INTERNÂTIONAL

Rebels abduct Colombian presidential candidate

AP, San Vicente De Caguan

Leftist guerillas were holding a presidential candidate hostage this weekend after abducting her at a roadblock as she was driving into a volatile area of southern Colombia where government troops are trying

Ingrid Betancourt, an outspoken critic of the rebels, and her campaign manager, Clara Rojas, were being held Sunday by the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombo, or FARC.

Betancourt's campaign spokeswoman, Diana Rodriguez, said the former senator's entourage ran into the rebel roadblock Saturday afternoon as they tried to reach San Vicente del Caguan, the main town inside a rebel zone the government began attacking last week

President Andres Pastrana had ceded the Switzerland-sized enclave to the FARC in 1998 as an incentive to end Colombia's war. He called off peace talks and ordered the army to retake the zone after guerillas hijacked an airplane and kidnapped a current senator on Wednesday

Three men traveling in the same car, including two Colombians and a French photographer on assignment for Marie Claire magazine, were detained for several hours Saturday and released.

French President Jacques Chirac telephoned Pastrana on Sunday to express his "deep concern" over Betancourt's kidnapping. Chirac also spoke by telephone with UN Secretary-General Kofi Annnan to ask him to try winning her release.

Betancourt is well known in France, where she spent her college years and, last year, launched a best-selling memoir. She is a also divorced from a French diplomat.

85 whales found beached near Tokyo

A total of 85 whales were found beached on a coast near Tokyo yesterday one day after 10 whales believed to be from the same pod washed up on the same shore.

Officials rescued 32 of the whales on the beach 90 kilometers east of Tokyo, but the rest died. Town officials Yasunari Jitsukawa said the melon-headed whales discovered over the past two days measured 2 to 3 meters long.

Television news footage showed the dead whales lined up in a row along the beach. They were to be buried in the sand after marine local official Kazuhiro Kosai

On Sunday, local officials saved seven of 10 beached whales. The three that died disappeared during rescue efforts, and town officials said they believe locals took them to

Whale meat is considered a delicacy by many in Japan. Commercial whaling is banned under an international convention. but many restaurants here get stocks of whale meat from Japan's controversial scientific whaling programme.

Although the government urges communities not to eat whales that was up dead on their shores because they might carry diseases, it is not illegal to do so. When about 50 similar whales swam ashore in the same area last year, local people shared some of the 20 dead

On Sunday, Nobuhiro Inaba, a marine biologist at a local aquarium, said the whales may have come too close to the beach while chasing prey or may have lost their sense of direction due to parasite infections.

33 feared dead as boat capsizes in Indonesia

AP, Jakarta

At least 33 people are feared bead after the fishing boat they were on capsized amid stormy weather off Indonesia's Sumatra island, a navy official said Monday.

Local fisherman have recovered two bodies from the Kuda Mas, which sank Wednesday off Bengkulu district in south Sumatra, about 500 kilometers (300 miles) northwest of Jakarta, said Navy

officer Endy Kuswoyo. "We believe the others are dead," Kuswoyo said, adding that no rescue teams had been dispatched to look for survivors. "We don't have the men or the facilities to

search for them. Fatal accidents in Indonesian waters are common. Maritime safety laws are rarely enforced, the country has no coast guard and its navy has minimal search-andrescue capability



AFP file photo of Yasser Arafat.

Israel eases Arafat siege but keeps ring of armour

REUTERS, Ramallah

Israeli tanks pulled back from Palestinian President Yaser Arafat's headquarters in Ramallah yesterday but kept a ring of armour around the West Bank city where he has been

Palestinians cancelled security talks in protest at Israel's decision to keep up the "siege" and tensions were high after Israeli troops fired on Palestinian parliamentary speaker Ahmed Korei's car as he approached a checkpoint late on

Soldiers shot dead two Palestinians early on Monday, including a man who was driving his pregnant wife to hospital to give birth. She told Reuters she was wounded in the shoulder and her father-in-law was seriously hurt.

On Sunday Israel's security cabinet ordered only a partial easing of Arafat's confinement, stoking hostilities after renewed efforts to calm 17 months of violence since the start of a Palestinian uprising against Israeli occupation.

European Union foreign policy chief Javier Solana began talks with Israeli Foreign Minister Shimon Peres in

lerusalem on Monday to help cool tensions and head off all-

Peres said the decision to pull back the tanks was a gesture to Arafat after he ordered the arrest of three Palestinian militants wanted by Israel. But in a sign of a split in the cabinet, he said: "I wanted another decision, I don't deny it."

Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon is under right-wing pressure to crack down harder on Arafat and his Palestinian Authority. The left wing had been seeking a total end to Arafat's confinement to boost peace efforts.

Sharon's public support has been dented by a surge in the death toll in the past 10 days and criticism that he lacks a policy for ending the violence that has killed at least 892 Palestinians and 274 Israelis.

Tanks retreated before dawn vesterday from positions they had held for two months a few hundred metres from Arafat's office and rumbled through the dark streets to positions just outside Ramallah.

The tanks had been sent to Ramallah to pressure Arafat to arrest militants after a wave of Palestinian attacks, particularly those suspected of involvement in the killing of Israeli

Tourism Minister Rehavam Zeevi last October

On Thursday the Palestinian Authority arrested three suspects in Zeevi's assassination, which avenged Israel's killing of a Palestinian militant leader. But Sharon said the men must been extradited to stand trial in Israel before Arafat's confinement could end completely

Palestinian officials said allowing Arafat to move within Ramallah was not a concession as he had recently moved inside the city unencumbered.

"There won't be any meetings with the Israelis for the time being, whether it's on the security level or the political level,' Nabil Abu Radainah, a senior Arafat aide, told reporters.

Tensions were further strained after soldiers fired at Korei's armoured BMW as it neared a checkpoint on Sunday evening. He was unhurt and Peres telephoned him to apolo-

The army said the soldiers fired warning shots into the air when a car approached the checkpoint at speed and they feared it was going to run them down. Israeli troops have been jittery since last week's killing of six soldiers at a check-

Indian media rubs salt into **BJP's electoral wounds**

The rout of India's governing BJP party in crucial state elections has dealt a severe body blow to its image as the dominant power in the central coalition government, Indian newspapers said yester-

Banner headlines like "BJP gets vote of no confidence" in the Hindustan Times and "BJP falls off pedestal" in the Asian Age summed up the media verdict as Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee's party emerged beaten and bloodied from elections in four states

In India's most populous and politically crucial state of Uttar Pradesh, the Hindu nationalist BJP was beaten into second place by the regional Samajwadi Party, although no group won enough seats to form and administration on its own. A BJP government was ousted

in Uttaranchal state by the main

opposition Congress party, which also took over Punjab from the BJP and its allies and was expected to win in the northeastern state of Manipur

While the worse-thanexpected results pose no immediate threat to the BJP-led coalition in New Delhi, they are a clear indication that the party's star is

"Of course, it can be argued that the verdict is not a reflection on the performance of the BJP-led government at the centre, although few would fall for it." the Indian Express said in an editorial.

'The results will indeed be seen as a commentary on the party's style of functioning.

"There's a clear warning in the results for the Vajpayee government which can ignore it only at its peril," the newspaper said. The Hindustan Times said the

main message of the state polls was that Vajpayee's party was in "deeper trouble" than it realises

"When you compare the electoral performances of the two parties, it is clear that the Congress is now on the ascendant and the BJP is on the decline." the Times said.

"The BJP is now a party that has lost its way."

The results showed that voters concerned about the economy, unemployment and services had not responded to the BJP's campaign focus on the issues of terrorism and national security.

Vajpayee had been hoping for a patriotic vote of confidence in his party at a time when India is locked in a military face off with Pakistan.

"If there is one central message, that has emerged at the end of the latest electoral exercise, it is the outright rejection by the electorate... on divisive, extraneous issues that the BJP laid so much store by," the Asian Age

bags following

Sri Lanka's central zoo yesterday

banned the public from bringing in

plastic bags following the deaths of

at least 10 animals in the last six

The animals, which included

monkeys, deers and mountain

goats, died after swallowing and

choking on the bags, which contain

harmful toxic metals like chromium

and copper that can cause allergic

reactions and choking. Visitors to

the zoo often use their own plastic

aware of the consequences," said

zoo director Brig. HANT Perers.

"Even after posting signboards with

information on the dangers of poly-

thene (plastic), the people continue

Perera said it would take a long

time for the ban to work because it

does not penalize violators. But with

the help of environmental authori-

to animals can be prevented.

"The Sri Lankan public is not fully

bags to carry in food.

to bring it into the zoo.'

months, the zoo's director said

deaths of

animals

Habibie quizzed Zoo bans plastic over graft scandal

AP, Jakarta

Prosecutors questioned former Indonesian president B J Habibie yesterday as a witness in a massive corruption scandal that threatens to destroy the party that ruled this Southeast Asian country for 33

Akbar Tandjung, Habibie's former Cabinet secretary and the current parliamentary speaker, is accused of embezzling dlrs 3.8 million form the state food distribution agency, Bulong, in 1999. Tandjung allegedly used the

funds to finance the election campaign of the Golkar party, which he now heads. Golkar is Indonesia's second-largest party and was the political machine of former dictator Habibie, who has not been

accused of any wrongdoing, said nothing to reporters when he arrived for questioning at the Attorney General's Office. His lawyer, Yan Juanda Saputra,

said Habibie did not know how the missing funds were distributed. Habibie flew into Indonesia on

ties and a proposed awareness Sunday from Germany, where he programme, he believes the threat has spent much of his time since being voted out of office in 1999

the annual Hajj pilgrimage on February 21. More than two million pilgrims poured into the plains of Arafat for the climax of the pilgrimage. Makkah is a shoppers' paradise for pilgrims

Hundreds of thousands of Muslim pilgrims perform noon prayers at the Namira mosque at Mount Arafat outside Saudi Arabia's holy city of Makkah during

Muslims flock to Saudi Arabia every year for the Hajj pilgrimage seeking spiritual renewal, but many also enjoy a more earthly reward: Shopping. Buying gifts and souvenirs

during the Hajj has become a tradition that is keenly observed by the pilgrims who spend millions of dollars in this Saudi holy city every Retail therapy is big business in

Makkah, where around two million pilgrims gather to perform Haii in the Grand Mosque shrine for around two weeks a year. Thousands of Muslims also visit

the city during the holy month of

Ramadan for umrah, or minor pilgrimage. In between performing prayers and religious rituals, the pilgrims

become shoppers, to the delight of Makkah's merchants. From prayer beads or scarves

worth a few riyals to expensive jewellery and designer clothes, shops display a variety of goods that cater to every budget and every

quented by well-heeled pilarims while shops with cheaper goods line the roads of Makkah.

"During the Hajj stays away from his country for 20 to 25 days, it is not possible to return home to your family without gifts,' Alaa al-Shakhsheer, a 36-year-old Palestinian pilgrim from the West Bank town of Nablus, told Reuters at a shop selling watches outside the Grand Mosque.

Bangladeshi pilgrim Abdul Motin. a retired air force pilot, says some of the goods in Makkah are unique to the holy city.

"Several things here are very special for the Muslim people," he said. "Even if you travel all over the world, you don't get certain thins that are available here," he said citing Islamic books and Arabic perfume.

But while most pilgrims described the shopping as an important part of their trip to Makkah, they all said it did not distract them from their religious

"I think this whole thing is one experience," American Haroon Patel said. "I think you're here to

perform your religious duty but at the same time you have to take in the city and, lets face it, there are shops all over ... it's hard not to buy

Some pilgrims, mainly from Africa and the Muslim former Soviet Republics, even manage to combine their religious duty with trade. displaying handicrafts and prayer rugs on the roads leading to the

Shopping fever hits a zenith after dark when the pilgrims have performed all their prayers and the heat of day gives way to a cooler breeze. At the Makkah Commercial Housing Centre, a large shopping mall thousands of pilgrims strolled into the plethora of shops.

But some salesmen, blaming the September 11 attacks on the United States, said business was not as brisk as last year. "Hajj season this year is good,

but its not like last year," said Mustafa Ayjoun, a Turkish salesman at a shop selling semi-precious stones and pearls. "The economies of Muslim countries have been hit after the incident in America

Omar's concern for Bosnian Muslims turned him into Islamic militant

Sheikh Omar, the self-confessed mastermind of US journalist Daniel Pearl's abduction, is a former English public schoolboy whose concern for Bosnian Muslims led him into the murky underworld of Islamic militants.

Congress supporters celebrate victory outside the residence of Sonia

Gandhi in New Delhi after the party won the state assembly polls in Punjab

Omar was arrested on February 12, 20 days after the Wall Street Journal correspondent disappeared in the southern port city of Karachi and eventu-

His capture had marked the biggest breakthrough in the month-long hunt for Pearl and his captors. Omar, who spent six years in an Indian prison for allegedly abducting foreign tourists, told a Karachi court on February 14 that Pearl had been

Pearl's death was confirmed on Thursday when a grisly videotape of his beheading was handed to the US consulate in Karachi. Omar comes from a respected business family in the eastern city of

Lahore, the Punjab provincial capital, where police finally seized him. He was born in London in 1973 where his father ran a shop, but moved to Lahore for secondary education at the prestigious Aitchison College, returning to Britain to study at the London School of Economics, which he left

without graduating. "Many of his close relatives enjoy good positions in the government's civil service, but his faith in jihad, or holy war, took him into a different world," a Karachi-based Islamic cleric told AFP on condition of anonymity

Omar's father said his son's Islamic zeal sprouted when he took up arms alongside Muslims in Bosnia to fight the Serbs. "That was a turning point in his life," his father was quoted as saying by one of the police investigators. "From then on he devoted himself to Islamic

After two months in Bosnia he returned to Pakistan and spent the next

Harkat-ul Ansar, which had fought Soviet invaders.

The group also sent guerillas to fight Indian rule in disputed Kashmir, where Omar battled Indian troops until he was arrested in 1993 for allegedly kidnapping tourists to be used in a prisoner exchange.

Omar's prison diary, written in English and published by the Indian Express in October last year, reveals his bungled first attempts at kidnap-His mentor told him: "Remeber, American first priority, then British and

French" However on his first attempt, Omar lured back a "hulking" 6-foot 3-inch

(1.88-metre) Israeli who was hurriedly hustled back out of the house. He also records his later attempts to kidnap an American, who was actually German, and other failures as prospective victims became suspicious before his final "success"

His diary ends with the moment he was shot by Indian police. "I felt the anger being drawn out with the blood. I thought it was the end. It was the end of one era and beginning of another," he wrote After serving almost six years in jail, Omar was released in 1999 when the

hijackers of an Indian Airlines plane demanded his release, along with

Harkat-ul Ansar figure Maulana Masood Azhar, in exchange for their hos-Harkat-ul Ansar was banned as a terrorist group in 1998, but re-emerged as the Harkat-ul Mujahedin. Omar and Azhar quit the group after their release from prison, the Karachi cleric told AFP.

Police say Omar returned to Lahore to live with his family, marrying in November 2000. He put his university-educated wife "under the veil in accordance with orthodox Islamic tradition", his father told investigators, and rarely left Lahore without her, showing his "deep attachment to his family."

Thailand revokes visas of two foreign newsmen

REUTERS, Bangkok

Thailand has revoked the visas of two foreign journalists working for the Hong Kong-based Far Eastern Economic Review magazine, saying they are a threat to public

The Review's Bangkok bureau chief, Shawn Crispin, 33, an American citizen, and correspondent Rodney Tasker, 56, a British national, told Reuters today they had received letters from the Immigration Police notifying them of the decision

Police said on condition of anonymity that the move followed the review's publication of articles on the Thai royal family, as well as on businesses run by the family of Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra.

The officers declined to say exactly what they objected to, but the action stems from the January the report 10 issue, which was banned by Tha authorities and pulled from shelves.

"I received a letter yesterday at my house and there was a letter from the immigration department saying my visa had been revoked as Embassy in Paris could have been of Friday," Tasker said.

Just a sample of what Laden had in mind?

The sheer number of suspected plots uncovered around the world since September 11 lead investigators to suspect the attacks were just a sample of what Osama bin Laden had in mind, Newsweek magazine

Authorities around the world have found evidence that US embassies were on a list of targets much longer than the World Trade Center in New York and the Pentagon outside Washington, the magazine reported in the issue due on news stands yesterday.

Italian authorities arrested five Moroccans with one map of the Rome water system and another, which pinpoints the US embassy. The Moroccans allegedly possessed an industrial chemical that is a harmless relative of cvanide.

US officials think Rome was not the only other target, according to

Dutch, Italian, British and Spanish authorities arrested suspected al-Qaeda members that may also have been planning to participate in operations on September 11. French authorities say the US

Bosnia say terrorists had a mole inside the US embassy. Police unearthed plots on the US embassy in Singapore, as did police in Malaysia, Yemen and Indonesia, according to Newsweek. While US officials are more

reticent about attacks planned within US borders, they told Newsweek that al-Qaida is likely to try again. The so-called "axis of evil"

formed by Iran, Iraq and North Korea constitutes a real threat no matter what it is called, US Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld has told a British daily. "Now, if someone can come up

with a better adjective than 'evil'

fine," Rumsfeld said in an interview

published today in Britain's The Daily Telegraph. "But to turn your head and pretend that's not going on is wrong." "And not only is it wrong, it is unhelpful if one cares at all about all

those human beings," he added, referring to political prisoners in North Korea who he claimed "are being starved."