

Protests continue in Venezuela

AFP, Caracas
Tens of thousands of people took part in rival rallies in Caracas Saturday, further fuelling tension one day after at least three people were shot dead during a protest against President Hugo Chavez.
Meanwhile, an open-ended general strike entered its seventh day Sunday with no end in sight.
"We are not close to a solution," said Organisation of American States Secretary General Cesar Gaviria after talks late Saturday between government and opposition representatives ended without an accord.

Nepali bus blown up by land mine: 5 killed

AP, Katmandu
A land mine blew up a bus carrying soldiers, police and civilians in Nepal on Sunday, killing at least five passengers and wounding 30, police said.
They blamed Maoist rebels for the attack on a highway near Karkare village in Sindhuli district, 125 miles southeast of the capital, Katmandu.
An officer who spoke on condition of anonymity said two soldiers were among the dead. Six soldiers and three policemen were among the injured.
Army helicopters flew the wounded to nearby hospitals.

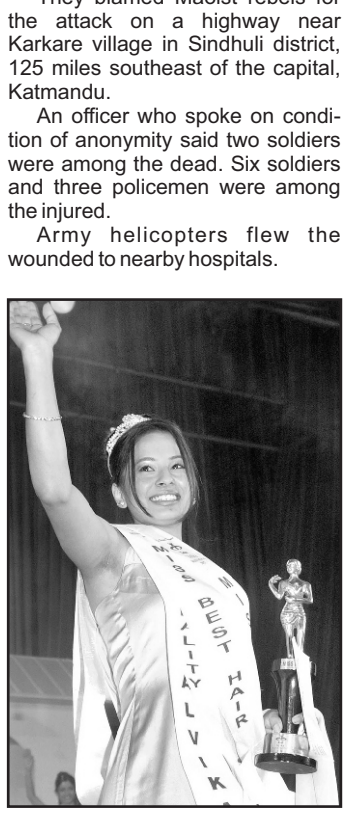


PHOTO: AFP
Newly crowned Miss Nepal Malvika Subba waves after winning her title in Kathmandu on Saturday. Subba, who also took the Miss Talent, Miss Personality and Best Hair titles, will be representing Nepal in the next Miss World pageant.

200 corpses found in Ivory Coast mass graves

AFP, Abidjan
Nearly 200 corpses have been found in two mass graves in the west African state of Ivory Coast, the scene of renewed fighting between government troops and rebels in an 11-week old conflict, witnesses said on Saturday.
A community leader said one mass grave contained more than 100 bodies. Missionaries said they had been told of a second grave further east with 80 corpses.
Villagers said the first grave was piled with bodies of foreigners hunted down since fighting began in September. The second held soldiers slain by rebels.
Boureima Ouedraogo, leader of the Burkina Faso immigrant community in Monko-Zohi, said "men in uniform" had killed some 120 west African immigrants in the area on November 29 and piled them into the grave, which was uncovered on Thursday by French soldiers.

Flames ring Sydney

AFP, Sydney
Reinforcement firefighters rushed to Australia's famous Blue Mountains Sunday after a bushfire broke containment lines and left Sydney surrounded by a ring of flames.
The blaze at the popular tourist destination, which destroyed two homes and threatened an historic hotel, was one of about 70 bushfires burning across New South Wales.
More than 4,500 mostly volunteer firefighters took advantage of easing conditions early Sunday to strengthen containment lines amid fears conditions would dramatically worsen.
But their work was rendered useless within minutes when strong winds whipped up the flames and carried them across fire breaks in the Blue Mountains, Sydney's northwestern outskirts and Shoalhaven south of the city.



PHOTO: AFP
Iraqi officials seal a suitcase destined for the United Nations Security Council containing a mass of documents detailing Iraq's nuclear, chemical and biological activities after handing out the documents to UN officials, at the UN in Baghdad on Saturday. The 12,000-page declaration flown to New York and Vienna on Sunday.

Gujarat gears up for polls as religious fervour peaks

Diplomats to observe election

AFP, Mumbai
India's riot-hit western state of Gujarat goes to the polls Thursday against a backdrop of religious violence which killed 1,000 people earlier this year.
The victims, mainly Muslims, were killed in riots sparked after a mob - believed to be predominantly Muslim - torched a train carrying Hindu hardliners on February 27, killing 58 people.
Chief Minister Narendra Modi's BJP government has been accused by the main opposition Congress party and rights groups of turning a blind eye to the violence.
He called the December 12 elections hoping to capitalise on a wave of Hindu nationalist fervour after the riots.
"The BJP has gone back to its core ideology of Hindutva (Hindu way of life) and Pakistan-bashing," said Rajnikant Desai, a professor of politics at Gujarat University in Ahmedabad.

Ahmedabad.
"Large parts of Gujarat are swept up by this wave which is increasing hour by hour ahead of the elections."
"Congress, on the other hand, is talking of economic issues, but secretly banking its hopes on a large chunk of Hindu votes."
Desai predicted that the BJP would win with around 100 to 120 of the 182 assembly seats, while Congress would bag around 70.
A pre-election poll conducted for weekly magazine India Today and television news channel Aaj Tak Saturday said the BJP would get about 110 seats and the Congress, headed by Italian-born Sonia Gandhi, would win about 70 to 80 seats.
The survey, which sought the opinion of about 10,000 eligible voters in 52 constituencies, also found Modi was still the favourite to head the administration in the state.
"As part of a larger game plan, Modi has taken religious passions to

unprecedented levels in parts of Gujarat, including the commercial city of Ahmedabad which was the epicentre of the riots," Desai said.
"Modi's message to the people is clear. He talks of a choice between him or Pakistan President Pervez Musharraf, meaning a victory to Congress means victory to Musharraf."
Meanwhile, foreign missions in India, including those of the United States and Britain, will send officials to the riot-scarred state of Gujarat to "watch" state assembly elections next week, a report said Sunday.
The Hindu newspaper, quoting unidentified sources, said the diplomats would not be "observing" the elections on Thursday, but simply "watching" them.
Communal riots broke out in the western state of Gujarat after a Muslim mob torched a train carrying Hindu activists in Godhra town on February 27.

Armitage in Asia to drum up support for Iraq war

AFP, Tokyo
US Deputy Secretary of State Richard Armitage arrived in Japan Sunday on the first leg of a four-nation tour of Asia in a bid to drum up support for a possible American-led attack on Iraq.
Armitage, Washington's second highest-ranking diplomat, arrived at Tokyo's Narita airport around 3:55 pm (0655 GMT) Sunday, an embassy spokesman said, just hours after Iraq handed to the UN a 12,000-page declaration of its banned weapons program.
The document is expected to determine whether the UN disarmament process ends in peace or war.
The US envoy is expected to present a possible war scenario to Washington's three key regional allies Japan, South Korea and Australia as well as China.
Armitage's spokesman Philip Reeker said the Asia trip was "part of our continuing consultations with friends and allies on Iraq and efforts to ensure that Iraq complies with the UN Security Council Resolution

1441 and other relevant UN resolutions."
Resolution 1441, under which UN weapons inspectors returned to Iraq, requires Baghdad to make a "currently accurate, full, and complete declaration of all aspects" of its banned weapons programmes.
On Monday, Armitage is to meet with Japanese Foreign Minister Yoriko Kawaguchi, Vice Foreign Minister Yukio Takeuchi and Defense Agency Director General Shigeru Ishiba, a foreign ministry official said.
Australian Foreign Minister Alexander Downer said Sunday that he did not believe Iraq's assertion it had no weapons of mass destruction and urged President Saddam Hussein to disarm.
"If he doesn't then he'll of course invite military action," Downer told Channel Ten television.
In Japan, opposition politicians attacked a move by the government to dispatch an Aegis destroyer to the Indian Ocean to provide protection during refuelling of US force ships by Japanese vessels.

Saddam makes first apology to Kuwait

AFP, Baghdad
President Saddam Hussein issued a first-ever apology to Kuwait Saturday for Iraq's 1990 invasion as officials handed over to the United Nations a mandatory declaration of its banned weapons programmes.
The 12,000-page document, which is expected to determine whether the UN disarmament process ends in peace or war, was carried into UN headquarters here in four cardboard boxes and two plastic bags for transmission to New York by the Sunday deadline set by the Security Council.
UN spokesman Hiro Ueki confirmed that in a ceremony at 8 p.m. (1500 GMT) lasting about one hour, "the government of Iraq handed over... documents and CD-ROMs containing Iraq's declaration."
After a chaotic sneak preview for the international media earlier, Iraq's top liaison officer with the United Nations announced that the massive document contained no admissions of banned weapons development as demanded by

Iraq hands over arms documents to UN

AP, Baghdad

A UN plane took off from Saddam International Airport on Sunday morning carrying three sets of voluminous documents detailing Iraq's chemical, biological and nuclear programs as required by a UN Security Council resolution.
The plane later landed on the Mediterranean island of Cyprus, from where the huge declaration was to be transferred to other flights, taking two sets to UN headquarters in New York and one to the UN nuclear agency in Vienna. In New York, the Security Council gets one set, and UNMOVIC the UN Monitoring, Verification and Inspection Commission the other.
A day earlier, President Saddam Hussein grudgingly apologised to Kuwait for his 1990 invasion. That invasion and seven-month occupation ended only when a huge, U.S.-led force drove Iraq out in February 1991.
Saddam's letter to Kuwaitis, read on state television by his information minister, was obviously timed in tandem with the presentation of the "tell-all" arms documents. Although he apologised to the Kuwaiti people, he also repeated Iraqi charges that it was the Kuwaiti government's anti-Iraq oil policies that justified the invasion.
Saddam charged that the Kuwaiti government was now working "with foreigners" who have aggressive designs on Iraq. Thousands of US troops in Kuwait, based there since the 1991 war, would likely play an important role in any new US attack launched to punish Saddam for allegedly stockpiling weapons of mass destruction.
Kuwait's information minister, Sheikh Ahmed Fahd Al Ahmed Al Sabah, rejected Saddam's apology.
While Saddam's apology was unexpected, his arms declaration was long-awaited. The declaration was contained in at least a dozen bound volumes accompanied by computer disks. It covers such subjects as the

1990s UN weapons inspection regime in Iraq, when many arms and much production equipment were destroyed, and "dual-use" industries that can alternate between civilian and military purposes.
The UN resolution requiring the declaration be filed by Sunday also called on Iraq to declare any stocks or programs in chemical, biological or nuclear weapons. The Baghdad government says it has none.
President Bush rejects such Iraqi denials. Reacting to the delivery of the report Saturday, Bush spokesman Ari Fleischer said Washington will analyse Iraq's claims and work with other countries to end "Saddam Hussein's pursuit and accumulation of weapons of mass destruction."
Bush administration officials have threatened war against Iraq if, in its view, Baghdad has not met UN arms control demands. They say they have "solid evidence" Iraq retains weapons of mass destruction, and will eventually supply it to UN inspectors.
The UN investigators, who returned to Iraq two weeks ago after a four-year absence, went out on their daily surprise inspections again Sunday morning, visiting a mining and survey company in Baghdad and a pesticide plant west of the capital.
The UN teams were to receive reinforcements later Sunday, up to 35 additional inspectors, which would more than double their strength. They also received the first of an expected eight helicopters on Saturday, and on Sunday it was being assembled for deployment here.
The previous UN weapons inspection regime collapsed in 1998 amid UN-Iraqi disputes over access to sites and over US spies within the UN operation.
If Iraq is eventually found to have cooperated fully with the inspectors, UN resolutions call for the Security Council to consider lifting economic sanctions imposed on Iraq after it invaded Kuwait in 1990.

Sept 11 probe recommends US intelligence changes

REUTERS, Washington

A draft report of the congressional inquiry into Sept. 11-related intelligence failures recommends clipping the CIA director's authority over all US spy programs and investigating whether a domestic spy agency like Britain's MI5 was needed, government sources said.
The joint inquiry by the Senate and House intelligence committees has drafted a final report, most of which is classified, that is scheduled to go before the panels' 37 lawmakers for a vote on Tuesday, congressional aides said.
It includes more than a dozen recommendations that are unclassified and will be publicly released on Wednesday if lawmakers on the intelligence committees approve the report.
The CIA and FBI have been criticised for missing potential clues that if pursued, critics say, may have led to unravelling the plot that sent four hijacked planes crashing into the World Trade Centre in New York, the Pentagon outside Washington and a Pennsylvania field on Sept. 11, 2001.

Al-Qaida threatens more Mombasa-style attacks in new web claim

AFP, Dubai

The al-Qaeda network of Osama bin Laden threatened more attacks on Israeli and US targets in a fresh claim of responsibility Sunday for last month's attacks in Kenya which killed 13 people. "The two Mombasa attacks are the work of al-Qaeda," the group's spokesman Sulaiman Abu Ghaith said in a voice recording posted on the jihadist online.org Islamist website.
"The Crusader-Jewish alliance will no longer be immune from attack anywhere," Abu Ghaith warned.
"We are going to strike at its vital installations and strategic interests with all means at our disposal," he said, calling on al-Qaeda fighters to "prepare themselves seriously for the next phase which will be bigger and more serious."
"We must use shock weapons against the enemy, by mounting lightning well-targeted operations against him everywhere in

the world so that he feels danger, insecurity and instability on land, at sea and in the air," the al-Qaeda spokesman said.
Three Israelis and 10 Kenyans were killed when three suicide bombers struck a resort hotel near the Kenyan port city of Mombasa on November 28, shortly after a failed missile attack on an Israeli jetliner packed with returning holidaymakers.
The al-Qaeda spokesman said the movement was taking the new step of formally claiming responsibility for the twin attacks because it had succeeded in regrouping in the face of the US-led campaign against it that followed the September 11, 2001 attacks in the United States.
"The nature of our activity stopped us from claiming our jihad (holy war) operations against the Crusader alliance in the previous phase, but now we find ourselves in better circumstances which allow us to do so," said Abu Ghaith.

India to buy low level radar to detect spy planes

AFP, New Delhi

India's defence ministry has given the go ahead to its armed forces to purchase low level transportable radars to help detect intrusions by spy planes in mountainous and desert terrain, local media reported Sunday.
The Indian Air Force submitted a proposal to purchase the radars six years ago but it has been ignored until recently, the Press Trust of India (PTI) news agency said.
But after a reported increase in the number of flyovers by the stealth aircraft, the Indian government approved the 90 million-dollar project.
Defence Minister George Fernandes said Israeli, French and German companies were candidates to provide the radars, PTI reported.
IAF experts said the radars, which can be carried by hand or installed in light vehicles, will give the Indian military the capability to spy up to 60 kilometres (37 miles) into enemy airspace.



PHOTO: AFP
Iranian students hold up a picture of late prime minister Mohammad Mosadegh and the founder of the Nationalist Movement, during a demonstration to mark their National Student Day at Tehran University on Saturday. Iranian police stormed a crowd outside the university and arrested about a dozen people, an AFP correspondent said, after students called for the resignation of the country's judiciary chief. Student protested against the hardline judiciary's sentencing to death of dissident academic Hashem Aghajari.

2 masterpieces stolen from Van Gogh museum

REUTERS, Amsterdam

Two Vincent Van Gogh oil paintings worth millions of dollars were snatched by thieves on Saturday in a daring robbery at an Amsterdam museum dedicated to the tortured 19th century Dutch artist.
Thieves scrambled on to the roof of the Van Gogh Museum using a ladder and ropes, broke in, descended to the first floor of the three story building and disappeared with the renowned paintings about two hours before the museum opened, police said.
The thieves, who triggered the burglar alarm, fled with the oil paintings "Congregation Leaving the Reformed Church in Nuenen" and "View of the Sea at Scheveningen" from a museum with the largest Van Gogh collection in the world.

US war planners fine-tune key command exercises in Gulf

AFP, Doha

Massed before a giant computer screen, hundreds of senior US war planners finalised details Sunday of a major command exercise that could help put the pieces together for an eventual invasion of Iraq.
Battle staff led by General Tommy Franks, commander of US forces in the Gulf, went over the "Internal Look" exercises due to start Monday to test the capabilities of a high-tech forward headquarters mounted at a Qatari army base.
"We are in the final stages of preparations," said Major Bill Harrison, a spokesman for the US Central Command that is staging the computer war games with some 1,000 US and British personnel here and thousands more abroad.
Franks and about 200 aides at the As-Saliyah base gathered in a drab conference room equipped

with computers and a 25-by-25 foot (7.5-by-7.5 meter) screen for the second and final day of their "Rock Drill" walkthrough.
But officials steadfastly avoided any explicit link to US threats to use force if necessary to strip Saddam Hussein's regime in Baghdad of its alleged weapons of mass destruction.
"That's ROCK and not Iraq," one officer said, enunciating carefully. CENTCOM planners refuse to say what scenarios they will be playing out, and only grudgingly concede that "some" will involve Baghdad.
But the week-long exercises are clearly part of an orchestrated drumbeat pounded out by Washington as the task of assessing Saddam's compliance with UN disarmament resolutions hits a critical juncture.
They will kick off as UN officials

get set to pore over a 12,000-page document submitted by Baghdad to back up its claim that Iraq is free of nuclear, biological and chemical arms.
Media access to US army exercises in Kuwait and naval operations in the Gulf has increased significantly in recent weeks. Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld was to visit Qatar after a tour of the Horn of Africa this week.
US Senators Joseph Biden, a Democrat from Delaware, and Chuck Hagel, a Republican from Nebraska, visited the As-Saliyah base Sunday after a trip to northern Iraq to meet with the Kurds, a senior CENTCOM official said.
He said that both praised the state of military planning and Biden was confident of bipartisan support in the US Congress if President George W. Bush decides to go to war against Iraq.



PHOTO: AFP
Two firefighter discuss the fires as flames heads towards houses in the small town of Berowra Heights on the outskirts of Sydney on Sunday. Over 70 fires have surrounded Sydney, raging out of control, destroying houses and property with fire authorities stretched to the limited with 67 helicopters and thousands of fireman battling the blazes.