

## Small Italian town ready to offer asylum to Saddam

AFP, Rome

The small southern Italian town of Soveria Mannelli is ready to offer asylum to Iraqi President Saddam Hussein and his family if he chooses to leave his country to avoid a US-led war, mayor Mario Caligiuri said Friday.

The town of 3,500 inhabitants in the mountainous Calabria region would be a peaceful haven for the embattled Iraqi leader, he said.

"The Iraqi leader would sleep peacefully here: our three policemen will watch over him day and night," he added.

"Our proposal is meant to avert war."

Caligiuri said that Saddam Berlusconi has said that he was in contact with Arab countries close to Iraq's leadership to have him go into exile.

# Arabs open summit, hope unity can prevent Iraq war

## Baghdad urged to cooperate with UN

REUTERS, Sharm El-Sheikh

Arab leaders began meetings in Egypt Saturday to try to bridge long-standing rifts and agree a unified policy on Iraq they hope can prevent a US-led war in the volatile region.

As Washington forges ahead with its massive troop build-up in the Gulf amid warnings to Iraq to disarm or face war, the one-day summit of the 22-member Arab League will try to come up with a peaceful solution to the crisis.

"We repeat our rejection of war against Iraq, or Kuwait, or any Arab state as a threat against the entire Arab nation," Lebanon's President Emile Lahoud said in a speech opening the summit.

"We have previously called upon Iraq to cooperate with the United Nations to eliminate pretexts for aggression against it, and we will not cease to call for such cooperation," he added.

The leaders will discuss a draft declaration which delegates have said includes rejection of a strike against Iraq and a possible call on Arab states to resist participating in a war.

But analysts doubt Arab leaders have the leverage to influence either Iraq or the United States, even if they can paper over differences among the deeply divided members, who range from long-time US allies to states Washington calls sponsors of terrorism.

While Arab states oppose war and fear its repercussions on their domestic stability and economies, analysts say they have a limited ability to make their disapproval felt.

Oil producers have made clear they will not use oil as a weapon, nor will US allies try to exert influence by taking the domestically popular step of kicking out US troops, analysts say.

With 22 views to take into account, analysts say the summit conclusions will boil down to the lowest common denominator.

"My expectation for the summit isn't much. They will try to postpone a war as much as possible in the hope that opportunities will arise to end the crisis," said Abdel-Moneim Said, head of Egypt's al-Ahram Centre for Political and Strategic Studies.

AP adds: Arabs opened a crisis summit on Saturday with a call on Iraq to cooperate with the United Nations in order not to provide any pretext for war and a condemnation of any possible strike on a fellow Arab state.

"We oppose a war against Iraq or any other Arab country and will regard it as a threat to the whole Arab nation," said Lebanese President Emile Lahoud, opening the summit in this Red Sea resort as he handed over the rotating Arab League presidency to Bahrain.



PHOTO: AFP

Lebanese President Emile Lahoud (L), who handed the chairmanship of the Arab League summit to Bahrain, sits next to the League's Secretary General Amr Mousa at the opening session of the Arab summit in Sharm el-Sheikh on the southern tip of Egypt's Sinai peninsula on Saturday. Leaders and officials from the 22 Arab nations opened a summit at this Red Sea resort, with plans to issue a statement proclaiming their "total rejection" of any US-led war on Iraq.

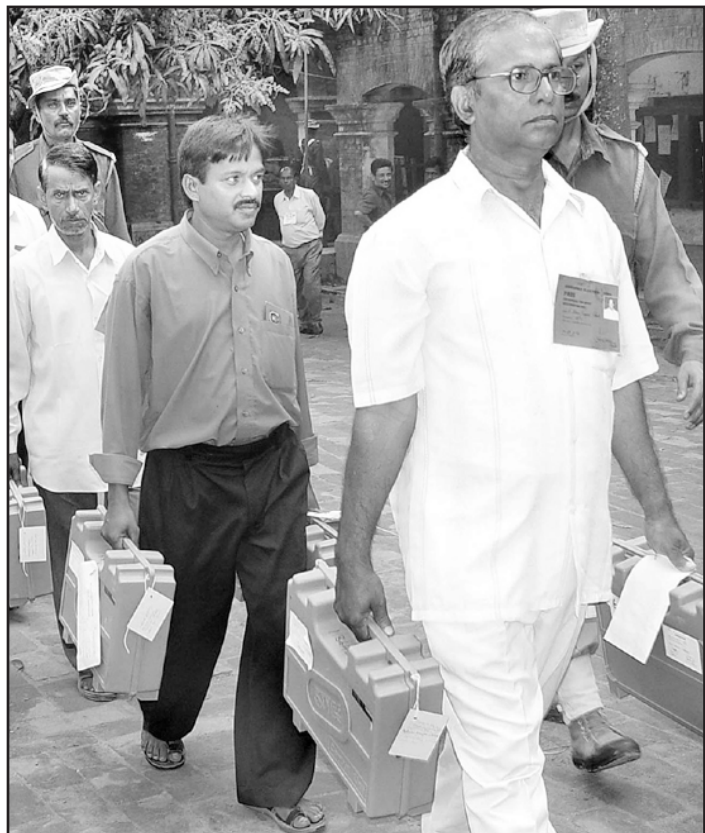


PHOTO: AFP

Election officials carry electronic voting machines to a counting centre in the capital of Tripura state Agartala on Saturday after Tripura, Meghalaya, Nagaland and Himachal Pradesh states went to the polls. According to preliminary results, India's ruling Hindu nationalists lost power in the northern state of Himachal Pradesh, in polls seen as a litmus test on the performance of Indian Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee.

## Formal Nepali truce accord to get ready by Monday

AFP, Kathmandu

Nepal's government and Maoist rebels will have a formal agreement on their month-old ceasefire ready by early next week, despite disagreements over the release of prisoners and anti-terror laws, an official said Saturday.

Government negotiator Narayan Singh Pun, the minister for physical planning and works, met Saturday for a third day with Dina Nath Sharma and Krishna Bahadur Mahara, members of the rebels' self-styled politburo.

"We're working hard on reaching a memorandum of understanding, which should be ready by Monday," Pun told reporters.

The formal agreement on the truce is considered vital before the two sides can begin formal negotiations.

The Maoists and the government reached a ceasefire January 29 that ground to a halt the violence that has left more

than 7,800 people dead since 1996.

But the two sides have been at odds on several points of the ceasefire, particularly an agreement to release thousands of prisoners taken during the conflict.

A Maoist source told AFP that the rebels were collecting information on the estimated 180-plus civilians held by guerrillas around the country.

"We believe there may also be about 5,000 Maoists in police custody or jails," he said.

The memorandum of understanding could clear up the dispute over the prisoners, although a marathon cabinet session addressed by Pun on Friday did not set a date for the release of the detained rebels.

Prime Minister Lokendra Bahadur Chand's cabinet made no comment on the withdrawal of anti-terror laws that give authorities broad powers to detain Maoist suspects and impose curfews.

The Maoists want the measures repealed before talks. The law had been enacted for two years by parliament after the last ceasefire collapsed in November 2001.

But King Gyanendra dissolved the parliament in June 2002, and three-and-a-half months later dismissed elected premier Sher Bahadur Deuba. Chand is due to serve until a new election is held, but no date has been set.

It remains unclear how the anti-terror laws could be repealed in the absence of parliament.

Former premier Girija Prasad Koirala, whose Nepali Congress was the largest party in the last parliament, said it was possible the House of Representatives could be reconvened.

That brought an angry rebuke from the Nepal Communist Party-United Marxist and Leninist, which was in opposition and would prefer new elections.

## US court stands by controversial 'under God' pledge ruling

REUTERS, Los Angeles

The US appeals court that infuriated Americans by declaring the Pledge of Allegiance unconstitutional refused to reconsider on Friday, setting the stage for a Supreme Court showdown over whether two words -- "under God" -- breach the wall separating church and state.

The decision by the US 9th Circuit Court of Appeals to stand by its stunning ruling prompted a quick reaction from the US Attorney General John Ashcroft, who said the Justice Department would "spare no effort" to defend the Pledge -- presumably by an appeal to the nation's highest court.

The Justice Department had joined the Bush administration, the US Congress, State of California and others in asking the 9th circuit to reconsider its June 26, 2002 ruling that schoolchildren could no longer recite the Pledge because of the phrase "on nation under God."

A three-member panel of the 9th Circuit, ruling 2-1 in a lawsuit by a California atheist who sued on behalf of his young daughter, found that the phrase violated the separation of church and state mandated by the US Constitution because it appeared to endorse religion.

## Bush marks Homeland Security Dept merger

AP, Washington

President Bush said this weekend's merger of employees from 22 federal agencies into a single terrorism-fighting department will bolster America's defences. Democrats accused him of not doing enough.

In the largest government reorganisation since 1947, the Homeland Security Department becomes fully operational Saturday when 170,000 employees shift from other areas of the federal bureaucracy to provide what Bush called "a united defence of our homeland."

They will patrol America's borders, analyse US intelligence, secure computer networks, check for contamination of crops, respond to emergencies and otherwise help guard against terrorism.

"Every member of this new department accepts an essential mission - to prevent another terrorist attack," Bush told Cabinet members and federal workers involved in homeland defence. "Yours is a vital and important step in reorganising the government to meet the threats of a new era as we continue to work securing this country."

For now, the change is mostly on paper. Most of the department's workers, spread across the nation,

will continue to show up for work at the same office, ship or airport as before.

Only about 10 percent - or 17,000 - work in the Washington area, and about 1,000 of them will work from the department's headquarters. The agency, with a \$33 billion first-year budget, is located at least temporarily at a secure office complex run by the Navy.

It will take months or years for the department to become fully integrated with a permanent home and an identity all its own. Even then, there are no guarantees that the new agency will prevent terrorism.

"For a vast and free nation, there is no such thing as perfect security," Bush said.

Many Democrats, including the party's presidential candidates, have accused the Bush administration of failing to devote enough money and resources to the job.

Bush said much has been done already, including hiring sky marshals and stockpiling vaccines. He also said Congress had reduced his \$3.5 billion budget request for local law enforcement and had designated part of the money for other priorities.

## Israel to authorise PLO meeting to elect PM

AFP, Jerusalem

Israel is expected to authorise next week a meeting of the Palestine Liberation Organisation (PLO) central council as part of efforts to appoint a Palestinian prime minister, public radio reported Saturday.

The meeting will be followed by one of the Palestinian Legislative Council (parliament) on March 11, during which Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat could announce the name of the prime minister, a Palestinian source said.

The Palestinian leadership has asked the Israeli authorities to allow their representatives in the West Bank and Gaza Strip to attend both meetings, the Israeli radio said.

The government has yet to reply officially to this request but sources close to the prime minister told the radio Israel would allow Palestinians "not involved in terrorism" to attend the meetings.

This would exclude a limited number of delegates.

Israel's authorisation is a must if the meetings are to get underway, because the Israeli army has reoccupied most of the West Bank and the road to the Gaza Strip cuts through Israeli territory.

Arafat is to appoint a prime minister on March 8, UN Middle East envoy Terje Roed-Larsen told reporters Friday as he was leaving a meeting with Arafat in his West Bank headquarters at Ramallah.

But a Palestinian official later told AFP the nomination would probably take place on March 11, following the Palestinian Legislative Council meeting.

Arafat, whose personal power is virtually unchecked, announced last Friday that he had agreed to appoint a prime minister.

The veteran leader has been under intense pressure over recent months, from the international community and namely the European Union, to reform his administration, amid US and Israeli accusations of widespread corruption and links to militant groups.

## San Francisco police chief, 9 others indicted

REUTERS, San Francisco

San Francisco's police chief and nine other officers were indicted on assault and conspiracy charges in connection with a brawl involving off-duty officers over a bag of Mexican takeout food, officials said on Friday.

Police Chief Earl Sanders, Assistant Chief Alex Fagan, and his son Alex Fagan Jr., along with deputy chiefs David Robinson and Greg Suhr were among the 10 officers indicted late on Thursday on charges related to the fight and an alleged cover-up.

The grand jury indictments were a blow to a department that, prior to Sanders' appointment as chief in July, had been under fire for its failure to solve crimes.

San Francisco Mayor Willie Brown, who appointed Sanders, said in a statement that the decision to prosecute the officers "came as a shock, and is deeply disturbing."



PHOTO: AFP

Pakistani President General Pervez Musharraf (L) hold talks with the visiting US Assistant Secretary of State for South Asia Christina Rocca in Islamabad on Friday. The United States and Iraq vied for fence-sitter Pakistan's support in the Iraqi crisis with rival envoys of both countries taking their cases directly to President Pervez Musharraf.

## Video shows astronauts' final minutes

AP, Space Centre

In the final minutes of their lives, Columbia's astronauts were cheerful, at times lighthearted.

They helped one another in the cockpit, collecting empty drink bags and putting on their spacesuit gloves. The two women mugged for the camera. They remarked on the blast-furnace heat outside - mere minutes before the superheated gases were about to penetrate the left wing and lead to their deaths.

The video cassette shown on NASA TV on Friday was found three weeks ago in East Texas. Among the more than 250 videos aboard Columbia - most of them to document scientific experiments - it was the only one recovered that had any recording left.

"Looks like a blast furnace," commander Rick Husband says, referring to the bright flashes

outside the cockpit windows as Columbia re-entered the atmosphere above the Pacific Feb. 1.

"Yep, we're getting some G's (gravity)," replies his co-pilot, William McCool. "Let go of the card and it falls."

"All right, we're at 100th of a G," Husband notes. McCool observes how bright it is outside and calls it amazing.

"Yeah, you definitely don't want to be outside now," Husband adds. Says Laurel Clark, seated behind them: "What, like we did before?" drawing a big laugh.

The tape ends a minute later - and a full four minutes before the first sign of trouble. The camera almost certainly continued recording. But the rest of the tape was destroyed in the accident, leaving only the initial 13 minutes of tape to be recovered from the reel, said astronaut Scott Altman. He was

commander of Columbia's previous mission, a year earlier, and is also part of NASA's investigation team.

The small digital camera was mounted at the front of the cockpit, to the right of McCool, who then handed it to Clark. She aimed it at Kalpana Chawla, the flight engineer seated next to her, and asked: "Can you look at the camera for a second? Look at me." Chawla waves at the camera. Clark turns the camera around and smiles into it.

As Columbia started its descent through the atmosphere, Clark pointed the camera at the overhead window to show the bright orange and yellow flashes from the superheated gases surrounding the spaceship as it streaked toward a landing in Florida, where all of their families waited.

## Train overturns in Taiwan: 15 killed

AP, Taipei

A tourist train overturned Saturday in central Taiwan, killing about 15 people, a television station reported. Soon afterward, a helicopter evacuating injured passengers from the site crashed.

The train was carrying at least 130 people when it derailed at around 2:15 p.m. (1:15 a.m. EST). More than 20 people were freed from under the wreckage, a witness told FTV television. Nine people were injured, several of them seriously.

The helicopter crashed shortly afterward, television reports said. It was not clear how many people on board were injured or killed.

Television footage showed train carriages lying among trees in the mountainous terrain.

The train was loaded with families on weekend outings to Alishan mountain, a popular destination for tourists in Central Taiwan's Chiayi area.

## 1,128 people killed in Thai war on drugs

AFP, Bangkok

The death toll in Thailand's month-old war on drugs has exceeded 1,128, Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra said Saturday, admitting for the first time that police might have made some mistakes.

"More than 1,100 deaths were not government orders to kill but were the work of their own gang members who feared that investigation could implicate themselves," Thaksin said in his weekly radio address.

He said police had killed another 28 people in self-defence and admitted that "bad officers" might have been involved in other killings.

"It's normal that we have some mistakes in such a big war and a few cases may be work of officers since there are some bad officers. We have to resolve the problem," he said.

He said four police officers had

been killed since the crackdown started February 1 and nine others wounded.

Authorities have arrested 76 suspects in the killings, he said.

The high death toll has provoked a torrent of criticism from rights activists, who have urged the government to investigate claims of police involvement in extra-judicial killings.

But Thaksin said the toll would not sway his government from the anti-drugs campaign but only reaffirmed its commitment to uproot the problem, with users able to order drugs "like pizzas."

"We are now at war on drugs which have already destroyed a million of our people," he said. "Don't be moved by the high death figures, we must be adamant and finish this war."

"Don't you worry about our next generations?" he asked his audience. "They are innocent people, but we are getting excited by the death toll."