INTERNÂTIONAL

Arafat blames Laden for exploiting **Palestinians**

Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat has ordered al-Qaeda leader Osama bin Laden to stop exploiting the Palestinian cause to further his own

In an interview with Britain's Sunday Times newspaper, Arafat said he believed bin Laden and his al-Qaeda network were using the Palestinian campaign for independence to gain support in the Islamic

"Why is bin Laden talking about Palestine now? ...He never helped us. He was working in another, completely different area and against our interests," Arafat told the

"I'm telling him directly not to hide behind the Palestinian cause,"

Lankan peace panel moves to dismantle military camps

AFP, Colombo

Sri Lanka's warring parties meeting in Norwegian-brokered peace talks have begun moves to dismantle military camps as a confidencebuilding measure in efforts to end decades of ethnic bloodshed. diplomats said Sunday

Sri Lanka's top defence official, Austin Fernando, and senior rebel military commander Karuna led discussions Saturday, Norwegian diplomats said.

The two men are members of a sub-committee appointed by peace negotiators to move towards deescalating the conflict and normalising the situation in the island's embattled northeast.

100 terror attacks foiled. claims FBI

AP, Washington

Nearly 100 terrorist attacks, some intended to take place on US soil, have been thwarted since Sept. 11, 2001, FBI Director Robert Mueller says. But he warns that many potential terrorists remain at large in the United States.

`We will be at war until we make certain that every member of al-Qaeda is incapacitated in his or her ability to harm the United States," Mueller told The Associated Press.

In a wide-ranging, almost hourlong interview in his seventhfloor conference room at FBI headquarters, Mueller also rejected proposals to shift counterintelligence duties from the FBI to a new agency. He said punishment is not the answer for mistakes by individual FBI agents before the Sept. 11 attacks.

US official in Pakistan for talks

AFP, Islamabad

US Assistant Secretary of State for South Asia Christina Rocca was to arrive early Monday in Pakistan for wide-ranging talks on regional and security issues, officials said.

Rocca is a regular visitor to the region and her trip to Islamabad to meet President Pervez Musharraf. Prime Minister Zafarullah Jamali and other senior officials was described as "routine" by the US embassy.

"She is going to be meeting with senior Pakistan officials and addressing a whole range of issues. Everything is on the table," an embassy spokesman told AFP.

Iraq urges UN to stop **US-British air strikes**

Experts probes defence factories, reinforces inspection mission

REUTERS, Baghdad

Iraq has urged the United Nations to stop an "undeclared war" waged by US and British warplanes policing a self-declared "no-fly" zone in the south of the country.

UN weapons inspectors left their Baghdad base on Sunday, heading for a number of undisclosed sites in their search for traces of banned weapons of mass destruction.

Iraqi Foreign Minister Naji Sabri, in a letter sent to UN Secretary General Kofi Annan on Saturday, said allied planes based in neighbouring Kuwait had violated Iraqi airspace on 1,141 occasions between November 9 and December 6.

"These daily violations...facilitated by the government of Kuwait, and the barbaric bombing of Irag's cities and villages, have reached the level of an undeclared

"The United Nations must take the necessary steps in line with the (UN) charter to halt the aggression."

Iraq does not recognise the no-fly zones set up after the 1991 Gulf War to protect a Kurdish enclave in the north and Shi'ite Muslims in the south from possible attack by President Saddam Hussein's

Sabri's letter coincided with fresh incidents in the southern zone on

Iraq said US and British warplanes attacked civilian targets, but the US military said the planes had targeted Iraqi air defence facilities after coming under fire. Iraqi air defence forces have fired

at US and British aircraft more than 470 times and violated the southern no-fly zone on 13 days this year, a US statement said. In the same period, allied aircraft

About 300 delegates attended on have responded by striking Iraqi the invitation of a committee of six military targets more than 80 times.

Iraq says the air raids often hit

The meeting heard calls for a federal Iraq, liberated from Saddam's Ba'ath Party.

But the extent to which the Iraqi delegates have support in their homeland is unclear. Saddam has now been in power for 30 years and most of the delegates have been in exile for decades

AFP adds: UN weapons experts probed factories linked to missile and warhead production Sunday, as they prepared to step up the pace of disarmament checks in Iraq with new reinforcements of personnel and equipment.

At least four inspection teams went out into the field, an AFP correspondent reported.

An International Atomic Energy Agency team swooped on a plant run by the Um al-Maarik (Mother of All Battles) General Company, in Yusufiya, 30 km west of Baghdad.

VHP sees end to secular forces Congress terms BJP win a victory of fear

AFP, New Delhi

The BJP win in state assembly polls in Gujarat has killed off secular forces, the leader of a hardline rightwing Hindu group said Sunday.

Gujarat "has turned out to be a graveyard for secular forces," said Praveen Togadia, general secretary of the rightwing Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP, World Hindu Council), a group allied with the ruling Hindu nationalist BJP, the Press Trust of India (PTI) reported.

The BJP won 127 seats in the 182-member Gujarat assembly, a two-thirds majority that will enable it to easily form the next government in the wealthy western state

The opposition Congress secured 50 seats, with four seats going to other parties, the Gujarat state information bureau said. One seat was not being contested due to the death of a candidate.

Togadia said the VHP played a role in helping the BJP win in Gujarat. "Ideologically, it is a victory for

Hindutva (Hindu way of life)," he said. "It is a personal victory for The hardline Modi, who cam-

Chief Minister Narendra Modi." paigned on an aggressive pro-Hindu and anti-Muslim plank, has been accused of turning a blind eye to communal violence in Gujarat

earlier this year that killed as many as 2,000 people, mostly Muslims.

civilian sites, killing innocent people.

Washington says civilians are never

search sites on Sunday after

inspecting about a dozen buildings

on Saturday in their busiest day so

last month after a four-year absence

to look for chemical, biological and

UN arms experts set off again to

The inspectors returned to Iraq

Iraq denies having any banned

Washington says it will topple

Saddam's opponents began a

meeting in London on Saturday with

the aim of burying their differences

and mapping out a future for Iraq in

Saddam and disarm Iraq by force if it

fails to disarm voluntarily.

the event Saddam is ousted.

The violence was triggered after a mob, believed to be Muslim, torched a train carrying Hindu pilgrims and activists, killing 58 Shortly afterwards Modi called

elections. His critics said he was seeking to capitalise on the bloodletting and a wave of Hindu national-

PTI adds: The Congress on Sunday said BJP's victory in Gujarat was the victory of "fear and terror generated" by the party and defeat for progress and development championed by the Congress

Labour eyes Jerusalem partition

AFP, Jerusalem

In a bold move likely to stir up feelings over Jerusalem, Israel's Labour party, facing an uphill battle in January elections, said Sunday it would be ready to renounce Israeli claims on the annexed eastern sector of the disputed holy city. Meanwhile the governing right-

wing Likud, which has seen its lead shrink but is still tipped to win the general elections, faces a police inquiry into allegations of corruption during its own internal leadership



A protestor wears a large placard during a demonstration in Paris against a possible US-led war against Iraq on Saturday. Some forty French organisations called for protests across the country for an "anti-war day".

Sharon's Likud looks set to ride out Graft scam AFP, Jerusalem A police probe into allegations of a

cash-for-votes scandal in internal elections could cost Prime Minister Ariel Sharon's Likud party votes. although it is unlikely to shake the resounding victory he is tipped to win in January. "Probity counts with Israel's

citizens and the latest poll on Friday

showed that after the internal Likud

elections, there was already a drop of three to four projected seats," said Mina Tzemah, head of the Dahaf polling institute. "But the scandal hasn't directly

affected Sharon's image, which remains in the eyes of voters trustworthy," she said.

Sharon's popularity has hardly taken a knock since he came to office in March 2001, despite the worsening security and economic situation in the country. Latest polls showed that Likud

would win 35 votes, up from its current 19, during the snap elections on January 28, brought about by the collapse of Sharon's national unity coalition. Éarlier predictions credited Likud

with a probable 38 seats in the 120deputy parliament Sharon's Labour party chal-

lenger Amram Mitzna is set to win 22 seats, down from 25 at present.

But the press gleefully reported on the scandal rocking the rightwing Likud, after three hopefuls for the party electoral list charged they were asked for money in exchange

for support from party central committee members, and a criminal investigation has been opened.

The corruption charges centre on allegations by rejected candidates in the December 8 announcement of the party's electoral slate. Press reports have talked of

suitcases stuffed with bank notes changing hands in the internal elections for parliamentary candi-One of the allegations came from

deputy Nehama Ronen, who said he was asked for 300 dollars for each member of the party's central committee which went his way. Faced with the brewing scandal

Sharon ordered his justice minister Meir Sheetrit to reform the interna electoral system in his party. Labour has done its best to play

up the graft gaffe. "The people will have to choose

between us and a party manipulated by the mafia," Labour deputy Eitan Cabel told AFP. "It is not us who levelled these accusations, but members of the

big party like the Likud is terrible," he "The mafia has made its way into the Knesset," or parliament, was the headline of the top selling daily Yediot Aharonot, quoting Israeli

Likud. That the mafia can take on a

justice ministry sources. But analysts pointed out that Labour are not unburdened by similar accusations and has been struggling to shake off several

Laden tops White House 'hit list'

REUTERS, New York

The Central Intelligence Agency is authorised to kill individuals described as "terrorist leaders" on a list approved by the White House, the New York Times reported in its Sunday editions.

Killing is authorised "if capture is impractical and civilian casualties can be minimised," senior military

President Bush has not waived the executive order banning assassinations, officials told the newspaper. The presidential authority to kill terrorists defines operatives of al-Qaeda as enemy combatants and thus legitimate targets for lethal

Crooner Clinton records CD with Sophia Loren

AFP, Geneva

Former US president Bill Clinton has recorded a CD with legendary Italian actress Sophia Loren and the Swiss Romande Orchestra, Swiss news media reported on Sunday.

For the project, which the report dubbed "top secret". Clinton and Loren reportedly read out a series of texts against a background of orchestral music directed by renowned US conductor Kent

According to the Sunday editions of Dimanche.ch and SonntagsBlick the former head of state, who arrived in Geneva early on Saturday, agreed to participate in the project which was organised by **Dutch record label Pentatione**

S Korea opens talks with North on nuke

South Korea is set to open three days of direct talks on Sunday with the North over its nuclear program, after the Stalinist state threatened to remove seals and surveillance cameras from its nuclear facilities.

Government officials from the two Koreas were to meet at the North's Mount Kumgang resort to begin three days of talks originally intended to focus on family reunions and cross-border travel

But Seoul's delegates were adamant that Pyongyang's nuclear intentions should figure high on the "I will tell them that peace on the

Korean peninsula is threatened by North Korea's nuclear problem, Lee Byung-Woong, head of South Korea's Red Cross delegation, told reporters before departing.

"I will note that the current situation will not help resolve humanitarian issues between the two sides."

North Korea said last week it would reactivate its plutoniumproducing program to produce energy after global oil shipments to the energy-starved country were cut off this month It also threatened to remove

seals and surveillance cameras on its nuclear facilities by itself after the United Nation's International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) appeared to ignore calls to remove the monitor-'If the IAEA fails to expeditiously

take measures to meet our request, we will take necessary measures unilaterally," North Korea's General Department of Atomic Energy chief Ri Je-Son said Saturday.

Pyongyang's official Korean

Central News Agency quoted Ri as

saying the message was delivered letters sent Thursday and Saturday to the IAEA. The Vienna-based IAEA acknowledged Friday it had

received a letter from Ri and director general Mohammed ElBaradei appealed to the isolated nation not to take unilateral steps to remove the seals and monitoring devices "It is essential that the contain

ment and surveillance measures which are currently in place continue to be maintained," he said.

UN Secretary General Kofi Annan, too, urged North Korea to respect safeguards on its nuclear program, and said he hoped Pyongyang would not expel IAEA inspectors.

"I hope we will not get to the stage where they will kick out the inspectors. I know there are hints about that but I hope it doesn't happen," Annan said.

The latest crisis erupted when North Korea declared Thursday it would immediately re-activate a plutonium-producing program frozen under a 1994 arms control accord with the United States.

Under the accord, North Korea agreed to give up its nuclear program and Washington pledged to supply 500,000 tonnes of fuel oil annually and join in a consortium to build two light-water reactors to meet the Stalinist country's fuel needs

Consortium countries halted oil shipments after the United States reported in October that North Korea had admitted to running a nuclear program based on enriched uranium, in breach of the agree-

Rally challenges Chavez rule in Venezuela

Hundreds of thousands of Venezuelans poured into this capital for the biggest opposition rally of a growing political stalemate, many chanting for embattled President

Hugo Chavez to resign.
Punctuated by shouts of ``Chavez get out!" the rally by as many as 1 million or more demonstrators posed a fresh slap to the elected leftist government already struggling with an opposition strike.

Since Dec. 2, Venezuela has been crippled by a general strike launched by labour and business leaders bent on toppling Chavez. The opposition demands Chavez resign or call early elections, angered by what it claims is his inept leadership and mishandling of a deteriorating economy.

Chavez says he won't resign, but he had no immediate response to Saturday night's rally by his foes. Supporters hastily threw a smaller,

but boisterous street demonstration

results after ballot-counting began.

Members of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) set off firecrackers during

celebrations in Bhopal on Sunday in Madhya Pradesh state as counting in

Gujarat's state assembly elections began. India's ruling Hindu nationalists

led in the polls for the riot-hit western state of Gujarat, according to early

On Sunday, as the strike concluded its second week, Venezuelan's awaited the president's regular weekend radio address for his word to those challenging his rule and to US govern-

ment calls for early elections. 'Some kind of early election is needed," US Deputy Assistant Secretary of State Thomas Shannon said Saturday, outlining a new US stance on the Venezuela

crisis at the end of a visit But Foreign Minister Roy Chaderton has said an early election is "not something outlined in the constitution and it can't be moved forward without the corresponding constitutional considerations.'

Venezuela's constitution does not allow for early elections until halfway through a president's term in this case, August 2003 and early elections would require amendments to the constitution

Pak minorities face Islamist threat

Pakistan's religious minorities expressed outrage Sunday over threats they said have been made against non-Muslim politicians.

AFP, Islamabad

Members of the All Pakistan Minorities Alliance (APMA) said they have been threatened with physical violence since last week by unnamed Islamists who demanded the group cease its call for an end to discriminatory

"Several telephone threats have been made against us," an APMA member who asked not to be named told AFP. The APMA last Tuesday

demanded equal rights in the Islamic republic and called for the repeal of laws that legitimise discrimination.

The group's chairman, Shahbaz Bhatti, said he was stunned by a subsequent response to the call by Ikramullah Shahid, deputy speaker of the

assembly in North West Frontier

Shahid was quoted by the APMA as saying, "Minorities do not have rights to demand for any amendment or abolition of discriminatory laws in an Islamic

The English-language daily The News also carried Shahid's denunciation Friday, saying he warned of explicit provisions of capital punishment for those committing blasphemy. Bhatti urged the government to

"That aggressive and irresponsible statement of such a respon-

ban such "provocative" com-

sible person and authority can incite extremist elements, which can take any harmful and violent action against me and the members of the APMA," Bhatti said in a statement

The far-right Islamist alliance Muttahida Majlis-e-Amal (MMA), whose parties advocate enforcement of Islamic Sharia law, made dramatic gains in October elections and rule the North West Frontier Province.

Religious minorities have accused Muslim extremists of using legal cover, particularly the blasphemy ordinance of 1985, to persecute non-Muslims.

Pakistan, which is 97 percent Muslim, has seen a string of attacks against Western and Christian targets that have killed more than 40 people since October last year.



Japanese Crown Prince Naruhito (L) and Crown Princess Masako inspect at close quarters, a native bird called a Kea, in the snow as they visit the scenic Milford Sounds in New Zealand's South Island on Sunday. Crown Prince Naruhito and his wife Crown Princess Masako are on a five-day trip through New Zealand.