

Top US official to visit embattled Jaffna

AFP, Colombo

US Assistant Secretary of State for South Asian Affairs Christina Rocca will visit Sri Lanka's embattled northern peninsula of Jaffna later this week, officials said Tuesday.

Rocca will Thursday become the highest ranking US official to go to Jaffna, where Tamil Tiger rebels ran a de facto separate state for nearly five years until they were driven out in December 1995.

Her visit follows a stern US warning Monday for Sri Lanka's rebel Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) not to jeopardise a Norwegian-brokered ceasefire with government forces which came into effect on February 23.

Ravi Shankar plays Sitar for peace

AP, New Delhi

Sitar virtuoso Ravi Shankar made a plea for peace by performing at a special concert Monday as India slowly recovered from the country's worst sectarian riots in a decade.

More than 700 people have died in the western Indian state of Gujarat over the last two weeks following Hindu-Muslim riots.

Shankar, 82, who won a Grammy last month for his album "Full Circle/Carnegie Hall 2000," was accompanied at Monday's "Concert for Peace and Harmony" by his daughter, Anoushka Shankar.

New Delhi's Siri Fort hall was packed to capacity, with people filling the aisles, standing in the back and crowding the entrance. Nearly 200 fans, including many Westerners, were accommodated on the huge stage, sitting cross-legged on the bare stage floor, while scores of people waited outside the hall clamoring to be let in.

PNG army mutiny over troop cutbacks spreads

AFP, Port Moresby

A mutiny by troops in Papua New Guinea over plans to slash the size of the defence force spread to a second base Tuesday as senior officers attempted to quell the second army revolt in a year.

The National newspaper reported on its website that troops at Igam Barracks in Lae had joined a protest at Moem barracks over government plans to demobilise large numbers of soldiers in line with demands from international lenders.

The World Bank, International Monetary Fund (IMF) and neighbouring Australia have demanded a reduction in the 4,000-strong army as a condition of extending 200 million dollars worth of soft loans to the near bankrupt country.

A meeting was scheduled for later Tuesday between officers and soldiers who mutinied at Moem at the weekend.

Aga Khan meets Pak FM

AFP, Islamabad

Prince Karim Aga Khan, the Spiritual leader of the Ismaili community, here Sunday held separate meetings with Foreign Minister Abdul Sattar, Finance Minister Shaukat Aziz and Minister for Kashmir Affairs, Northern Areas and Frontier Regions Abbas Sarfraz.

During the meetings he discussed economic development and welfare projects launched by the Aga Khan Foundation in Pakistan.

Prince Karim said he would continue to support the social welfare initiatives of the government.

He arrived Saturday evening on a five-day visit of Pakistan.



PHOTO: AFP

An Israeli tank roars across a crash barrier in the West Bank town of Ramallah early on Tuesday while doctors transfer the body of a Palestinian youth (R), shot dead by Israeli troops during an incursion into the northern Gaza Strip refugee camp of Jabalia early Tuesday to al-Shifa hospital's morgue in Gaza City. The Israeli army overnight launched its largest operation since the beginning of the Palestinian uprising in September 2000, reoccupying most of the autonomous city of Ramallah with around 100 tanks and armoured vehicles.

US asks world to get serious about Iraq

Attack to set region ablaze, Baghdad warns

AFP, Washington

The United States said on Monday the world must soon get serious about the problem posed by Iraq's suspected arsenal of weapons of mass destruction, predicting Baghdad will have enough material to build a nuclear weapon in just several years absent UN inspections.

"This is a problem that the world had better get serious about very soon," said national security adviser Condoleezza Rice, appearing on PBS's "NewsHour with Jim Lehrer" program.

"We cannot sweep under the rug what Iraq has been doing for the last 10 years," she added. "We cannot pretend that this regime is one that can be trusted not to acquire weapons of mass destruction."

The comments came as the administration of President George W. Bush was pondering a post-Afghanistan phase of its anti-terrorism campaign launched in the aftermath of the September 11

attacks.

Bush, who has repeatedly accused Iraqi leader Saddam Hussein of trying to develop weapons of mass destruction and using them against his own citizens, made clear earlier Monday that despotic regimes must not be allowed to fulfill their military ambitions, if they involve weapons of mass destruction.

"Men with no respect for life must never be allowed to control the ultimate instruments of death," he said at a White House ceremony marking the six-month anniversary of the terror attacks without naming Saddam by name.

In London, visiting US Vice President Richard Cheney warned of dangers posed by a "potential marriage" between terrorist networks such as al-Qaida, blamed for the attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon, and "those who hold or are proliferating knowledge about weapons of mass destruction."

Cheney is at the beginning of a

12-nation tour aimed at preparing US allies and partners for the next -- yet to be defined -- stage of the US-led war on terror.

Meanwhile, Baghdad warned Tuesday that a US attack on Iraq, for which Vice-President Dick Cheney might pave the way during his Middle East tour this week, would set the whole region on fire.

"If fire breaks out, no one will be able to prevent it from spreading or put it out," wrote the newspaper Al-Iraq, noting that Cheney's trip to the region will coincide with that of US Middle East peace envoy Anthony Zinni.

"In a 'transparent maneuver,' Washington was trying to 'restore calm in Palestine' while discussing its 'aggressive plans' against Iraq with some Arab capitals, the paper charged.

"But the Arabs, notably their rulers, are conscious of the huge risks of giving a green light to an American military adventure against any Arab country," Al-Iraq said.

US remembers September 11 eyeing new targets

AFP, Washington

The United States paused Monday to remember and contemplate new targets in the accelerating global war sparked six months ago when September 11 attacks rained terror on US soil, killing more than 3,000 people.

President George W. Bush led tributes to honour the office workers, service personnel, fire fighters, police officers and passengers who died when four hijacked airliners crashed into New York's World Trade Center, the Pentagon and in Pennsylvania.

Bristling with defiance, Bush lauded the success of US anti-terror strikes in Afghanistan and promised future operations to deprive "terrorist parasites" of a safe haven.

Warning Americans that more

"dangers and sacrifices lie ahead," Bush pledged to wage a campaign against states with the potential to arm terrorists with weapons of mass destruction.

"Men with no respect for life must never be allowed to control the ultimate instruments of death," Bush declared, warning foreign governments that neutrality was not an option.

"Terrorist groups are hungry for these weapons, and would use them without a hint of conscience," he told an audience of relatives of the September 11 dead, Washington's political elite and foreign ambassadors at an open air White House ceremony.

"America will not forget the lives that were taken and the justice their death requires," warned Bush in a speech that included only an indi-

rect reference to the suspected mastermind of the attacks, Osama bin Laden.

In New York, at 8:46 am (1346 GMT), quiet fell over the crater where the World Trade Center once stood, on the moment when the first of two hijacked airliners sliced into the twin glass-fronted towers, setting off a deadly inferno.

A second moment of silence shrouded the ruins, or "Ground Zero" as the area is known, at 9:03, commemorating the moment when a second fuel-laden plane ignited a fireball in the second tower.

"Those people we lost would have wanted us to make a better world, show the terrorists that they can't defeat us," said New York Mayor Michael Bloomberg, in a ceremony in nearby Battery Park.

Irregularities set stage for violence in Zimbabwe

AFP, Harare

Widespread irregularities in Zimbabwe's landmark presidential election have set the stage for "major violence" if results are seen as rigged in favour of longtime ruler Robert Mugabe, the International Crisis Group (ICG) warned Tuesday.

"The risk of major violence erupting is exceedingly high," the ICG's co-director for Africa, John

Prendergast, said in a statement. "Deep resentment combined with economic desperation has created a pressure cooker in parts of Zimbabwe."

The ICG said "all indications are that the victor should be (Mugabe's challenger) Morgan Tsvangirai ... notwithstanding extensive and well-documented intimidation of opposition supporters."

Prendergast said: "There is

every chance of an explosion if the results are seen to be fixed. And Mugabe's massive deployment of loosely controlled youth militias and warlord war veterans makes it likely that there will be a bloody reaction to any mass protest or rioting."

The ICG, a leading European think-tank based in Brussels, cited evidence that Mugabe has taken "desperate" measures to ensure his re-election.

US calls for 'concerted effort' on ME with Europeans, Arabs

AFP, Washington

The United States called late Monday for a "concerted effort" involving European and Arab nations to end Israeli-Palestinian violence, saying it was willing to explore "an opening" created by a Saudi peace initiative.

Appearing on PBS's program "NewsHour with Jim Lehrer," national security adviser Condoleezza Rice said that US consultations with Saudi Arabia and Egypt "suggest that a concerted effort by the parties in the region and also with the European Union might be needed now to push forward a little bit what are some positive steps that the parties have taken."

The appeal came as two US officials -- Vice President Richard Cheney and retired general Anthony Zinni -- were about to head for the region for talks aimed at finding ways to stop 17 months of violence that has claimed nearly 1,500 lives.

The top presidential foreign policy adviser also spoke after Israel launched new large-scale operations against Palestinian targets in the West Bank and Gaza Strip designed to forestall any more terrorist attacks against Israeli civilians.

Despite more overnight bloodshed in both sectors, Rice said the administration of George W. Bush believed the situation in the region was "a little bit

better" than before.

"First of all, even though the violence has worsened, we think there's a little bit of an opening made possible by the initiative of Crown Prince Abdullah of Saudi Arabia, recognising that out of a peace of process there ought to be normalisation of relations between the Arab world and the Israelis," she said.

"We think that even though that is not a plan, per se, that it is an initiative that says that the moderate Arab states want to accept responsibility for being part of the solution and so we want to explore that opening," the national security adviser pointed out.

Saudi Crown Prince Abdullah Bin Abdel Aziz revealed the outlines of his plan, which calls for full normalisation of relations between Israel and Arab nations in exchange for Israel's withdrawal to the 1967 borders, in an interview with a New York Times columnist last month.

The Saudis plan to present a full written version of their initiative at the Arab summit scheduled in Beirut on March 27-28.

Rice welcomed the Israeli decision to lift restrictions on travel by Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat, who had been blocked by Israeli troops from leaving his office in the West Bank town of Ramallah for several weeks, saying it was "a good step forward."

India awaits court ruling on temple-mosque dispute

VHP plans 'scaled-down' ceremony if court bans full ritual

AFP, New Delhi

India held its breath Tuesday ahead of a Supreme Court ruling on a seemingly intractable religious dispute that goes to the very core of India's commitment to its secular constitution.

The highest court in the land will Wednesday hear a petition seeking a ban on plans by hardline Hindus to hold a special ground-breaking ceremony on Friday for a temple they wish to build in the northern town of Ayodhya.

The Hindus want to hold the ceremony on government land adjacent to the disputed site of a 16th century mosque that was torn down by Hindu zealots nearly 10 years ago.

A week of intense negotiations involving leaders of the Hindu and Muslim communities as well as Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee and top cabinet ministers has made little headway in resolving the dispute.

A "compromise" formula put forward by the militant Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP - World Hindu Council), which is spearheading the temple construction drive in Ayodhya, was rejected by Muslim leaders.

Since then the VHP and other right-wing Hindu groups have sent mixed signals as to how they might respond should Wednesday's Supreme Court ruling go against them.

Some insist that the judiciary has no say in religious matters and Friday's ground-breaking ceremony will go ahead come what may, while others have agreed to abide by the court's decision.

Meanwhile, hardline Hindu groups said on Tuesday they would hold a scaled-down ceremony this week at a disputed religious site in northern India if the Supreme Court bans their original plans for a full-scale Hindu ritual.



PHOTO: AFP

Chairman of Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP), Ashoke Singhal (R), speaks to the media as architect of the Ram Temple project, Ramchandra Paramhans (L) looks on in Ayodhya on Tuesday. Authorities have restricted all entry points to the city of Ayodhya as tight security is being enforced to prevent any disturbances ahead of the proposed March 15 religious ceremony to launch the Ram Temple construction.



PHOTO: AFP

US President George W. Bush (C) holds his hand over his heart on Monday as the US Honour Guard presents the colours at the beginning of ceremonies commemorating the six-month anniversary of the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks against the US at the White House in Washington, DC. Diplomats from the international communities are also seen in the back.

HR envoy urged to take note of abuses in Kashmir

AP, Islamabad

Pakistan is urging UN Human Rights Commissioner Mary Robinson to take note of alleged human rights abuses in the Indian-held part of Kashmir, officials said.

President Gen Pervez Musharraf raised the issue with Robinson during a meeting Monday on the first day of her three-day visit to Pakistan, the government said.

Robinson, who arrived from Afghanistan, also met with Foreign

Minister Abdul Sattar. Musharraf also mentioned recent communal riots in India when Hindu mobs, enraged over the burning of a train by Muslims, killed hundreds of Muslims in western Gujarat state.

Robinson is on a visit to the region to assess the human rights situation and will prepare a report for the UN Commission on Human Rights, which meets in Geneva later this month.

Coup plotters planned kidnap of Myanmar junta leaders

AFP, Yangon

The family of Myanmar's former dictator Ne Win planned to take the top junta leaders hostage and force them to swear allegiance to the ageing autocrat, officials said Tuesday.

Myanmar's Senior General Than Shwe, army chief Maung Aye and military intelligence chief Lieutenant-General Khin Nyunt were targeted in the family's coup plot which was foiled Thursday, they said.

"Using military troops, they were going to raid the homes of the three leaders by overpowering security at the gates and take the three people hostage," said deputy chief of military intelligence Major General Kyaw Win.

"Then they would take them to the house where Ne Win lives, and the old man would say that anybody who would agree to the conditions set down by him would be chosen leaders of the new government," he told reporters.

Anyone refusing to the demands would be held hostage at Ne Win's Yangon residence, he added.

Meanwhile, the failed coup attempt unveiled last week will not derail the ongoing dialogue between Myanmar's ruling military regime and the opposition, a senior junta official said Tuesday.

"This failed coup by members of the previous first family will not derail the ongoing dialogue," Major General Kyaw Win, deputy chief of military intelligence, told reporters.



PHOTO: AFP

Britain's Queen Elizabeth II and the Duke of Edinburgh listen to a speech by Don McKinnon, General Secretary of the Commonwealth, at a reception to mark the Queen's 50 years as Head of the Commonwealth at Buckingham Palace in London on Monday.