

## NATION IN BRIEF

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Texas School Test Upheld

AUSTIN--A federal judge rejected a challenge to Texas's standardized high school graduation exam yesterday, saying the test is legally permissible despite "inescapable" and "disconcerting" evidence that black and Latino students fail the exam in disproportionately large numbers.

Ruling in a lawsuit filed by the Mexican American Legal Defense and Educational Fund in San Antonio on behalf of seven students who were denied diplomas because they failed the test, U.S. District Judge Edward C. Prado noted that "in every administration of [the exam] since October 1990, Hispanic and African American students have performed significantly worse . . . than majority students." But he said the disparity does not result from flaws in the test's content or in the way that the exam is administered. More than 80 percent of students who have failed the TAAS exam since 1990 have been black or Latino. But Prado said he found it "highly significant that minority students have continued to narrow the passing rate gap at a rapid rate.

Attorneys for the students said they had not decided whether to appeal the ruling.

### FBI Probes Racist Mail

CHARLOTTE--The FBI is investigating a spate of racist hate mail sent to civil rights groups and black colleges in five southern states in recent weeks threatening escalating violence against blacks and Jews, an FBI spokeswoman said yesterday.

The obscenity-laden letters, which refer to Rahowa , or racial holy war--the battle cry of the white supremacist World Church of the Creator--were mailed from Fayetteville, N.C., in late December. A similar antisemitic letter, with a swastika at the bottom, was received by 18 of the 36 offices of the American Jewish Committee around the country, a group spokeswoman said. Letters to two of the black colleges contained threats against civil rights leader Jesse L. Jackson and expletives directed at basketball star Michael Jordan, boxing legend Muhammad Ali and the late Rev. Martin Luther King Jr.

### Florida Death Penalty Bill

TALLAHASSEE--Florida lawmakers passed a bill yesterday aimed at cutting in half the number of years that condemned inmates spend appealing death sentences by limiting them to two appeals and requiring the second to be filed within six months of the first. Gov. Jeb Bush (R) said he would sign the measure and one approved Thursday making lethal injection--instead of electrocution--the state's primary method of execution.

\* DALLAS--Tommy Lynn Sells, 35, was charged with capital murder and attempted capital murder in the knife attack New Year's Eve on Kaylene Harris, 13, as she and a friend, Krystal Surles, 10, lay asleep in the Harris family's mobile home near Del Rio, Tex. Texas Rangers said Sells gave them details about six other slayings he allegedly committed in North Carolina, Alabama, Arkansas and California and sexual assaults and beatings of women across the nation. He also faces rape, kidnapping and capital murder charges in Kentucky for the rape and slaying of Haley McHone, 13, in Lexington in May.

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