

Mushroom cloud

U.S. intelligence officials tell us there is no evidence indicating North Korea conducted a nuclear test earlier this month.

Furthermore, the Defense Intelligence Agency doesn't think there was even an explosion of any kind at a remote region near North Korea's border with China.

"We have so many sensors that we would have detected it," one Pentagon official said.

The official noted that the explosion of a train in North Korea last April that killed as many as 3,000 people was detected by intelligence sensors. However, there was no similar sensor pickups of the reported blast.

A U.S. official said the leading theory now is that the mushroom cloud was an unusual cloud formation.

"We don't have evidence that points to it being an explosion," this official said.

"That said, it may have been weather-related, such as a peculiar cloud formation that resembled a mushroom cloud."

Satellite photographs showed the cloud was shaped like the mushroom cloud commonly resulting from an above-ground nuclear blast.

Frank question

"I'm wondering when the political process has been exhausted? We know these countries, these rogue nations are developing nuclear weapons underneath our noses, and when are we going to go in there and whip their butts?" — Question last week from 101st Airborne Division soldier to Defense Secretary Donald H. Rumsfeld.

Frank answer

"For the most part, the United States of America and our friends and allies were organized, trained and equipped to fight big armies and big navies and big air forces. And that's not what we're doing today. Today we're chasing individuals. Today we're chasing small clusters of 10, 20, 30, 40 people. Today we're chasing suicide bombers. Today we're dealing with people who chop off people's heads. These extremists, these fanatics have to be dealt with, and they have to be stopped, and the full weight of the national power of this country and the other nations in the coalition are being organized to do exactly that."

— Defense Secretary Donald H. Rumsfeld.

Military votes

The Bush-Cheney campaign is making a major effort to get out the military vote — a likely



Associated Press

If elected, Democratic Sen. John Kerry seems certain to move to lift the military's ban on homosexuals.

base of support for the president.

The campaign recently distributed an e-mail "action alert" to friends and families of military members. "If you have a loved one serving in the military, please forward this message to them and let them know that there is still time to vote via absentee ballot," the notes state.

The message says that there are more than 1 million men and women of voting age serving overseas or in the United States who are away from their homes.

The e-mail gives instructions on how to mail or fax absentee ballots.

Absentee voters must request an absentee ballot from local elections officials. The ballot must then be mailed or faxed to the election official.

Details can be obtained from www.fvap.gov.

Gay debate

Based on his past comments, it seems certain that Democratic presidential candidate Sen. John Kerry will move to lift the military's ban on open homosexuals, if he becomes commander in chief.

Elaine Donnelly, who runs the Center for Military Readiness, has compiled the Kerry record in her current publication of CMR Notes.

"Sen. John Kerry, now the Democratic presidential nominee, voted against legislation to ban homosexuals from the military, and made several on-the-record statements that revealed an elitist and sometimes disdainful attitude toward anyone disagreeing

with his views," Mrs. Donnelly writes.

President Clinton triggered a free-for-all debate in Washington shortly after taking office. He moved unilaterally to lift the ban, only to be slapped back by Democratic Sen. Sam Nunn, then-Senate Armed Services Committee chairman, and a number of like-minded lawmakers.

The debate's end in 1993 was ironic. Mr. Clinton signed the ban into law, whereas before it was simply policy. This means a President Kerry would have to seek Congress' legislative OK. Mr. Clinton did achieve one change: a new policy known as "don't ask, don't tell" forbids the military from asking a recruit if he or she is homosexual.

Mr. Kerry made his views clear in testimony before Mr. Nunn's committee. Mrs. Donnelly has included excerpts in CMR Notes.

In his testimony, Mr. Kerry backed a single standard of conduct for homosexuals and heterosexuals, although the military outlaws homosexual acts. "So the standard of behavior ought to be one officer's club, one enlisted, one sort of standard within there, and if somebody wants to walk around holding hands, we are big enough to tolerate that," the senator said. "I mean, for God's sake, men were dancing with men in the war when they did not have any women around."

Of opponents, Mr. Kerry testified, "The reality is that if you examine the opposition today . . . they are making their measurement within the context of a leader-supported status quo. They are measuring the effect, and you are listening to opinions that are heavily weighted by licensed hate, by licensed fear, by licensed confusion, by licensed misunderstanding, and even by licensed ignorance, and the reaction to that, of course, is going to be negative, as it was to letting women in, to letting blacks in, and so forth."

Beslan lessons

A special-operations source has provided us with a quick appraisal of what went wrong, militarywise, in the Beslan, Russia, school hostage blood-bath.

For one, Russian's premiere counterterrorism unit, Alfa, did not arrive on the scene until less than an hour before an explosion touched off the carnage. The Alfa soldiers only had time to create a perimeter.

The mostly Chechen terrorists, who numbered about 35, planned a counterattack. They wanted to hijack an ambulance, attach explosives and have a female suicide terrorist drive the vehicle among anguished parents outside the school. Then the terrorists, who included several Arabs, would make a getaway and blow up the school from a distance. But they never had a chance to commandeer the ambulance.

Some terrorists fired at wounded children lying on the ground.

Let's get physical

Air Force veterans say one of the many flaws in the bogus anti-Bush memos that appeared on CBS is the idea that a squadron commander would write an order to a pilot to obtain a flight physical.

One of the memos purportedly obtained by retired Texas Army National Guardsman Bill Burkett and given to Dan Rather for a CBS "60 Minutes" broadcast is such an order.

We asked a Vietnam-era Air Force pilot, Nick Pishvanov, about such orders. He assured us it just isn't done. Such issues as continued flight status are worked out between the commander and the pilot.

Just to be sure, our source e-mailed his network of former Air Force pilots. All concurred on that point.

"Having spent 20 years as a regular officer and fighter pilot in the Air Force, I can substantiate everything that Lt. Col. Pishvanov said," said a retired major. "I went through the flight physical process 20 times in my 20 years and it was incumbent upon the pilot to do all of the scheduling. There were never any written orders related to annual physicals."

The White House has said that Mr. Bush sought permission to leave flight status after logging 336 hours on the F-102 fighter in 1972 so he could work on a Senate campaign in Alabama. Military records show his unit commander granted the request and he was taken off flight status in August 1972.

• Bill Gertz and Rowan Scarborough are Pentagon reporters. Mr. Gertz can be reached at 202/636-3274 or by e-mail at bgertz@washingtontimes.com. Mr. Scarborough can be reached at 202/636-3208 or by e-mail at rscarborough@washingtontimes.com.