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# The New York Times

Late Edition

New York: Today, very windy, mostly to partly cloudy, high 44. Tonight, partly cloudy, low 37. Tomorrow, partly sunny, high 48. Yesterday, high 58, low 52. Weather map, Page A11.

VOL. CLIII . No. 52,682

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NEW YORK, SATURDAY, NOVEMBER 29, 2003

ONE DOLLAR

## Apartment Glut Forces Owners To Cut Rents in Much of U.S.

By DAVID LEONHARDT

MEMPHIS, Nov. 25 — Renting an apartment in much of the country these days can feel a little like waking up on your birthday.

Waiting for the tenants in some building lobbies around Memphis every morning are free cups of Starbucks coffee. In the Atlanta suburbs, people who move into one garden-style apartment building receive \$500 gift certificates to Best Buy, the electronics chain. In Cleveland, Denver and many other cities, landlords have been giving new tenants gifts worth \$1,000 or more: one, two or even three months of rent-free living.

While rents have continued to rise in many big cities on the coasts, including New York and Los Angeles, they are falling in more than 80 percent of metropolitan areas across the country. Low interest rates in recent years have persuaded many families to move out of rented apartments and buy their first homes at the same time that developers have been putting up thousands of new rental buildings, leaving many landlords desperate to fill apartments.

The portion of apartments sitting vacant this summer rose to 9.9 percent, the highest level since the Census Bureau began keeping statistics in 1956.

"I've been doing this for 30 years, and this is the worst rental climate I've ever seen," said Leonard Richman, president of the Sunshine Corporation, which manages almost 4,000 apartments in Memphis. "Rents have gone down to where they were about three or four years ago."

The rent decreases and the enticements, which have proliferated in the last year, are helping many younger adults, who are more likely to rent than other groups and who have suffered in the hiring slump of the last three years. Between late 2001 and this summer, the average rent per square foot fell 4.8 percent across

the country, according to the National Real Estate Index, which is published by Global Real Analytics, a research company.

But the declines are also a worrisome sign that the nation's housing market has begun to suffer from some of the same problems of oversupply that have already hurt manufacturers, economists say. If mortgage rates continue increasing, as is widely expected, people who might have bought houses will instead rent. That could shift the burden of the excess supply from landlords onto homeowners, hastening the end of a decade of rapidly rising house prices.

"You're going to take the one bright light in the economy, and it will dim," said Mark Zandi, chief economist of Economy.com, a research company. "It's just a question of how much."

The biggest rent declines have occurred mostly in cities, like Memphis, where land is abundant but building regulations are not and where housing costs were already among the least expensive of the country's urban areas.

"In any city in the Southeast or Midwest, you'll drive around and see banners — 'One month off,' 'Two months off,' '\$2,000 off,'" said Mark Fogelman, president of Fogelman Management, which manages 16,000 apartments from Kansas to Florida.

Last month, Andrew H. Underwood, a 24-year-old employee of a local bank, moved into a high-ceilinged one-bedroom apartment in downtown Memphis with a view from the balcony of center field at the new minor-league ballpark across the street. He signed a 13-month lease, and though the apartment was listed at almost \$1,000 a month, he will pay only 10 months of rent.

"It seems like everyone I talk to in the building got in on a special," Mr. Underwood said. Buildings in less trendy neigh-

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With apartment vacancies rising in places like Memphis, landlords have had to lower rents and even offer a month or more rent-free.



Associated Press

## Bargain Hunting Season Opens

At 7 a.m. yesterday, Elizabeth Cupples, left, and her cousins June Delgado and Eddie Concepcion were already loading up and tying down Christmas purchases at a Toys "R" Us store in Elizabeth, N.J. Page C1.

## Coerced or Not, Palestinians Who Assist Israel Face Death

By GREG MYRE

TULKARM, West Bank — For a Palestinian accused of cooperating with Israel's security forces, confession can amount to a death sentence. But Muhammad Hilal apparently felt he had no choice.

Al Aksa Martyrs Brigades had seized Mr. Hilal, himself a member of the militant group, and interrogated him for three weeks. Now the camera was rolling. In great detail, Mr. Hilal, 23, spoke about informing on his fellow Palestinians by means of furtive cellphone calls to his Israeli handlers, allowing the security forces to track down militants here in this ragged West Bank town.

Mr. Hilal said he began working for the Israelis after he went to a military office seeking a travel permit for his mother. When it was rejected, he argued with the Israeli official and was taken to a room where a woman in an Israeli Army uniform greeted him.

"She asked me what I thought of the Palestinian uprising," Mr. Hilal said. "I said I had no business with the uprising. She put one hand on my shoulder and one on my leg and started to rub. Then she took off all her clothes. When I saw her naked like that, I had to have sex."

Afterward, Mr. Hilal said on a videotape that was distributed by Al Aksa Martyrs Brigades to interna-

tional news agencies, an Israeli officer showed him 15 photographs of the sexual encounter and demanded that he work with the Israelis or the photos would be distributed in Tulkarm.

Mr. Hilal's description of his recruitment through sexual entrapment could not be corroborated. Shin Bet, the security service that runs the informer network, declined to comment on its methods and said that as a matter of policy it would not comment on individual cases involving suspected Palestinian informants. But a former Shin Bet official strongly denied that Israel would engage in such tactics.

"As far as I know, it is never used," said Gideon Ezra, an Israeli cabinet minister who served more than 30 years in the Shin Bet security service and was the deputy head of the agency before leaving in 1995. "We can't give a man this kind of motive."

Whatever the truth, the videotape offers insights into the shadowy world of Palestinian informers, real or suspected. Israel recruits thousands of them with offers of, if not sex, money and valuable favors like travel permits or reduced jail sentences, say Palestinians, who regard

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## Iraq Exit Plan: New Obstacles

Some Fear Quick Shift Of Power Carries Risk

By STEVEN R. WEISMAN

WASHINGTON, Nov. 28 — Two weeks ago, the Bush administration settled on an "exit strategy" for Iraq in which the United States committed itself to establishing self-rule there by next summer — well ahead of its previous schedule and just as the American presidential election season will be getting under way.

But the administration's initial plan for that transfer of authority has fallen apart, raising doubts about whether the June 30 deadline for ending the American occupation authority in Baghdad is still feasible.

At stake is whether the administration can reconcile President Bush's desire for a speedy transfer of sovereignty to a friendly Iraqi government next year, with the need to have some sort of electoral process to ensure that government's validity in the eyes of Iraqis and the rest of the world.

The "process," agreed upon two weeks ago, amounted to less than an election. Instead, it was an elaborate arrangement to hold caucuses throughout Iraq and give the Iraqi Governing Council considerable oversight.

The administration's quandary sharpened this week when Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani, Iraq's senior Shiite cleric, laid down his own definition of a legitimate government. Nothing less than an election was acceptable, he declared — a demand the United

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## U.S. IS WORRIED FOE IS TRACKING TARGETS IN IRAQ

SIGNS OF EFFECTIVE SPYING

Movement of High-Level Americans Watched — Plot to Kill Colonel

By THOM SHANKER

WASHINGTON, Nov. 28 — Bush administration officials are increasingly concerned that anti-American forces in Iraq are using simple but effective means to monitor activities and coordinate attacks against the American military, civilian administrators and visiting dignitaries.

As evidence, Pentagon and military officials cite a recent raid by troops of the 101st Airborne Division during which they broke up an apparent plot to assassinate an American colonel. The would-be assailants, they said, had observed and charted the Army officer's daily routine — including his jogging route and schedule of public appearances — to plan their attack.

Evidence gathered by investigators also sheds new light on the rocket attack that struck the Rashid Hotel during the overnight visit to Baghdad by Paul D. Wolfowitz, the deputy defense secretary, in late October. Military intelligence officers have reported that the hotel staff was infiltrated over the summer by at least one former member of Saddam Hussein's secret service.

Although Pentagon, military and intelligence officials caution that some of the evidence remains circumstantial while investigations continue, these concerns help explain the extraordinary secrecy surrounding President Bush's surprise visit to Iraq on Thanksgiving Day.

American troops already vary their routes and routines, officials said, and are being encouraged to do it more. But Baghdad's infrastructure of roads and secure places to stay is limited, making it difficult to obscure actions that might allow an observant resistance to plan attacks.

"It does not require a very robust intelligence capability to pick up from time to time the presence of 'high value' American officials," said a Bush administration official with access to intelligence reports from Iraq. "It is hard to shield the large security presence that identifies senior officials in Iraq."

Investigators are reviewing recent attacks on American convoys hit by improvised explosives to see whether the routes had become so routine as to make them obvious targets. They are also examining the bombing of the United Nations headquarters in Baghdad in August, in which the explosives-packed vehicle detonated adjacent to the United Nations special representative's window.

American officials say operatives loyal to the ousted Hussein government do not require high-technology eavesdropping devices to gather substantial amounts of information on the activities of American officials. "Given the size of our footprint, you can't overestimate the amount of information you can gather just

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### Ulster Peace Pact in Peril

Northern Ireland's hard-line Democratic Unionists emerged dominant after elections that deepened the sectarian divide and cast doubt over the future of the province's power-sharing government. PAGE A3

### Russian Oil Deal Suspended

The Russian oil producer Sibneft suspended its \$13 billion merger with Russia's biggest oil company, Yukos, taking its embattled partner by surprise and rolling the country's markets. PAGE C1

### Bush Faces Fiscal Challenge

The costs of programs President Bush and Congressional Republicans have championed will make it hard to achieve his goal of cutting the deficit in half. PAGE A10

### Red Sox Add Schilling

Boston fortified its rotation by getting Curt Schilling, twice a 20-game winner, from Arizona and giving him a two-year extension on his contract. SPORTSSATURDAY, PAGE D1

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## As Obesity Rises, Health Care Indignities Multiply

By RICHARD PÉREZ-PEÑA and GRANT GLICKSON

When Mark Rosenthal suffered a stroke, he was too heavy and wide for a stretcher, so he made the jarring, bouncing dash to the hospital lying on an ambulance floor. The ride injured his back, and he felt as if his own weight would suffocate him. At the hospital, doctors wanted to give him an M.R.I. scan, but he could not fit into the machine.

But in that ordeal last June, Mr. Rosenthal's gravest humiliation came from something as simple as having to go to the bathroom. He was in no shape to walk to the cramped bathroom — he might not have been able to fit, anyway — and the hospital's portable commodes and bedpans could not hold his 450 pounds. So, he recalled, hospital workers told him to go in his bed, on himself, saying they would clean it up afterward.

"I just cried," said Mr. Rosenthal, 51, the treasurer of District Council 37, the New York City employees' union. "I refused to eat anything for six or seven days, hoping I wouldn't have to go again."

Obesity is the fastest-growing major health problem in the United States. In 2000, 31 percent of American adults were obese, up from 23 percent in 1990 and 13 percent in 1960, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

And those, like Mr. Rosenthal, who are classified as "morbidly obese" tripled in number in just a decade, to 2.2 percent of the population in 2000. The perils of morbid obesity are not limited to life-threatening ailments like Type 2 diabetes and high blood pressure; merely getting the health care other people take for granted is beyond their reach.

Severely overweight people cannot

fit into standard wheelchairs, waiting-room armchairs, blood pressure cuffs, hospital beds and gowns, or M.R.I. and CAT scan machines.

X-rays often cannot penetrate far enough into their bodies to produce useful images, and wall-mounted toilets snap off under their weight.

For the morbidly obese, trips to doctors or hospitals are more reminders that they literally do not fit, like paying for two seats on a plane, hunting for clothes, or enduring people's curiosity and derision. The indignities mean that obese people, who need medical treatment more than most, often refuse to seek it.

Teena Gamzon stayed away from doctors for so many years that by the time she finally sought treatment, her diabetes had raged out of control, sleep apnea had so ruined her nights that she spent her days in a haze, and a buildup of lymphatic fluid in her

lower legs — a common side effect of severe obesity — had caused nerve damage and permanently hobbled her.

"I can barely stand up, but the chairs in the doctor's waiting room all have arms, so I can't sit down," said Mrs. Gamzon, 55, who lives in Bergen Beach, Brooklyn, and who declined to give her weight. "I didn't fit on the gynecologist's table, and the gown wouldn't cover me. Going to the doctor was just too hard, and it was humiliating."

Obesity is defined by the Centers for Disease Control and other health experts as a body mass index of 30 or more. Morbid obesity is a B.M.I. of 40 or more, and the term "super-obese" is sometimes used for 50 or more. (B.M.I. is one's weight in pounds multiplied by 703, then divided by the

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Ruby Washington/The New York Times

Michael Hebranko uses a special wheelchair at a health care center in Queens. Many hospitals have been slow to accommodate obese patients.

## Having Reshaped Broadway, Disney Readies a Second Act

By JESSE MCKINLEY

The Walt Disney Company, with three hits already on Broadway, is preparing a second, even more ambitious assault.

The company has another three musicals nearing production, each based on a Disney movie. Having already changed Broadway, Disney may soon dominate it, with possibly as many as six musicals running simultaneously.

The most anticipated and potentially lucrative is "Mary Poppins," based on the classic P. L. Travers children's books and the 1964 movie version that starred Julie Andrews as a high-flying, umbrella-toting, chore-dispensing governess.

Disney officials, led by Thomas Schumacher, president of the company's theatrical division, have high hopes for "Poppins," which some on Broadway believe could match "The Lion King," which has grossed more than \$300 million at the New Amsterdam Theater since its opening in 1997 and more than \$1 billion worldwide.

"It's a beloved movie, just as 'The Lion King' was a beloved piece and 'Beauty and the Beast' was, and the creative talents involved are prodigious," said Gerald Schoenfeld, the chairman of the Shubert Organization, Broadway's biggest landlord.



Chang W. Lee/The New York Times  
Thomas Schumacher, the president of Disney's theater division.

"I'll tell you something: if this show is a hit in London, it will be off the charts here."

It was just a decade ago that the Walt Disney Company introduced singing and dancing spoons to the American theater. The flatware in question were characters in Disney's first musical, a version of its animated hit film "Beauty and the Beast," which had its first preview at the Theater Under the Stars in Houston on Nov. 27, 1993. Five months later, the show opened on Broadway, where it still plays today, alongside

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