

Irish Prime Minister Bertie Ahern (C) is welcomed to the polling station at Drumcondra national school in Dublin on Saturday. Ireland voted for a second referendum on Saturday in little more than a year to decide on the Nice treaty.

### EU expansion at stake as Ireland votes

AFP, 5Dublin

Ireland went to the polls Saturday for a second vote on EU enlargement that could yet derail the European Union's grand plan to expand into the formerly communist east and the Mediterranean.

Prime Minister Bertie Ahern, who has promised his nervous fellow European leaders a Yes verdict on the Nice treaty on enlargement, is calling the referendum nothing less than "a date with history."

Polls opened at 0800 GMT and will remain open for 12 hours, though the final results will not be known before late Sunday, government officials said.

The 10 nations in eastern Europe and the Mediterranean which hope to join Europe's exclusive club of rich states in 2004 will be closely watching the outcome after voters rejected the treaty last year.

## US considers Israel's joint operation plan in Iraq

AP, Washington

The Bush administration is weighing an Israel proposal for a joint operation in Iraq's western desert to disarm Iraqi missiles before they could be launched against Israel.

If successful, the operation might not only protect Israeli civilians from an Iraqi attack like the one they weathered in the 1991 Persian Gulf War but eliminate the troublesome prospect of an Israeli retaliatory attack on Iraq.

Under the proposal, which would involve American special forces troops, Israel would furnish the United States with intelligence about the sites and how to disarm them early in the conflict.

The idea was presented during Prime Minister Ariel Sharon's talks in Washington this week with President Bush and senior White House, Pentagon and State Department officials.

Afterward, both sides said Sharon had received assurances the United States would make a maximum effort to reduce any threat to Israel posed by Iraq.

The Israeli plan was not announced, but an account was provided to The Associated Press on Friday by a US official on condition of anonymity.

Israel yielded to a request from then-President George H.W. Bush in the 1991 war to hold its fire even though 39 Iraqi Scud missiles struck Israeli territory. The president did not want to risk losing Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Syria and

other Arab nations that joined his war coalition to reverse Iraq's occupation of Kuwait.

This time, however, Sharon has declared Israel "will take the proper steps to defend its citizens" if Iraq launches its missiles against the Jewish state.

While there are fewer Arab nations lined up with the United States than a decade ago, there still would be a risk of defection if Israel were to attack Iraq.

On Wednesday, with Sharon at his side in the Oval Office, Bush endorsed Israel's right to self-defense. Still, the prospect of Israel attacking Iraq could hamper US war preparations.

Sharon was not given a response to the special forces proposal during his three-day visit, and it is under consideration, the U.S. official said.

Bush has approved US combat training for Iraqi opponents of Saddam Hussein, The Washington Post reported Saturday. As many as 5,000 recruits will begin an initial training phase next month, administration and military officials told the newspaper.

The training was authorized by Bush in a presidential directive on Oct. 3, the Post said, and allows for spending \$92 million in Defense Department funds.

On the diplomatic front, the State Department asserted Friday that Bush has the authority to attack Iraq to force it to disarm even if the United Nations does not give the United States the support it has been seeking and not getting for five weeks.

### Kashmir still in the grip of violence: Governor

AFP, Srinagar

The federal governor in Indian Kashmir said Saturday the disputed region was still in the grip of violence, despite the end of state elections that were relentlessly attacked by Muslim militants.

"Although we have successfully seen through the very difficult period of the Amarnath yatra (Hindu pilgrimage), independence day and especially the elections, the threat (of militant violence) continues," Governor Girish Chander Saxena said.

Saxena took over the reigns of the troubled-state on Friday after the interim chief minister refused to serve beyond midnight Thursday, when the term of the previous state assembly expired.

### Cops free hostages from German school

REUTERS, Waiblingen

Police said they had freed the last two boys held hostage at their school in southwest Germany and arrested the pistol-wielding youth who took them prisoner for six hours Friday.

"All witnesses are doing fine, relative to the circumstances," a police spokesman said, adding that no one was hurt when the last hostages were freed shortly after 9 p.m. (3 p.m. EDT).

The 16-year-old hostage-taker, who had demanded one million euros (\$970,000) ransom and a car, was arrested. The four boys aged 11 to 14, whom he seized from a classroom in the afternoon, were freed unharmed.

### Nationalists elected to Bosnian presidency

AFP, Sarajevo

Croat, Muslim and Serb nationalists scored a clean sweep of Bosnia's tripartite presidency in elections two weeks ago, according to final results released by the electoral commission Saturday.

Officials said Sulejman Tihic of the Muslim Party of Democratic Action (SDA), Mirko Sarovic from the Serb Democratic Party (SDS) and Dragan Covic from the Croat Democratic Union (HDZ) would share the largely symbolic joint presidency.

The three parties led Bosnia into brutal inter-ethnic conflict in 1992 and continued to rule the country in a de-facto coalition until the last elections in 2000, when a moderate alliance took control of the central parliament.

## Indonesia passes tough anti-terror decree

### Bali carnage suspect Bashir detained

AFP, Jakarta

Indonesian authorities Saturday arrested a bombings suspect who failed to attend a summons for questioning, hours after assuming sweeping new powers including the death penalty to fight extremism.

Muslim cleric Abu Bakar Bashir was formally arrested in hospital in Solo city after failing to come to police headquarters in Jakarta to be quizzed as a suspect in a bombing spree almost two years ago.

His lawyers said he was too ill to attend after collapsing Friday.

"As of now he is formally arrested but he will remain in hospital until he is healthy enough," criminal investigations director Brigadier General Aryanto Sutadi told AFP by phone from the Central Java city.

"After that we will detain him. He is now under police control."

The government of President Megawati Sukarnoputri, under fire for months for its perceived soft approach to extremists, appeared finally galvanized into action by the October 12 Bali bombing.

Bashir is not a suspect in that blast, which killed at least 186 people.

But Singapore and Malaysia accuse the cleric of links with extremist groups, which he denies. Singapore says he is the spiritual leader of Jemaah Islamiyah, a

Southeast Asian extremist group suspected to be linked to Osama bin Laden's al-Qaeda network.

Indonesian police say they summoned Bashir after Omar al-Faruq, an alleged al-Qaeda operative detained by US authorities, implicated him during questioning by Indonesian investigators.

Embassies, which have already urged their nationals to leave the country if possible, went on heightened alert.

An Australian foreign ministry travel advisory warned of possible reprisal attacks in the event of the arrest of Bashir or other suspected extremists.

Foreign Minister Alexander Downer said Australia had received specific threats of bombings targeting Westerners in the suburbs of Jakarta.

The US State Department Saturday warned Americans to avoid travelling to Indonesia or consider leaving immediately if they are already there.

"The US embassy in Jakarta has received information that indicates extremist elements may be planning additional attacks targeting US interests in Indonesia, particularly US government officials and facilities," the department said.

Hundreds of Bashir's supporters held a noisy protest outside the hospital amid a standoff with scores of police, a witness in Solo said.

One of Bashir's lawyers, Mahendradatta, said the cleric is apparently a suspect in the Christmas Eve, 2000, church bombings which killed 18 people.

"We are convinced that (Bashir) doesn't know and has not made any contact with Omar al-Faruq," Mahendradatta said, urging the media "not to get involved in efforts to spin a web of lies to make someone face a firing squad."

The emergency anti-terrorism decree announced early Saturday, and made retroactive to cover the Bali bombing, authorises the death penalty for extremist acts and allows suspects to be held for up to six months without trial.

"This regulation may reduce some rights but all of this is intended to protect the greater rights of human beings," said Justice Minister Yusril Isha Mahendra in response to fears it could usher in a new era of Suharto-style repression.

Foreign leaders have voiced suspicion the Bali bombing was planned by al-Qaeda, possibly in conjunction with Jemaah Islamiyah.

Al-Faruq was arrested in Indonesia in June and handed over to US authorities. Indonesian police said he has confirmed a Time magazine report that he knew and was helped by Bashir.

### 2 killed in shelling in Pak Kashmir

AFP, Muzaffarabad

Two people have been killed and four others wounded in shelling in the Pakistani-controlled part of Kashmir, officials said Saturday.

The clashes occurred Friday in Leepa valley, some 100 km south-east of Muzaffarabad, the capital of the northern third of the disputed Himalayan region controlled by Islamabad.

"The shelling started in the area at Friday noon and continued until late at night," a military official said, accusing Indian troops of using mortars and medium artillery.

"Two people died on the spot and four were wounded and hospitalized," the official said.

He said four houses were also burnt in shelling.

### Australia FM warns of bomb threats in Jakarta suburbs

AFP, Sydney

Foreign Minister Alexander Downer warned Saturday that Australia had received specific threats of terrorist bombings targeting Westerners in the suburbs of Indonesia's capital, Jakarta.

"The nature of the specific threats in Jakarta is threats of bomb attacks in those certain suburbs against Westerners," Downer told Australian Broadcasting Corporation radio.

"On the basis of intelligence we've received, it's very important we draw people's attention to the risk," he said, urging Australians to strongly consider leaving threatened areas.

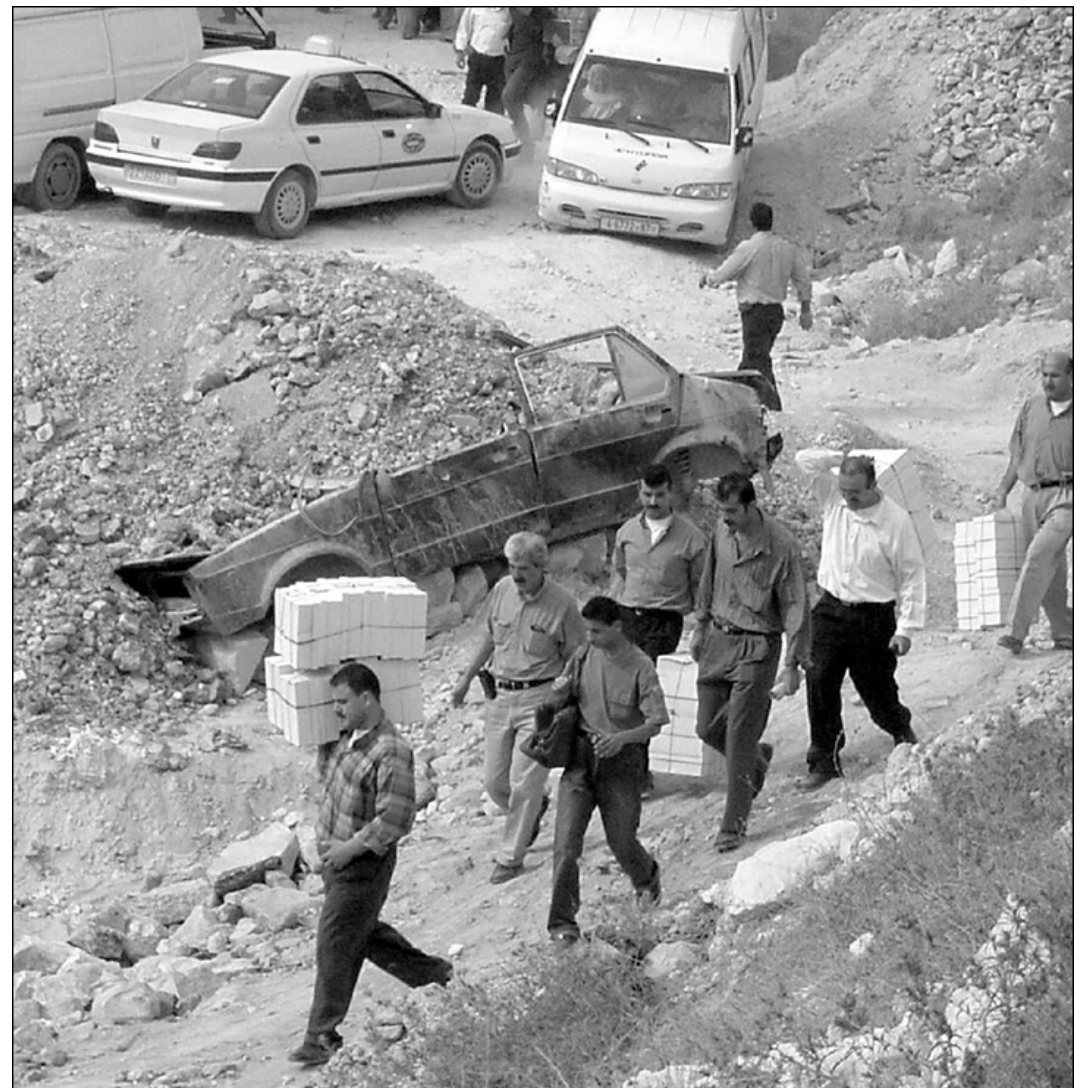
### Nepal waiting for Maoist proposal for talks

AFP, Kathmandu

Nepal is waiting for Maoist rebels to announce a ceasefire and present a formal proposal for talks before taking the next step in the peace process, Deputy Prime Minister Badri Prasad Mandal said in an interview published Saturday.

"The newly formed government is ready to take initiatives for peace talks with the Maoists if they come up with a formal proposal," Nepal's English daily, The Kathmandu Post, quoted Mandal as saying.

"Peace talks with the rebels are necessary to restore peace in the country, which is the main task of the government given by the king," said Mandal, who is also the acting president of the pro-India Nepal Sadbhavana Party.



Palestinians carry their merchandise while crossing through a dirt track on Saturday as they try to make their way out of Jenin into the nearby village of Barkin after the Israeli army had blocked all the main roads in the northern West Bank town. Israeli army declared that it had lifted a curfew in Jenin, but had dug trenches and placed sand embankments around the town to "thwart the movement of weapons, suicide bombers and terrorists."

## Israel eases grip on Jenin under US pressure

### Tel Aviv asked to probe into Rafah killings

REUTERS, Jerusalem

Israel eased its hold on the Palestinian city of Jenin Friday, under pressure from a U.S. government which hopes to calm a conflict that undermines its efforts to win Arab support for possible war on Iraq.

Israeli military and security sources said the army suspended its curfew indefinitely in the West Bank city. They said it would also minimize its presence in Hebron, ahead of talks on a potential withdrawal from the Palestinian city where a small enclave of Jewish settlers live.

But the partial measures that followed Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon's return Friday from a U.S. visit were unlikely to calm tensions aggravated by Israeli shelling that killed at least six Palestinians in the Gaza Strip Thursday.

Palestinian militant groups vowed to avenge the deaths of the Palestinian civilians who were killed

when Israeli troops shelled houses in the Rafah refugee camp in Gaza, after Palestinian gunmen fired rockets at army bulldozers nearby.

The Islamic militant group Hamas promised "a strong response, not only by Hamas but by all the factions, to banish the Zionist enemy."

The call was echoed by the Al-Aqsa Martyrs Brigades, an armed offshoot of President Yasser Arafat's Fatah faction.

The new violence soured the atmosphere before a two-week Middle East tour by U.S. envoy William Burns and imperiled Israeli-Palestinian talks planned for coming days to build on a high-level meeting Wednesday, the first in weeks.

"Every time there's a move to break the vicious cycle of violence, or a meeting like the one we had Wednesday night, the Israeli army responds with massive firepower against Palestinian civilians," said chief Palestinian negotiator Saeb Erekat, who met Israeli Foreign

Minister Shimon Peres in Jerusalem this week.

Burns arrived in Cairo Friday and will visit Israel and the Palestinian territories during his trip, intended to encourage efforts to end violence that has raged since Palestinians began an uprising for independence two years ago.

Meanwhile, the United States on Friday called for an Israeli investigation into the killing of at least six Palestinians in the Gaza Strip on Thursday.

"We are deeply concerned by reports that civilians and children were among those killed and injured," said State Department spokeswoman Anne Marks.

"The government of Israel should investigate the circumstances of these incidents, review its procedures and take all appropriate measures to avoid civilian casualties in their operations," she added.



Italian actor and director Roberto Begnini (L) receiving the trophy of the Foundation Gorbachev for Peace from former Nobel Peace Prize winner Mikhail Gorbachev during the 3rd Summit of Nobel Peace Laureates on Saturday in Rome.

## India crosses finger over talks with Pakistan

PALLAB BHATTACHARYA, New Delhi

With India having de-escalated its military mobilization at the border with Pakistan, analysts here are keeping their fingers crossed over the possibility of resumption of dialogue with Pakistan.

With elections in both Jammu and Kashmir and Pakistan over, the United States and European Union are goading both India and Pakistan for resumption of dialogue, New Delhi is in a bind on the issue, analysts say.

In fact, the international community has for quite some time viewed

resumption of dialogue between the two South Asian nuclear-powered neighbors as a logical next step after re-deployment of their troops from eyeball-to-eyeball location for nearly a year. But India's official

Secretary of State Colin Powell spoke to his Indian counterpart Yashwant Sinha on Thursday night and US Ambassador to India Robert Blackwill met Indian National Security Advisor Brajesh Mishra yesterday.

But India continues to ward off the pressure for further de-escalatory measures vis-à-vis Pakistan. Both Sinha and Mishra made it clear to Powell and Blackwill that there has been no let-up in Pakistan's cross-border terrorism and a complete halt to this is a pre-condition for resumption of dialogue.

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position is that no dialogue with Pakistan is possible as long as that country continues to sponsor cross-border terrorism.

Reflective of the pressure the US is building on India for resumption of dialogue with Pakistan, American

## Dozens of bushfires rage in Australia

AFP, Sydney

Fueled by drought and fanned by high winds, dozens of bushfires raged out of control Saturday in eastern Australia, where one woman has already been killed and hundreds of people evacuated from their homes, officials said.

A number of properties were destroyed and several firefighters injured in one blaze raging out of control in the wine-producing Hunter Valley region of northern New South Wales state, fire brigade officials said.

"There have been property losses. I can't confirm numbers or types," spokesman Ian Krimmer said.

Emergency services said they may have to withdraw their crews from another front in southern Queensland state as gusting winds pushed flames over a firebreak. One fireman was severely burned battling those fires on Friday.

"We have to be careful that the wind doesn't whip the fire around our crews, so we are assessing the situation as to whether we may need to pull the crews out at this stage," a spokeswoman for the local fire brigade said.

More than 200 people were evacuated from the area, where six homes and several outbuildings and vineyards already destroyed, she said.