INTERNÂTIONAL

French court upholds Chirac's immunity

AFP, Paris

France's highest court of appeal on Wednesday upheld presidential immunity for head of state Jacques Chirac, who has been cited in a number of graft investigations, but said he can be called as a simple witness provided he agrees to testify.

The ruling by the Cour de Cassation means that Chirac cannot be placed under official investigation or called as a material witness during his term of office, which runs until

The court said barring high treason -- a crime that would be handled by the High Court of Justice -- "any other proceedings before an ordinary court of law cannot be brought during the presidential

Schroeder to visit India for talks

AFP, New Delhi

German Chancellor Gerhard Schroeder will make an official visit to India later this month for highlevel talks with Indian leaders, officials said Wednesday.

Foreign ministry officials said Schroeder would meet President K.R. Narayanan, Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee and other Indian leaders during his October 28-31 state visit to New Delhi.

"This is purely a bilateral visit and was planned much before the world changed on September 11," a ministry official said, but added that the talks would focus on last month's ongoing military strikes on

South Korea apologises for deaths of immigrants

AFP, Seoul

The South Korean government on Wednesday apologised to China for the deaths of 25 illegal immigrants who suffocated on a smuggler's boat and were dumped in the sea.

Government spokesman Park Joon-Young pledged a thorough investigation and hunt for all those involved in the human trafficking after the arrests of the nine South

"This is a horrible and humanitarian crime," he said in a statement. "We will maintain close consultations with the Chinese government in the search for bodies and our investigation.

Tigers attack military camp: 4 killed

AFP, Colombo

Tamil Tiger guerrillas attacked a military camp in northeastern Sri Lanka Wednesday, killing at least four air force men and wounding seven others, a defence official said.

The separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) launched the pre-dawn assault on the air force base near the town of Morawewa. defence ministry spokesman Sanath Karunaratne said.

He said four air force men were killed while another seven were wounded

Helicopter gunships were deployed to attack the guerrillas, but rebel casualties were not immediately known, he said

Ťiger guerrillas are leading a drawn out campaign for independence in the island's embattled northern and eastern regions. More than 60,000 people have been killed in

'Iran can set up camps in Afghanistan for refugees'

AFP, Tehran

Afghanistan's ruling Taliban militia have given Iran the green light to erect camps inside some Talibancontrolled areas in case of a major influx of refugees from US and British military strikes, an Iranian official said Wednesday.

"In areas controlled by the Taliban, they have agreed on some camps but stressed that we would have to set them up after the number of refugees becomes large," Ahmad Ali Nourbala, head of Iran's Red Crescent society, told a press conference in Tehran. "In other areas, they (the Taliban) are greatly opposed to it," he said, adding that a total of six camps are planned for the border with Iran's northeastern Khorassan province, and another "two to three" camps on the border with the southeastern Sistan



Thai Muslims hold a banners as they march down the street to the front of US embassy in Bangkok on Wednesday. Hundreds of Thai Muslims protested outside the embassy calling for an end to the US-led attacks on Afghanistan and for solidarity among Muslims to reject the strikes.

Protests spread in Asia against US strikes

Protests flared in Asian cities for a third day Wednesday as demonstrators called for an end to the US-led strikes in Afghanistan, amid mounting fears for the safety of civilians.

Riot police were out in force outside US embassies, at times backed by armed US security personnel, but the demonstrations mostly passed off without the clashes seen since the strikes were launched on Sunday.

The bloodiest clashes so far have been in Pakistan where anger among Islamic radicals at the fate of people in neighbouring Afghanistan has boiled over into violence leaving six people dead, and hundreds under arrest

Police, firefighters and United Nations officials were mopping-up in the western city of Quetta on Wednesday as US warplanes roared overhead on bombing runs into neighbouring Afghanistan.

Organisers have vowed the rallies will continue throughout the

The largest protests have been in countries with major Muslim populations, where government leaders are attempting to juggle domestic demands with international pressure to join the war on terrorism.

In Indonesia -- the world's largest Muslim populated country -- police fired tear gas at about 1,000 student protesters who were trying to break down the front gate of the parliament building, witnesses said. After retreating to stage a sit-in in

front of the complex, the protesters, more than half of whom were women wearing veils, shouted "America are terrorists", "Go to hell, America" and "Americans and Jews are the real terrorists" The crowd also burnt a headless effigy of President George W. Bush.

It was the second day that police had to use force to disperse the crowds, after violence erupted Président Megawati Sukarnoputri is under pressure both

from radical and mainstream Islamic

the strikes launched to retaliate for the September 11 terror attacks on New York and Washington.

The Indonesian Council of Ulemas (Muslim scholars) wants Megawati to sever ties with the United States, while the second largest Muslim organisation, the Muhammadiyah, has urged the government to take a tougher stand. "The US is fighting terror with

more terror," it said in a statement. But the demonstrations have been smaller in scale than those seen in Jakarta during its past months of political upheaval.

Wednesday's protests came as the al-Qaeda network of Saudi dissident Osama bin Laden issued another clarion call to all Muslims to join in a jihad, or holy war against America.

"The Americans must know that the storm of plane attacks will not stop," al-Qaeda spokesman Suleiman Abu Ghaith warned in a pre-recorded message broadcast by the Qatar-based Al-Jazeera

Pakistan's cricket hero Imran Khan speaks before the audience during the concert for peace and fund raising for Afghan refugees in Islamabad on Tuesday. The retired sports figure turned politician said that hatred is the root of terrorism and justice should prevail for peace

have been four independently confirmed civilian deaths and the Taliban insisted Wednesday that at least three residential areas had been bombed. New York's World Trade Center and the Pentagon is aimed only at a small "Details of civilian casualties are flowing in but the numbers are not group of murderous fanatics who have nothing to do with Islam known. The numbers of casualties increase and so does the fury of the But State Department spokesman Richard Boucher acknowledged that perhaps the US message was not getting through He also appealed to the Organisation of the Islamic Conference to help

Baghdad, Jakarta, Cairo and other predominantly Muslim cities.

onto the streets of several Islamic countries.

rally the support of the Muslim world for the people of Afghanistan

On Tuesday the ambassador described the US-led strikes as "oper

Meanwhile, the United States insists its war on terrorism is not aimed at

While Arab governments have generally been muted in their reaction to

Five people were killed in Pakistan in clashes Tuesday between pro-

Washington says its drive to avenge the September 11 terrorist strikes on

Muslims, but a month after the devastating kamikaze attacks on New York

and Washington it is struggling to overcome deep mistrust and resentment

the US airstrikes against Afghanistan's Taliban regime, anger has spilled out

Taliban demonstrators and police. Anti-US protests also broke out in

The Taliban militia on Wednesday called on Muslims living in the United

sations that they should show their opposition to such atrocities being made

by America against the people of Afghanistan," Taliban Ambassador to

The Taliban have come under US and British air attack since Sunday for

The Pentagon says Taliban military targets are being hit but so far there

their refusal to comply with international demands for the extradition of

Saudi dissident Osama bin Laden, the man blamed for the terrorist attacks

Pakistan Abdul Salam Zaeef told a press conference.

on New York and Washington last month.

population." Zaeef said.

"It is our message to the Muslims of America and all human rights organi-

States to show their opposition to US "atrocities" against the Afghan people.

Sri Lanka's minority government looked as though it was heading for collapse Wednesday after 13 legislators defected to the opposition or distanced themselves from President Chandrika Kumaratunga.

Taliban urge US Muslims to

show their opposition to war

US anti-terror campaign still faces Muslim mistrust

Eight MPs from the ruling People's Alliance crossed over Wednesday to the opposition, as did one legislator on Tuesday, while a coalition partner said it was reassessing its ties with the government.

The government had agreed to allow the opposition United National Party (UNP) to vote Thursday on a no-confidence measure, but the latest defections mean the ruling party no longer has sufficient numbers to defeat the measure.

When faced with a similar ouster threat in July, the president suspended parliament and only reopened it last month after striking a deal for support from the Marxist JVP, or People's Liberation Front.

However, even with the JVP's 10 seats in the 225-member assembly. the People's Alliance coalition is now in a minority.

The defections Wednesday were

minister S.B. Dissanavake and G.L. Peiris, a former justice minister and one-time confidant of Kumaratunga.

Lankan govt set to collapse

Later Wednesday, A. Arumugam Thonbaman announced his resignation as livestock development minister. In a letter to Kumaratunga,

Thonbaman said his Ceyon Workers Congress, which holds four seats in parliament, was reassessing support for the coalition "in view of the government's inability to rule the country.

The Ceylon Workers Congress is Sri Lanka's largest trade union representing Tamils of Indian origin.

With the party's virtual defection, the House's composition is now 106 seats for the government and 118 for the opposition, excluding the non-voting speaker.

After MP Bandula Gunawardena defected on Tuesday, government spokesman Mangala Samaraweera had said Kumaratunga had no plans to use her executive powers to sack the legislature and call snap parliamentary elections

But Gunawardena, quoted by

after new defections state-run Sri Lanka Broadcasting Corporation radio, did not say whether the president would again suspend the assembly

Kumaratunga gained the constitutional power to dissolve the assembly on Wednesday when it completed the first year of its six-

The president is elected separately so even if her government falls Kumaratunga can stay on until her term ends in 2005. In her alliance with the Marxist

JVP, Kumaratunga agreed to slash the size of her parliament and institute other "democratic" reforms, such as independent commissions to run the police, public service, judiciary and elections office.

The legislation for the commissions was passed by parliament late last month with the support of the Kumaratunga also promised the

JVP that the country would halt privatisation and make no further commitments to international lend-

India warns US against Pak place in coalition

AFP, New Delhi

India will stress its opposition to Pakistan's inclusion in the global anti-terrorism coalition when US Secretary of State Colin Powell visits South Asia, officials said

New Delhi will also downplay the possibility of a conflict between the nuclear-armed rivals and dismiss such fears as anti-India propaganda waged by Islamabad, they said.

Powell's expected visit -- the dates of which have yet to be confirmed -- is tacit recognition that Washington must walk a diplomatic tightrope in keeping both Islamabad and New Delhi on side.

British Prime Minister Tony Blair has already made a point of visiting both capitals in the wake of the September 11 terrorist attacks in the US, which led this week to US-British strikes on Pakistan's neighbour Afghanistan.

"We are going to tell Powell what we told Tony Blair: that the US has made the problem a part of its solution (by including Pakistan in

the coalition) which we will not accept as long as Pakistan supports cross-border terrorism in Kashmir.' a senior Indian foreign ministry official told AFP.

Blair's weekend trip to New Delhi and Islamabad did little to advance India's demands that the Kashmir insurgency also be tackled by the US-led alliance, although the British leader promised to "strengthen the coalition in all its forms".

The Indian official also tried to allay any fears in Washington that the US battle against terrorism could be derailed by another India-Pakistan conflict.

"In terms of soothing ruffled feelings, we can only say that India is indeed a mature state and that we can sort out our own problems," he said, a day after India said the two South Asian neighbours were taking steps to ease bilateral tensions.

India accuses Pakistan of arming and training Islamic querrillas in the disputed Himalayan state of Kashmir. Islamabad denies the accusations but extends moral and diplomatic backing to what it calls a

Helicopter strikes are next in US campaign

The United States plans to use helicopter gunships to strike targets in Afghanistan linked to Saudi-born extremist Osama bin Laden and the ruling Taliban regime. The New York Times reported Wednesday.

The low-flying helicopters based near, but not in. Afghanistan can be mobilised once US air missiles wear down the Taliban's air defences, two senior Pentagon officials told the It was unclear when the close-in

operations would begin, but the officials said the helicopters would be easier targets for Afghan artillery than the Air Force bombers and Navy jets that have been striking the country from high altitude.

The Blackhawks and other helicopters designed for special operations are equipped with better night vision and target equipment, affording them some protection from ground fire and the ability to refuel, the officials noted.

against al-Qaeda and Taliban positions in Afghaninstan in response to the September 11 terrorist attacks in the United States achieved air supremacy Wednesday, with daylight raids on the Taliban stronghold of Kandahar.

US officials also told The New York Times that terrorists tied to bin Laden's network based in the Philippines, Indonesia and Malaysia were among the likely targets of future US covert and overt actions. Stressing the campaign against

bin Laden's al-Qaeda network would probably take years, the officials said the group has expanded its operations in recent

"There has been a concerted effort by bin Laden and his people to expand their activities in East Asia, not only in the Philippines but in Malaysia and Indonesia," one official was quoted by the daily as



Selvam Panner (L), the new Chief Minister of Tamil Nadu state, offers a bouquet of flowers to Indian Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee in New Delhi on Wednesday. Panner is in New Delhi for a meeting of Kaveri river water sharing project between the southern Indian states of Karnataka, Kerala and Tamil Nadu. Panner is meeting Vajpayee for the

'US bombers changed targets in mid-flight'

REUTERS, Washington

Some US bombers conducting raids over Afghanistan were unexpectedly ordered to change targets in the middle of their mission. Air Force crew members said on Tuesday

"It did catch us a little off-quard when we were asked to retarget all of our weapons on targets that we were not planning on striking when we left." a B-1 weapons officer identified as Morning said. "The entire process is a really

dynamic environment, things are changing very quickly out there, so all of the aircraft flying are capable of retargeting their weapons at a moment's notice," he said. Morning and other crew mem-

bers from B-1 and B-52 bombers and KC-10 tanker refuelers who participated in raids on Afghanistan spoke to reporters from an undisclosed location in a conference call arranged by the Air Force. They were identified only by call signs or Morning said that he flew a

mission on the second night of strikes but that bombers who flew on the first night also had their targets changed while in the air. "The air crew worked together as

a team, and we made sure that all of

the weapons went where they were

cessful strike." he said.

It was unclear why targets were switched because the fliers would not elaborate and defense officials have refused to discuss so-called operational detail.

The United States launched

airstrikes on Afghanistan on Sunday in its war on terrorism and has pounded targets in that country every day since. The strikes were in retaliation for the Sept. 11 hijacked-airplane

attacks on New York and

Washington that killed more than 5,500 people. The United States has blamed Saudi-born militant Osama bin Laden and his organization al Qaeda for backing the attack. It has set out to punish the Taliban rulers of

Afghanistan for giving Bin Laden

refuge and refusing to turn him over. Slim, a B-52 navigator who had previously flown sorties over Kosovo, said in comparison, the mission over Afghanistan was quieter, with fewer aircraft, and there had been a "little more technology from the former Republic of Yugoslavia side.

The ages of the crew members ranged from the late 20s to the late 30s, and some of them had never flown together before the current

US, Pakistan deeply divided over support to anti-Taliban forces

The United States and Pakistan, its most crucial ally in its bid to crush terrorism in Afghanistan, are deeply divided over Washington's support of the main Afghan opposition, analysts said Tuesday.

But the strategic dispute, which emerged as US-led forces pounded targets in Afghanistan, is unlikely to develop into a major struggle for regional influence as Washington will not actively back the Afghan Northern Alliance following the expected implosion of the Taliban regime, they said.

"Clearly the agendas of the United States and Pakistan do not coincide on the issue of the Northern Alliance," said Teresita Schaffer of the Center for Strategic and International Studies

US Defence Secretary Donald Rumsfeld has made it clear that Washington is offering support to anti-Taliban forces -- notably the Northern Alliance, whose troops are encamped on front lines near Kabul in a bid to topple the "We are encouraging them, we would like to see

them succeed, we would like to see them heave the al-Qaeda (terror network of Osama bin Laden) and the Taliban leadership that has been so repressive out of that country," he said Tuesday. But Pakistani President Pervez Musharraf on

Sunday issued a loud warning to Washington after the first wave of strikes took place on targets in Afghanistan, saying that Islamabad did not want to see the alliance

"This action (US-led strikes against the Taliban) should not be allowed to be taken advantage of by the Northern Alliance," he said, adding that Islamabad wanted a "friendly" government in place in Kabul.

"If this void is filled by the Northern Alliance, ... I think we will return to anarchy and the atrocities and the

ing of the early 1990s. The public split is a worry for Washington as it moves to shore up its coalition against terrorism amid a rash of protests in the Muslim world over the US-led military

It risks further enflaming Pakistani Islamic extremists opposed to the strikes on Saudi-born extremist bin Laden and his network, as well as the Taliban regime. It will also rile elements within Pakistan's intelligence

action in Afghanistan.

and military establishments, just as Musharraf works hard to neutralise such opposition and maintain stability "It is a worry in the short term, as Pakistan is the key country in this coalition because of its interest in and

proximity to Afghanistan," said Thomas Keaney of Johns Hopkins University in Washington But he and other analysts said Washington and Islamabad would manage to avoid a head-on collision

as US support for the main opposition was probably

linked only to its immediate goal of ousting the Taliban and eradicating terror bases. "In the long term, the State Department will probably have a very different view of that support, as it is not in

the interests of the United States or Pakistan to see the Northern Alliance lead the future government," he said. Schaffer agreed, saying that Washington did not believe that the Northern Alliance, whose leaders were ousted from government in Kabul by the Pakistani-

backed Taliban only five years ago, can rule the country Instead, Washington will promote the establishment of a broad-based, multiethnic government focussed around former king Mohammed Zahir Shah, said Walter Meade, senior fellow of the Council on Foreign



Iris, in San Marcos, Belize, some 150 miles south of Belmopan on Tuesday. At least 20 people were killed and massive destruction was feared after Iris battered Belize and Guatemala, capsizing boats and flattening buildings.