

# Zinni continues talks to broker truce

## EU calls for independent Palestinian state

AFP, Jerusalem

US envoy Anthony Zinni was set to continue his meetings with Palestinian and Israeli officials Saturday, in a bid to broker a ceasefire between the two sides.

He was expected to meet with the Palestinian negotiating committee in the West Bank city of Ramallah around noon (1000 GMT). That group include will include top negotiator Saeb Erakat, parliament speaker Ahmed Qorei and information minister Yasser Abed Rabbo, as well as security officials.

The meeting will be held in Yasser Arafat's compound, Palestinian sources said, though Zinni and the Palestinian leader, who already met on Friday, were not officially expected to hold further talks Saturday.

However, Zinni's "schedule can change at any time," a diplomatic source told AFP, adding that Zinni's meetings with Palestinian officials could also be held in other West

Bank towns.

The retired Marine Corps general, who arrived in Israel on Thursday night, is also slated to hold a second meeting with Ariel Sharon at the Israeli prime minister's ranch in the Negev desert, public radio said.

The US embassy did not confirm the meeting.

Since returning to the region on his third ceasefire mission, Zinni has also held talks with Israeli Foreign Minister Shimon Peres and Defence Minister Binyamin Ben Eliezer.

Before meeting Arafat Friday evening, he said his "expectation was success."

Reuters adds: European Union leaders were set on reaffirming their support on Saturday for the creation of an independent Palestinian state alongside an Israeli secure with internationally recognised borders.

The 15 leaders discussed the Middle East crisis at a working dinner on Friday evening during summit talks in Barcelona.



US envoy Anthony Zinni (L) and Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat talk to the press after their meeting in the West Bank city of Ramallah on Friday hours after the Israeli army ended a deadly three-day reoccupation of the city. Arafat said he welcomed Zinni's efforts and reiterated his full commitment to the peace process. Man standing behind Arafat is his spokesman Nabil Abu Rudeina.

"(The EU supports) the creation of a democratic, viable and independent Palestinian state, bringing to an end the occupation of territories which began in 1967," Spanish Foreign Minister Josep Pique told

reporters after the dinner.

He said a declaration due to be issued later on Saturday would pledge strong support for US envoy Anthony Zinni's efforts to mediate a ceasefire in the region.

But unlike earlier drafts seen at the summit on Friday, the declaration would not include a call for Israel to respect the fourth Geneva convention, which protects the rights of refugees.

# Texas mother gets life-term Vajpayee gets reprieve over Ayodhya row

REUTERS, Houston

A Texas jury sentenced Andrea Yates to life in prison on Friday for drowning her five children while she was deeply psychotic, sparing her from death by lethal injection after a



stunningly swift 35 minutes of deliberations.

The sentence means Yates, 37, must serve at least 40 years behind bars before being eligible for parole. The only other punishment option under tough Texas laws was the

death penalty. Even the prosecution was split on seeking the death penalty, with one prosecutor saying the facts and evidence of the case did not merit asking jurors to impose it.

Yates, a former nurse and high school valedictorian, was convicted by the same jury of methodically drowning her children -- Noah, 7, John, 5, Paul, 3, Luke, 2, and Mary, six months -- in the family bathtub on June 20, 2001.

She said she killed them to save them from the devil and pleaded not guilty by reason of insanity. Mental health experts said Yates was profoundly psychotic at the time of the crime.

The case became the focal point of a national debate on the treatment, both legal and medical, of the mentally ill and once again put the spotlight on harsh Texas justice.

Husband Rusty Yates, who urged treatment not punishment for his wife, said it was a bittersweet day that never should have come.

AFP, New Delhi

Indian Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee may be able to claim victory after a crisis over a disputed religious site in the northern town of Ayodhya was peacefully defused, but it is only a temporary reprieve, analysts said Saturday.

"This has been one of the most serious challenges before premier Vajpayee," said Kiran Saxena, a professor of political studies at New Delhi's Jawaharlal Nehru University.

"And though he has managed to get out of this one, it is by no means the end of his problems," Saxena said.

The federal government breathed a sigh of relief Friday when, after days of frantic negotiations, it managed to persuade hardline Hindus to conduct a scaled-down religious ceremony on Friday in Ayodhya in line with a Supreme Court order.

The Hindu activists had given a deadline of March 15 to begin building a temple at the site, even though the issue is in the hands of the courts.

There had been fears of widespread violence -- close

on the heels of some 700 deaths in sectarian clashes in the western state of Gujarat last month -- but the event passed off relatively peacefully.

The VHP, a revivalist Hindu organisation which is spearheading the explosive temple-building drive, instead handed over two pillars of a future Ram shrine to an envoy of the premier and said prayers about a mile (kilometre) from the disputed site.

Some 10,000 troops were on stand-by to prevent the militants storming the ruins of the Babri mosque, razed by Hindu zealots in 1992 as part of their campaign to build a temple to their warrior lord Ram.

"The dilemma Vajpayee and his BJP party are now facing is how to deal with the Ayodhya issue and keep their secular credentials vis a vis their allies both at the same time," political analyst S.R. Maheshwari said.

"The BJP spearheaded the temple building campaign in the early 1990s and became a powerful political force on the back of it.

"But now if they have to remain in power, they will have to keep their allies, who have considerable Muslim support, happy," he said.

# Coalition forces continue search of al-Qaida caves

AFP, Bagram Air Base

Around a thousand coalition forces are still searching caves vacated by fleeing Taliban and al-Qaida fighters in eastern Afghanistan where they have recovered more military hardware and documents, a US spokesman said Saturday.

Canadian, US and local Afghan fighters have been scouring the foxholes of the diehard fighters around the Shahi Kot valley at the conclusion of the US-led offensive Operation Anaconda which began on March 2.

Coalition forces have described the offensive on the extremists' last known Afghan stronghold as a "text-book" operation and have said they believe hundreds of al-Qaida and Taliban have been killed in the fighting.

"We still have approximately 1,000 soldiers in Shahi Kot valley doing sensitive sight exploitations of the area," Major Bryan Hilferty told reporters at this US air base north of Kabul.

"The US and Canadian light infantry troops continue to search and we have Afghan troops on the valley floor.

"We have found ammunition caches, mortars and rockets, food items and clothing and numerous sensitive documents.

"I can't elaborate very much but we have documents in different languages. We have diaries, manuals and we have letters."

"We continue to look for other pockets of resistance and continue to seek out al-Qaida and Taliban terrorists and attack them."

# US throws weight behind Lankan peace plan

AFP, Colombo

The United States is holding talks with Sri Lanka on increasing military cooperation while supporting Norwegian attempts to broker peace in the island, a top visiting US official said here Saturday.

The US assistant secretary of state for South Asia, Christina Rocca, said Washington was taking a higher profile in supporting Sri Lanka's peace process following the changed global situation since September 11.

Rocca said the US marine general, Timothy Ghormley, who accompanied her on a visit to the war-torn northern peninsula of

Jaffna Friday was discussing increased military cooperation with Sri Lankan authorities.

"He is here to talk about military cooperation ranging from operating C-130s (Hercules aircraft) and other humanitarian matters," Rocca told reporters.

Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe who held closed-door talks with Rocca Friday in the northern town of Jaffna said he asked for US help in removing land mines in the Jaffna peninsula.

"We are looking for at least four de-mining teams of 10 each for about four months," Wickremesinghe said. "The US has told us that they will try to get us some equipment as soon as possi-

ble." Diplomatic sources have seen the US visits as a strong signal to the rebel Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) to fall in line with the Oslo-backed peace process.

Norway has brokered a truce between the government and the LTTE, who have been fighting for an independent homeland for the Tamil minority in the north and east of the island, which went into effect on February 23.

Rocca said they were closely watching the peace process and hoped the Sri Lankans would be able to work out a political settlement that will not threaten the territorial integrity of the island.

# Angola, UNITA rebels agree to end war

AFP, Luanda

The Angolan army and UNITA rebel leaders agreed Friday to end Africa's longest-running conflict, less than three weeks after the death of the man who launched the rebellion in 1975, Jonas Savimbi, the two sides announced in a joint statement.

It said the agreement was reached during a meeting attended by military officials and UNITA leaders in the village of Cassamba in Moxico, the eastern province where Savimbi was killed.

"On March 15, the first official meeting between the armed forces of Angola and National Union for the Total Independence of Angola (UNITA) took place in Cassamba" and led to "the end of hostilities in

the country," said the statement, released by the Angolan presidency.

Angola's government late Wednesday had ordered its forces to halt attacks on UNITA rebels as of Thursday, and said it was prepared to offer an amnesty to rebel fighters.

The government indicated the move was aimed at establishing a dialogue with UNITA with the ultimate goal of achieving a definitive ceasefire.

Friday's announcement gave no indication when or where a formal ceasefire agreement may be signed.

The meeting was attended by the deputy chief of staff of the armed forces, General Geraldo Nunda, and the commander of UNITA forces, Abreu Kamorteiro.



US Assistant Secretary of State Christina Rocca, (L) shakes hands with Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe at Palaly Air Base in Jaffna on Friday shortly after her arrival. Rocca made a high level visit to the war-ravaged Jaffna peninsula four days after the US embassy in Colombo warned the rebel Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) not to jeopardise the Norwegian-backed peace process on the island.

# Mugabe enacts law to clip wings of press

AFP, Harare

Zimbabwe's President Robert Mugabe, with the dust far from settled over his controversial re-election, enacted a tough new media law as street protests loomed Saturday over a vote many say was rigged.

Mugabe had put off signing the law, forced through parliament on January 31, amid an international outcry that the measure was an attempt to rig the presidential poll.

But only two days after winning the vote, which observers have widely condemned as fraudulent, on Friday he enacted the law that imposes stiff limits on independent

and foreign journalists.

While the decision was certain to fuel western criticism of Mugabe's re-election, which was rejected by his main rival Morgan Tsvangirai, neighbouring South Africa stepped up its support.

The ruling African National Congress (ANC) said in a declaration initially wrongly attributed to President Thabo Mbeki that "The will of the people of Zimbabwe has prevailed."

South Africa and Nigeria have led Africa's support for Mugabe's re-election, echoed by the Organisation of African Unity, Kenya, Namibia, Tanzania and Zambia.

# US missile interception test successful

AFP, Washington

The Pentagon scored its fourth successful missile interception Friday when a ground-based interceptor missile destroyed a dummy warhead in a test high over the Pacific, Pentagon officials said.

"Intercept was achieved at 9:41 pm (0241 GMT)," said spokeswoman Cheryl Irwin.

Roaring into space from the Kwajalein Atoll, the interceptor released a "kill vehicle" that sought out and struck the target exactly 30 minutes after it was launched from Vandenberg Air Force Base in California, Irwin said.

The collision occurred 224 km in

space over the mid-Pacific, the Pentagon said.

It was the third consecutive intercept for the Pentagon's ground-based midcourse missile defence system, formerly known as the National Missile Defence (NMD) system. In six tries, it has hit its target four times.

The Pentagon hailed it as "a major step in our aggressive developmental test program."

"The test successfully demonstrated exoatmospheric kill vehicle (EKV) flight performance and 'hit to kill' technology to intercept and destroy a long-range ballistic missile target," the Pentagon said.

It said the system's components

-- early warning sensors, ground radars, computerised command centres and the interceptor -- worked together in an integrated fashion.

"We will continue to pursue this testing regime to achieve a layered approach to missile defence, using different architectures to deter the growing threat of ballistic missiles carrying weapons of mass destruction," it said.

The latest test was almost identical to the previous three except that this time the "kill vehicle" had to distinguish the warhead from three balloon decoys, two more than in previous tests.