of areas near the plant in the town of Tokamura to stay indoors. A primary school, a kindergarten, and several shops and homes were all within the affected area. For most of the day Thursday,

Metric mistake caused loss of Mars spacecraft

By KERRY SAUVEN The Washington Post

WASHINGTON — NASA's Mars Climate Orbiter was lost in space last week because engineers failed to make a simple conversion from English units to metric, an embarrassing lapse that sent the \$125 million craft fatally close to the Martian surface, investigators said Thursday.

Officials are scrambling to determine whether a similar error is buried in the computer files of two other spacecraft currently cruising through space: the Mars Polar Lander, scheduled to hit the Martian surface Dec. 8, and the Mars craft bound for a comet.

Quake rattles southern Mexico

At least 11 die as tremor sends residents fleeing from buildings

By SUSAN FRENSS Associated Press/Washington Post Staff

MEXICO CITY — A powerful earthquake rumbled through southern Mexico early Thursday, causing at least 11 deaths, damaging thousands of buildings and triggering other tremors in Mexico City to sway.

The quake struck at 11:30 a.m. CDT and was centered about 200 miles southeast of Mexico City in the sparsely populated Pacific-coastal state of Oaxaca. Damage

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See Index, A13

See Math, A13

See Japan, A6

See Quake, A7