

Another sniper shooting in Washington

AFP, Washington

A man was shot in the chest early Tuesday in the Washington suburb of Montgomery County, Maryland, in what could be another attack by the Washington area sniper, media reports said.

The victim, a man, was shot at around 5:56 am (0956 GMT) near a bus stop on a main thoroughfare, according to initial reports, which said that he was being flown by helicopter to hospital.

Police have cordoned off roads surrounding the shooting scene, at the bus stop along Connecticut Avenue, some 16 to 24 kilometers (10 to 15 miles) north of the capital, CNN said.

The Washington area sniper has killed nine people and wounded three since he launched his murder spree on October 2.

The latest confirmed victim is a 37-year-old man shot late Saturday outside a restaurant in Ashland, Virginia — some 145 kilometers (90 miles) south of Washington. He is recovering from a shot to the abdomen.



PHOTO: AFP

US Marines put up a nuclear, biological and chemical warfare protective tent during an exercise organised by the Kuwaiti Civil Defence to manage the consequences of mass destruction weapons on Monday in Kuwait. US, Kuwaiti, German and Czech forces conducted a mock drill in nuclear, biological and chemical warfare to increase the emirate's level of preparation in the event of Iraqi retaliation if Washington were to launch a strike on Baghdad.

Nobel laureates say 'no' to war with Iraq

AFP, Rome

Nobel peace prize laureates meeting in Rome on Monday delivered a resounding "No" to war with Iraq and gave their full backing to the need for UN-brokered diplomacy to avoid a conflict.

In a joint statement at the end of the third annual forum of Nobel peace laureates, participants including former Soviet president Mikhail Gorbachev (a winner in 1990) and former Polish president Lech Walsia (1983) said recourse to arms as a way of settling problems between states was unacceptable.

"I believe that now we can be more optimistic regarding Iraq," Gorbachev told reporters before leaving for Moscow.

Detained Pak surgeon treated bin Laden

AFP, Islamabad

A top Pakistani surgeon arrested for suspected links to al-Qaida was believed to have treated Osama bin Laden two years ago, a security official said Tuesday.

Doctor Amir Aziz, a widely-respected 46-year-old orthopaedic surgeon with a reputation as a philanthropist, was picked up after leaving Ghurki Hospital in the eastern city of Lahore Monday by Pakistan's military intelligence wing ISI (Inter Services Intelligence) and two American agents, security officials said.

Aziz had been giving free medical treatment to al-Qaida and Taliban fugitives and had in the past treated al-Qaida chief bin Laden, a senior security officer said.

Sept 11 suspect denies advance knowledge of attacks

AFP, Hamburg

The first man to stand trial accused of a direct role in September 11, Mounir El Motassadeq, told a German court Tuesday that he knew nothing of any plans for the attacks.

Motassadeq, a 28-year-old Moroccan, said that although he and the suicide hijackers' alleged ringleader Mohammed Atta were close friends, Atta had never proposed violence.

"It was never like that," Motassadeq told the court in the northern German city of Hamburg. "The conversation never went like that."

Ancient stone box may be evidence of Jesus

AFP, Washington

A 2,000 year-old limestone burial box may be the oldest physical evidence of the existence of Jesus of Nazareth, according to a French scholar writing in a US journal.

An inscription on the empty box, called an ossuary, reads "James, son of Joseph, brother of Jesus" in rough ancient Aramaic letters.

Although all three names were common in ancient times, the statistical probability of them appearing in that combination is extremely slim, according to Andre Lemaire, a French paleographer from the Sorbonne University.

The mention of the dead person's brother is unusual, suggesting that this Jesus was a well-known figure, Lemaire wrote in the Biblical Archaeology Review, a Washington DC-based journal.

Court blocks govt bid to cut Chandrika's power

AFP, Colombo

Sri Lanka's Supreme Court on Tuesday shot down a bid by parliament to reduce the powers of President Chandrika Kumaratunga who is opposed to the government's peace process with Tamil Tiger rebels.

In its decision conveyed to the legislature Tuesday, the court called for a nationwide referendum if Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe's government pushes ahead with the controversial statute amendment.

The government proposed taking away the president's power to sack the legislature on completing one year after the last general election — December 5 for the current parliament.

The last parliamentary election resulted in Sri Lanka having the legislature run by a rival party to the

president's. Kumaratunga had been elected at a direct election in December 1999 to a six-year term.

A government spokesman said Tuesday the coalition was not interested in holding a nationwide referendum on what is known as the 19th amendment and instead would consider going for a snap poll.

The court ruling came amid a deepening political crisis in the country with a key coalition partner in the government facing a major internal power struggle.

The crisis within the Sri Lanka Muslim Congress (SLMC) was threatening the stability of the United National Party (UNP) government of Wickremesinghe.

The UNP has a slender two-seat majority in the 225-member assembly. The withdrawal of the 12 SLMC members, or even a few of them, could seriously undermine the government.

The political instability could hurt the ongoing Norwegian-backed peace bid with Tamil Tiger rebels, which was revived when Wickremesinghe took power, official sources said. The government and the rebels are due to hold a second round of talks in Thailand later this month.

Kumaratunga has opposed the cohabitation government's handling of the peace process.

The supreme court also called Tuesday for a referendum on another constitutional amendment that sought to give immunity from prosecution to members of an independent Constitutional Council.

Officials said the court decision was a blow to the prospects of early establishment of independent bodies to run the civil service, police, the judiciary and the elections department.



PHOTO: AFP

Activists from Insan Foundation, an non-governmental organisation, with dove cut-outs and posters during an anti-US demonstration in Lahore on Monday. Some one hundred activists, including students, took part in the anti-US protest to mark International Peace Day and demanded to establish peace all over the world.

'US post-Sept 11 visa system can't prevent terrorists'

AFP, Washington

New visa procedures implemented after the September 11 attacks are still not adequate to prevent suspected terrorists from obtaining documents to enter the United States, according to a report released Monday.

The General Accounting Office (GAO), the investigative arm of Congress, found that State Department consular officers who issue visas at US embassies abroad are not receiving enough training on how to screen applicants and are often getting conflicting instructions.

"Since September 11, 2001, the US government has implemented several changes to consular operations, but weaknesses remain in visa policies and procedures that limit the effectiveness of the visa process as an anti-terrorism tool," the GAO said in a report to lawmakers.

In addition to insufficient training

and problems with guidance, the GAO said many consular offices were inadequately staffed to handle the stricter visa guidelines.

"The State Department needs to improve its implementation of the visa process to improve its effectiveness and consistency among posts," it said.

The report was commissioned by Congress last November amid moves to prevent suspected terrorists entering the United States in the aftermath of September 11.

The 19 hijackers who committed the attacks in New York and Washington legally received a total of 23 US visas from five different embassies and missions.

Fifteen hijackers were Saudi nationals, 11 of whom were granted visas at the US consulate in Jeddah and four of whom were given visas by the US embassy in Riyadh.

Two United Arab Emirates citizens received visas at the US embassy in Abu Dhabi and at the US

consulate in Dubai. The remaining two hijackers obtained visas at the US embassy in Berlin.

Since those facts became public, the United States has vastly increased the number of names on its terrorism watchlists and required more detailed information from visa applicants.

But the GAO, whose investigators travelled to number of missions, including the five that approved the hijackers' visas, said more needed to be done "to strengthen the visa process as a tool to prevent terrorists from entering the United States."

It recommended that the State Department implement a new clear policy attaching the highest priority "to addressing national security concerns through the visa process," improving training for consular officers, boosting the numbers of officers and greater cooperation with other government agencies.

UN weighs new Iraq resolution

Russia still not convinced

AFP, United Nations

The five permanent members of the UN Security Council were Tuesday to mull a new text to disarm Iraq that the United States hopes will soon be adopted, but Russia said was seriously disappointing.

The White House said the resolution was moving forward after a first day of debate on Monday, but Russia, which with France has voiced the loudest opposition to US war plans, reportedly balked at the draft.

"I think it's moving forward nicely," said spokesman Ari Fleischer, warning of "serious consequences" if Iraq failed to comply.

However in Moscow, a Russian source told Itar-Tass and Interfax news agencies the new proposal appeared little different to the original draft.

"It is clear from a first look that as far as the main issues are concerned this document is little different from the US-British proposals put forward before and which were not acceptable to Russia and other permanent members of the Security Council," the source said.

The new text was a "serious disappointment, particularly since US officials have said a lot in recent days about being ready to take into account the positions of other countries and to find a mutually acceptable compromise."

Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Yury Fedotov had earlier said: "Mos-

cow would not like a new draft resolution to contain provisions authorising the automatic use of force against Iraq, or unfeasible requirements which might lead to new crises and tensions in the country."

Chief UN weapons inspector Hans Blix was to arrive in Russia on Tuesday for talks with Foreign Minister Igor Ivanov.

ITAR-TASS quoted diplomatic sources as saying the two would discuss conditions for the return of weapons inspectors to Iraq.

State Department spokesman Richard Boucher said the new revised text contained changes designed to ease French and Russian objections to the automatic authorisation of the use of force against Baghdad.

Both Fleischer and Boucher signalled that Washington was unlikely to bend much further and wanted the resolution adopted as soon as possible.

"We're also making clear that it's time to wrap this up and would like to see this finished," Boucher said.

He refused to detail the revisions saying the resolution would not be negotiated in public.

But a senior State Department official said Washington had conceded points on the consequences of Iraqi non-compliance with UN arms inspectors and the actual inspection regime.

Cong may give up talks with PDP to form Kashmir govt

AFP, New Delhi

India's main opposition Congress party said Tuesday it was considering giving up on talks with a Kashmir regional group to form a government in the violence-torn state after two weeks of deadlock.

The Congress and the People's Democratic Party (PDP) together swept out of power Kashmir's long-ruling National Conference in the four-phase election that closed October 8, but have since been squabbling over who will head a coalition government.

UN HR envoy meets with Suu Kyi

AFP, Yangon

United Nations human rights envoy Paulo Sergio Pinheiro met Myanmar's opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi on Tuesday as part of his 11-day mission to the military-run country, witnesses said.

Pinheiro, who arrived in Yangon last Thursday, has also held talks with leading members of the ruling junta including military intelligence chief General Khin Nyunt and Foreign Minister Win Aung.

Witnesses said he was seen arriving at Aung San Suu Kyi's lakeside residence by car, accompanied by his entourage including United Nations staff based in Yangon.

Mastermind of Advani, Modi's murder plot killed

PTI, Ahmedabad

Suspected Jaish-e-Mohammad terrorist Samir Khan, arrested on the charge of plotting to eliminate Deputy Prime Minister LK Advani and Gujarat Chief Minister Narendra Modi, was killed in an encounter with police after he "tried to make a bid to escape" in Usmanpura area in Ahmedabad early on Tuesday, police said.

Thirty-year old Khan, who had allegedly undertaken rigorous training in Karachi, Rawalpindi and terrorist hide-outs in Pakistan-Occupied-Kashmir was picked up from the state transport bus terminus in Ahmedabad on September 27 on his arrival from Mumbai.



PHOTO: AFP

Firefighters extinguish a fire in a bus and cars after a suicide car bomb killed at least 14 people and wounded 48 others as it tore apart the bus at Karkur Junction just outside the town of Pardes Hanna, between Tel Aviv and Haifa on Monday. The armed wing of the radical Palestinian Islamic Jihad claimed responsibility for the attack.

Arafat condemns bus bombing in Israel

Tel Aviv blames his leadership

AFP, Jerusalem

Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat condemned a car bomb attack on a bus in Israel Monday which killed at least 14 people, even as Israeli officials put the blame squarely on his leadership.

"I reject this operation completely," Arafat said in a statement from his headquarters in the West Bank town of Ramallah.

"The Palestinian leadership is against the killing of civilians on both sides."

But Israeli officials were unimpressed by the veteran Palestinian leader's remarks, insisting that before any return to peace talks, they wanted to see the sort of firm ceasefire on the ground that could only be brought about by his replacement.

"Before we can embark on any roadmap (for peace) there must be an absolute end to terror and violence, and this is contingent on a change in the Palestinian leadership," said Zalman Shoval, foreign

policy advisor to Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon.

"We hold him (Arafat) responsible by direct commission or omission."

The suicide car bombing, in which nearly 50 people were also wounded, was claimed by the Palestinian militant group Islamic Jihad.

A jeep packed with explosives pulled alongside the bus at Karkur junction near the town of Pardes Hanna, between Tel Aviv and Haifa.

Arafat's Palestinian Authority (PA) later issued its own statement on the bombing, urging a quick resumption of the peace process and an end to the violence.

"The Palestinian Authority calls immediately for the resumption without condition of the peace process, as this is the only way to break the circle of violence and bloodshed."

The Authority asked the diplomatic "quartet", which groups Moscow, Washington, the European Union and United

Nations, "to move immediately and deploy international observers on the ground."

"The way of security is not through siege and closure and reoccupation ... but through the peace process and ending the occupation to establish a Palestinian state beside Israel," it said.

But the calls for peace failed to win over Israeli ministers, who urged Sharon to continue his hard-line stance in the Palestinian territories.

Israel's only option was to "do in the future what we have done in the past — to keep our foot on the gas, to continue to act against the terror infrastructure and not to pursue 'friendly talks' with the Palestinian Authority," said Internal Security Minister Uzi Landau.

"Only after we have pulled (terrorism) out by the roots will we be able to negotiate," he told public television.

6 alleged al-Qaida men indicted in US

REUTERS, Buffalo

Six Yemeni-American men were indicted on Monday on charges of supporting the Islamic extremist group al Qaeda, in what has become a test case in the Bush administration's prosecution of terrorism suspects.

US Attorney Michael Battle said a grand jury handed up a two-count indictment charging the six with conspiring to provide material support to a foreign terrorist organisation, al Qaeda, and providing material support to the group that the United States blames for the Sept. 11 attacks.

The men were scheduled to be arraigned in federal court in Buffalo on Tuesday. If convicted, they could face a maximum penalty of 15 years in prison for the conspiracy count and 10 years for the other count.

US prosecutors obtained the indictment five weeks after detaining the men from Lackawanna, New York, near Buffalo, on the basis of statements by two of them that they

attended an al-Qaida camp in Afghanistan in the spring of 2001.

Lawyers for the men — Sahim Alwan, 29, Mukhtar al-Bakri, 22, Yasein Taher, 24, Faysal Galab, 26, Yahya Goba, 25, and Sharaf Mosed, 24 — said they had gone to neighbouring Pakistan to further their education in their faith and were not members of a "sleeper cell" planning an attack on the United States.

"I'm not surprised. We anticipated that this was going to happen," said Bakri's attorney, John Molloy.

The men were charged under the 1996 Anti-Terrorism and Effective Death Penalty Act. The law makes it a crime to provide "material support," including "personnel," to groups listed by the government as terrorist organisations.

Alwan, who cooperated with the FBI, was on Oct. 8 ordered released on bail, but under house confinement with electronic and satellite monitoring. He remains detained, however, pending his ability to meet stringent bail conditions.



Ooi Han Boon of Malaysia shows his costume during the Best National Costume sub-contest for the Grasim Mr. International 2002 male beauty pageant in New Delhi on Monday. The finals of the Grasim Mr. International will be held on October 26 in the Indian capital.