

Thousands flock to anti-war rallies

REUTERS, Rome

Waving banners and ringing church bells, thousands of Italians flocked to peace rallies across the country on Saturday to protest against a possible U.S. military strike on Iraq. Anti-war groups said demonstrators in 100 cities from the financial hub of Milan to the tip of the Italian boot participated in the protests. Thousands of people streamed through the historic centres of Milan, Florence, Bologna, Catania and Bergamo in the morning and many thousands more took to the streets of Rome in the evening.

"Against the war without ifs or buts!" one Milan banner declared as swarms of students marched through the streets.

"This protest gives a clear message without any doubt that we are against this war and against wars in general," said Luca Corradini, a student leader.

In Rome, a group of women hand-cuffed together headed a massive march to the capital's historic Piazza Venezia.



People march with a banner reading, "A world without war is necessary" in Genoa on Saturday. Thousands of anti-war demonstrators took to the streets of several major Italian cities including Milan, Bologna, Venice and Florence Saturday to protest US plans to attack Iraq.

War with Iraq Seems unavoidable: Bush

REUTERS, Washington

President Bush warned war with Iraq might be unavoidable, as Baghdad's foreign minister visited frontline Gulf Arab states with close military ties to Washington to plead for their solidarity.

Bush told flag-waving supporters in the eastern U.S. state of New Hampshire Saturday that Iraqi President Saddam Hussein had to be prevented from inflicting "massive and sudden horror" with weapons of mass destruction.

The danger to Americans was "grave and growing," he said. "There's no negotiations; there's nothing to talk about. We don't want you to have weapons of mass destruction," Bush said in a speech previewing a television address Monday to tell Americans why the United States should be prepared to go to war.

Under the threat of attack, Iraq has said it will allow back in U.N. weapons inspectors who left in 1998 after years spent trying to identify and destroy nuclear, chemical and biological weapons programs.

"You agreed to that, you said you would agree to that. Now you've got to show the world you don't have them. It's up to you, Mr. Hussein," Bush added.

In his weekly radio address aired Saturday, Bush said: "If...the Iraqi regime persists in its defiance, the use of force may become unavoidable."

The United States does not want inspectors to return to Iraq until the United Nations passes a tough new resolution which would give inspectors the right of access to every inch of Iraqi territory, and Washington the right to attack it and when it judges Iraq has violated the inspection regime.

Russia, France and China have grave doubts about granting Washington

such sweeping authorisation.

"There are no serious obstacles to inspectors returning to Iraq as soon as possible," Russian Foreign Minister Igor Ivanov told Russian television. "No new UN Security Council resolution is required."

Underlining Muslim anger with U.S. policy toward Iraq, Malaysia Sunday rebuked the United States for its stated goal of seeking Saddam's overthrow.

"One nation cannot demand that another change its government -- or else," Deputy Prime Minister Abdullah Ahmad Badawi said at the opening of the annual meeting of the World Economic Forum East Asia.

A senior US administration official sought to blunt criticism that the United States had not planned sufficiently for a post-Saddam Iraq.

"Should force be required, U.S. and coalition forces will liberate the Iraqi people from the tyranny of Saddam Hussein," Zalmay Khalilzad, a senior presidential aide, told a conference on foreign policy.

"We will not enter Iraq as conquerors. We will not treat the Iraqi people as a defeated nation."

Iraqi Foreign Minister Najib Sabri went to Oman after two days in Bahrain, headquarters of the US Fifth Fleet. Oman too has close military ties to Britain and the United States and has recently been the venue for major Western military exercises.

In Bahrain, Sabri called for solidarity with Iraq and said the region faced a serious threat to its security and future. Oman's official news agency said Sabri was carrying a message from Saddam to Oman's ruler Sultan Qaboos.

Gulf and other Arab states have indicated they will only support a military strike on Iraq with UN backing.

'Israel to deploy missile defense system'

AFP, Washington

Israel is deploying a missile defence system to protect Tel Aviv and other major cities if they come under attack from Iraq's arsenal of scud missiles, the New York Times reported Sunday.

Once it fully deploys the missile defence system, which will take about two years, Israel will be the first nation in the world to have a nationwide missile defence system, the daily reported.

The new missile system, known as the Arrow, is designed to avoid the pitfalls of the American Patriot system, which Israel says had little success in stopping Iraq's scud missile attacks during the Persian Gulf war in 1991.

The program, which cost more than two billion dollars, is partly financed by the United States, the Times reported.

India to use Israeli radars to check Kashmir infiltration

AFP, New Delhi

India is to use imported radars from Israel along its disputed border with Pakistan in Kashmir to detect cross-border movement of Islamic rebels, an official said Sunday.

A defence ministry source said the deal was signed recently, while the Press Trust of India (PTI) news agency said India had already received the first of the 1,022 portable radars, which can detect human movement up to 10 kilometres (six miles) away. India has already installed some of these radars along the Line of Control -- the de facto border dividing Kashmir into Indian and Pakistani administered regions, the report added.

WHO seeks \$300 m a yr to fight TB

AFP, Geneva

The World Health Organisation (WHO) needs an extra 300 million dollars a year to reach its goals in the fight against tuberculosis, a WHO statement said on Sunday.

"Tuberculosis experts working with WHO estimate that the total cost of tuberculosis control worldwide is 1.2 billion dollars every year," the statement said.

"Three quarters of that total is already covered by countries, donors and other sources. The remaining 300 million dollars each year is urgently needed if the targets are to be met by 2005", the statement added.

Hizbul utters no mercy for polls participants

AFP, Srinagar

Kashmir's dominant Islamic militant group, Hizbul Mujahedin, threatened Sunday to "teach a lesson" to all participants in the ongoing state elections in the disputed region.

The group, which wants Kashmir to secede from India and join neighbouring Pakistan, also called for a one-day strike on Tuesday, when the last round of voting in the four-phase election is taking place.

"We will not pardon all those who participated in the elections," the group's Kashmir-based chief commander Saiful Islam told a local news agency.

Arafat signs law making Jerusalem future capital

REUTERS, Ramallah

President Yasser Arafat signed a law on Saturday formally declaring Jerusalem to be the capital of a future independent Palestinian state, legislative speaker Ahmed Korei said.

"President Arafat signed the 'Jerusalem The Capital' law stipulating that Jerusalem is the capital of a future independent state and the centre of the legislative, judicial and executive authorities," Korei, speaker of the Palestinian Legislative Council (PLC), said.

Korei said Arafat decided to sign the law, which had been presented to him by the PLC two years ago, in response to the new U.S. legislation which President Bush signed this week requiring the government to stipulate on documents that Jerusalem is the capital of Israel.

Arafat has often spoken of the Palestinians' determination to make

Arab East Jerusalem the capital of a future independent state. The PLC was due to discuss the new U.S. law in a special session on Sunday.

AFP adds: The Palestinian parliament held a special session Sunday to discuss the issue of Jerusalem after Yasser Arafat signed in a law making it the future Palestinian capital in response to US moves to recognise it as Israeli.

The assembly was also set to discuss the Palestinian leader's demand for several extra weeks to name a new cabinet after the assembly last month rejected a previous reshuffle, announced in June, which members said did not go far enough in implementing promised reforms.

Arafat announced Saturday he was signing into law a nearly two-year-old bill making Jerusalem the Palestinian capital in response to a new US law effectively recognising the city as Israel's capital.

I won't run govt after polls: Musharraf

APP, Islamabad

Pakistan President Pervez Musharraf said on Saturday he would not be "running" the government after general elections on October 10 and promised to hand over "full" responsibility to the elected Prime Minister.

Chairing the Cabinet meeting here he said, "After the elections, the Prime Minister will be fully in charge and empowered to govern the country," he was quoted as saying by the official APP news agency.

He said as President of Pakistan, however, he would discharge his constitutional duties to ensure continuity of good governance through constitutional measures.

Ever since he brought in the new constitutional amendments granting him powers to dismiss the Parliament, Musharraf has said he would hand over powers to run day-to-day administration to the Prime

Minister and keep a strict vigil on the functioning of the elected government.

In his address to the Cabinet, he said it would be his endeavour to bring political harmony in the country.

"I am confident that as a result of forthcoming elections a new political culture of tolerance, accommodation and responsibility will emerge replacing the culture of complete political polarisation and conflict as we witnessed in the past decade," he said.

Musharraf said there should be an end to political polarisation and politics of hatred. "I believe that politicians have also realised that political polarisation and hatred will no longer be acceptable to people of Pakistan."

According to officials Musharraf would address the nation on October 9, a day ahead of general elections.



Women supporters of Mohajir Qaumi Movement party (MQM-HP) cheer at a election rally in Karachi late Saturday. Pakistan's 72 million voters is to elect their new leaders on October 10 elections promised under President Pervez Musharraf's vow to restore democracy after his three years military ruling since 1999.

Pakistanis divided over fairness of elections

But Musharraf enjoys popular support

AFP, Islamabad

Pakistani voters are divided over whether Thursday's polls will be fair, but a majority hold a favourable view of President Pervez Musharraf and his military government, a survey here said.

The survey predicts around 42 percent of the 72 million registered voters will cast their ballots, despite a low key campaign in the absence of traditional rivals Benazir Bhutto and Nawaz Sharif, who are both banned from running and live in exile.

Voter turnout in the previous elections in 1997 was a scant 36 percent.

Some 43 percent of those surveyed in the poll, carried by the Daily Times of Lahore on Saturday, believe the vote would be "very or somewhat fair" while an equal number of respondents had no opinion.

Fourteen percent said the polls would be "very or somewhat unfair,"

in a survey jointly conducted by the independent Pakistan Institute of Legislative Development and Transparency (PILDAT) and Gallup Pakistan.

Three years after Musharraf ousted elected prime minister Nawaz Sharif in a bloodless coup, the president's approval rating is well above 50 percent, with 58 percent holding "a very or somewhat favourable impression" of the general.

A scant 13 percent were very or somewhat opposed to Musharraf, while around 21 percent described themselves as neutral.

Some 25 percent support the Pakistan People's Party (PPP) of former prime minister Bhutto, 19 percent backed Sharif's Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N), and 14 percent were in favour of the pro-government PML-Q faction led by Mian Mohammad Azhar.

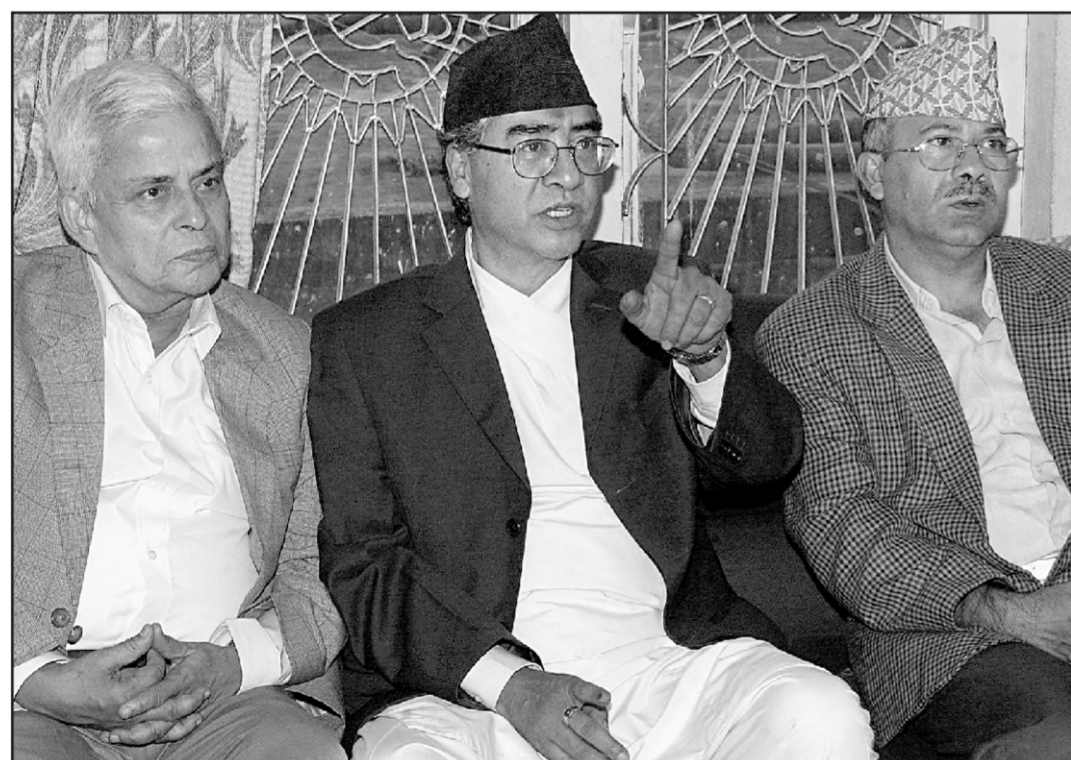
While 22 percent remained undecided, only five percent were in

favour of the Muttahida Majlis e Amal (MMA), an alliance of six Islamic fundamentalist parties.

Some 47 percent said Bhutto and Sharif should have been allowed to take part in the election. Both have been disqualified under new electoral laws enacted by Musharraf.

In another poll commissioned by the BBC's Urdu-language website BBCUrdu.com, published on Wednesday, 27 percent of respondents gave the edge to the PPP, 24 percent to the PML-Q, while only 12 percent thought the PML-N would win a majority of seats in parliament.

The survey published by the Daily Times said 17 percent expect Azhar will be the next prime minister, 14 percent named cricket hero-turned politician Imran Khan, and 12 percent believe the PPP's chief candidate Makhdoom Amin Fahim will head the next government.



Nepal's sacked caretaker Prime Minister Sher Bahadur Deuba (C) meets with Opposition leaders of the Nepal Communist Party - United Marxist and Leninist party, General Secretary Madhav Kumar Nepal (R) and Politbureau member Bharat Mohan Adhikari (L) in Kathmandu on Saturday. Rival political parties in Nepal said they would join forces after King Gyanendra surprised the country by sacking Deuba and the cabinet and taking power temporarily.

'King's sacking of PM unconstitutional'

AFP, Kathmandu

The dramatic sacking of Nepal's prime minister by the king was unconstitutional but could be seen as a necessary step to save the country from political squabbling, analysts and observers said Sunday.

In a surprise announcement King Gyanendra on Friday said he had dismissed caretaker prime minister Sher Bahadur Deuba for being "incompetent" and the cabinet and taken power until he appointed a new premier in five days time.

The king, a constitutional monarch whose role is supposed to be largely ceremonial, also indefinitely suspended elections which were due to be held in November.

"The unprecedented decision taken by the king has both positive and negative aspects," said Kapil Shrestha, a professor of political science at Kathmandu's Tribhuvan University and a member of the country's human rights commission.

"The judgement by the king is too premature and inconclusive, but at the same time the positive side is the king has repeated his solemn commitment to multi-party democracy and he has assured the people that he will facilitate elections,"

Shrestha said. But he said the king was tampering with the constitution, introduced when Nepal returned to democracy in 1990 following 30 years of partyless autocratic rule and warned that he could try to hold onto power.

"The step of the king is an extra-constitutional step and his next move is being closely watched by the supporters of democracy throughout the world."

"Should he fail to abide by the commitments he has made, he will be risking the credibility and legitimacy of his rule."

Gyanendra has been king for just 16 months. He came to the throne in June 2001 after his brother, King Birendra, was gunned down along with eight other members of the royal family by the crown prince, who then shot himself.

Birendra had presided over the move to democracy in 1990, but Gyanendra was seen as a more hardline monarch who was said to be opposed to the reestablishment of the multi-party system and the transfer of power from the king to parliament.

The king's move came after Deuba requested that the elections

be postponed for one year because of the Maoist rebellion that has claimed some 5,000 lives in a six-year struggle for a communist republic.

Deuba had in May called the elections two years ahead of schedule, but he was facing fierce opposition from rival political parties who said the polls could not be free and fair in the context of a violent insurgency.

Shrestha said the bitter rows over the election -- which also led to the country's oldest party the Nepali Congress splitting into two factions -- had meant the king had no choice.

"The king did not have many options because if he had agreed to postpone elections as per the decision of the prime minister and other political parties, he would not have pleased everybody," he said.

"So in a way the king has taken a courageous step to prevent squabbling."

Law enforcement officials say the surveillance program has provided vital evidence supporting a string of arrests and indictments since late summer, including recent arrests in western New York, Detroit, Seattle, and Portland, Oregon.

Oil tanker explodes off Yemen

REUTERS, Sanaa

Fire raged on a French oil tanker off the coast of Yemen Sunday after an explosion, and officials variously said they suspected a leak of crude or an attack by a boat laden with explosives.

A senior French diplomat in Yemen said it was too early to tell whether the blast that ripped through the Limburg off the southeastern port of Mina al-Dabah in the Gulf of Aden had been an accident or not.

"It is too soon to say anything. So far, there are many contradictory reports. It could be that a small ship with explosives collided with the tanker. Maybe something happened, it is too early," Vice Consul Marcel Goncalves told Reuters.

"The ship is burning and sinking," Yemeni officials said 11 of the 25 crew had been rescued so far.

Reports of a boat approaching the tanker raised the specter of an incident in 2000 when suicide bombers rammed a boat laden with explosives craft into the U.S. destroyer USS Cole in the Yemeni port of Aden, killing 17 servicemen.

US investigating hundreds of Muslims in anti-terror probe

AFP, Washington

The FBI is investigating hundreds of people -- mostly young Muslim men -- in an effort to uncover al-Qaeda-trained terrorists operating in the United States, the New York Times reported Sunday.

Senior law enforcement officials told the daily the surveillance campaign is being carried out by every major office of the Federal Bureau of Investigation in the United States.

The effort involves 24-hour monitoring of suspects' telephone calls, e-mail messages, Internet use, credit-card charges, their travel and their visits to neighbourhood gathering places, including mosques, the daily reported.

The campaign also involves efforts to recruit the suspects' friends and family members as government informers.

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"If you look at the number of people who went through the al-

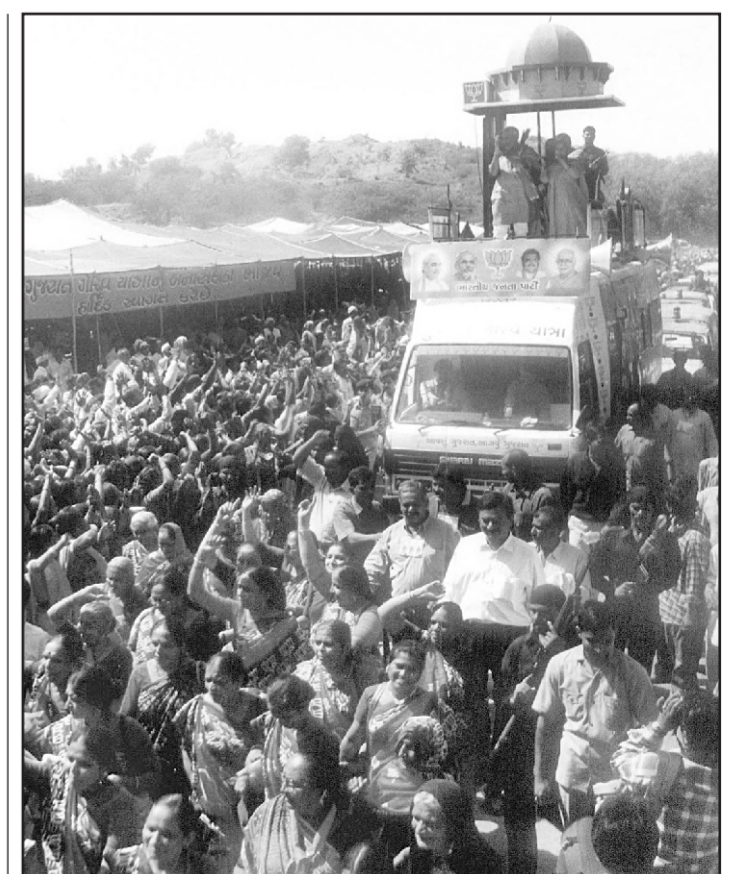
Qaida training camps, and there are literally thousands who did, it stands to reason that a certain percentage of them are in this country," recently-retired FBI agent John Bell told the newspaper.

American counterterrorism officials have estimated that 10,000 to 20,000 young Muslims from around the world trained in Osama bin Laden's camps in Afghanistan.

Bell retired last summer as the special agent in charge of the FBI's field office in Detroit, Michigan, home to the nation's largest population of people of Arab descent.

The surveillance effort has raised alarm from civil liberties groups and some Arab-American and Muslim leaders, however, who complain that the intense scrutiny has unfairly left the perception that all young men of Arab descent or the Muslim faith have some connection to terrorism.

"Young Arab men, in particular, are being treated as suspicious, possibly dangerous," Hussein Ibish, communications director of the American-Arab Anti-Discrimination Committee, told the daily. "I think there have been some really egregious instances of abuse," he said.



Supporters of the Bharatiya Janata Party take part in the Gujarat Gaurav Yatra or Pride of Gujarat Procession on Saturday in Ambaji, some 400 km north of Ahmedabad. The BJP resumed the politically-explosive march aimed at "re-awakening pride" in the region where recent riots left 1,000 people dead.