

Rice to visit Pakistan in mid-March

AFP, Islamabad

US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice is due to visit Pakistan, a frontline state in its global war against terrorism, in mid-March, an official said Saturday.

Rice is expected in Islamabad on March 17, a senior official of Pakistan's foreign ministry told AFP, but declined to comment further on her engagements.

The US Senate last year approved a 388-million-dollar budget which includes military aid to Pakistan and its war-torn neighbour Afghanistan.

The allocation is designed to bolster the capabilities of Pakistan's armed forces in hunting down suspected Al-Qaeda members along the rugged Afghan-Pakistan border.

US officials believe Al-Qaeda mastermind Osama bin Laden and other key militants have been sheltering somewhere along the mountainous border between Pakistan and Afghanistan.



Freed Italian hostage Giuliana Sgrena is helped out of the plane at Ciampino airport in Rome yesterday, a day after she was wounded in a shooting incident by US troops in Baghdad in which an Italian secret agent was killed.

Release of Italian hostage good omen for French journalist

AFP, Lille

The editor of the French left-wing daily Liberation on Saturday welcomed the release of the Italian journalist kidnapped in Iraq, hailing it as a "good omen" for the paper's own correspondent, abducted two months ago in Baghdad.

"The fact that Giuliana Sgrena has been released, I take as a good omen for Florence Aubenas," Serge July said on the sidelines of a press meeting being held in this northern French city.

Serge July said he believed the situation of Florence Aubenas "is relatively simpler" than that of the Italian journalist "because there is not this political constraint as with Italy, which is at the heart of the coalition with the United States" in Iraq.

Aubenas, who went missing on January 5 with her Iraqi interpreter, Hussein Hanun al-Saadi, was seen in a video broadcast on Tuesday saying she was in a "bad" way.

Seven Iraqi soldiers killed in attacks

AFP, Samarra

Seven Iraqi soldiers were killed in various attacks Saturday, security sources said, as a daytime curfew was imposed in the restive town of Samarra, north of Baghdad.

The worst attack left five soldiers dead when their camp in Al-Duluyiah, north of the capital, was hit by mortars at about 03:00 am (0000 GMT) as the new army recruits got up for training, said Captain Assad Saddam.

Another soldier was killed and another wounded when a roadside bomb blew up as they were attempting to diffuse it near the northern oil refining town of Baiji, said Captain Ali Yussif of the army.

He said nine suspected insurgents were arrested in a joint overnight raid with US troops in Al-

Siniyah in the Baiji region.

A second roadside bomb in Tikrit, Saddam Hussein's hometown, killed an Iraqi soldier and wounded three, according to police.

Three Iraqi policemen were also wounded in an ambush by gunmen in the village of Bir, east of Tikrit, said local police. A police officer was wounded in a similar attack in Baquba, said police in this restive city northeast of Baghdad.

Attacks against Iraq's fledgling forces have been relentless as the US military intensifies its efforts to train and equip Iraqis to assume more responsibility for the country's security.

Meanwhile, Iraqi police in the city of Samarra, 120 kilometers (70 miles) north of Baghdad, imposed a curfew from 07:00 am (0400 GMT) to 9:00 pm (1800 GMT) as it sought

to prevent an anti-American demonstration called for by the local chapter of the Sunni Committee of Muslim Scholars, according to outgoing mayor Taha al-Handira.

The mayor had quit in protest against what he saw as restrictive and tough security measures imposed by US and Iraqi forces on the city.

Iraq recently renewed a state of emergency countrywide except for the Kurdistan region for 30 days.

Samarra was the scene of a massive US-led onslaught in October against the insurgents that left hundreds dead and many of the rebel leaders at large.

The situation has remained tense in the area which includes towns like Duluyiah and Balad with almost daily deadly attacks against Iraqi forces.

China premier outlines year ahead

BBC NEWS ONLINE

The annual session of China's parliament, the National People's Congress, has opened in Beijing. Some 3,000 delegates heard Premier Wen Jiabao's two-hour opening speech, bursting into applause 26 times.

In his address, Wen said it was vital to modernise the country's army to achieve national security and move towards reunification with Taiwan.

Congress is expected to pass a new law aimed at curbing any bid by Taiwan for formal independence later next week. China views Taiwan as its territory, and regularly threatens to use force if the island declared independence.

Wen also told parliament that the country would aim for a growth rate of 8% in 2005 and hoped to create 9m new jobs.

"Maintaining steady and rapid economic development is an impor-

tant issue that the government must successfully handle," the prime minister told delegates.

He pledged to cut all farm taxes by next year and he set out plans for free schooling for needy children.

Parliament is expected to approve a 12% increase in its military spending, which will take official military spending to 247.7bn yuan (\$29.9bn).

Wen said that making sure the army "is capable of winning any war it fights" was an "historical objective".

The increase in defence spending is the latest in a series of regular cash infusions to try to upgrade and modernise China's army.

A controversial so-called "anti-secession law" is due to be approved on Tuesday.

The legislation has been criticised by Taiwanese politicians who say it will set out a legal basis for a possible Chinese invasion of the island.

BUSH SAYS Syria an obstacle to ME peace

AFP, Washington

US President George W. Bush said Saturday that Syria is an obstacle to securing peace across the Middle East, making a new demand that Syria withdraw its troops from Lebanon.

The US leader said however that anti-Syrian demonstrations by thousands of people in Lebanon was one of the "remarkable" new signs of democracy sweeping the region.

"For years, the Lebanese people have suffered from the aftermath of a horrific civil war and occupation by Syria," Bush said in his weekly radio address.

"Lebanese citizens who have watched free elections in Iraq are now demanding the right to decide their own destiny, free of Syrian

control and domination.

"Syria has been an occupying force in Lebanon for nearly three decades, and Syria's support for terrorism remains a key obstacle to peace in the broader Middle East."

The US president has made almost daily attacks on Syria since protests in Beirut started, sparked by the assassination last month of former Lebanese prime minister Rafiq Hariri.

"Today, America and Europe are standing together with the Lebanese people," Bush said, highlighting US cooperation with France to get a UN Security Council resolution on the withdrawal of foreign forces in Lebanon passed.

"The world is now speaking with one voice to ensure that democracy and freedom are given a chance to flourish in Lebanon," Bush said.

US trying to kill me: Chavez

AFP, New Delhi

Venezuela President Hugo Chavez renewed charges Saturday that Washington is trying to kill him, adding that his country's quarrel with the United States is with its government, not its people.

"There is in the US ... a plan to assassinate me, he said in New Delhi where he signed a slew of energy and other agreements with India's government.

"If anything happens to me, the responsibility will be with the president of the United States," Chavez, on the second day of a four-day visit to India, told a news conference.

Earlier during his visit, Chavez threatened to halt oil-rich Venezuela's crude shipments to the United States if Washington "hurts" the Latin American country. "If there is any aggression, there will be no oil," he said Friday.



An injured woman is carried across the debris of a bakery to her home after a booby-trapped motorcycle parked outside exploded yesterday, in Baghdad. Four Iraqis, including one woman, were wounded when the motorcycle rigged with explosives blew up in the Baghdad Sunni neighborhood of Adhamiya, police said.



Britain's Prince Charles (L) smells a rose he received from two-year-old Andrew Lawrance at the Australian War Memorial in Canberra yesterday.

Nine objections against Charles and Camilla's marriage: Report

AFP, London

Nine objections have been officially lodged to the marriage of Prince Charles and Camilla Parker Bowles within the legal time-limit which expired on Friday, the BBC reported Saturday.

The objections will be examined by the Registrar General, Len Cook, who will have to decide on their validity in the coming days, a spokesman for the General Register Office of England and Wales told AFP.

He refused to confirm the figure of nine but acknowledged that "several" had been submitted.

The spokesman said that if any of the objections were upheld, no certificate of marriage could be issued and the prince would have to go to court to overturn the objection.

The Daily Mail said Saturday that a decision was expected by Wednesday or Thursday.

Under British law, anyone with a

reason to oppose a wedding can issue a formal objection to the relevant registry office, which must investigate the claim and -- if necessary -- pass the matter up to the registrar general.

The objections were received by the registry office in Cirencester, Gloucestershire, southwest England, which covers Charles's countryside retreat of Highgrove, and in Chippenham, where the prince's divorced fiancée lives.

One of the objections was made by Paul Williamson, a vicar in west London, who maintained that Prince Charles, divorced from the late Princess Diana, could not remarry while remaining the heir to the British throne.

The vicar said that if his objection were rejected, he would personally go to Windsor to demonstrate against the wedding.

Militant wanted for 130 killings arrested in Pakistan

AFP, Quetta

Police in southwest Pakistan have arrested a suspected Sunni Muslim militant wanted for the killing of more than 130 rival Shiites, an official said Saturday.

"We have arrested Ramzan Mengal, an activist of banned militant outfit Lashkar-e-Jhangvi, from Quetta late Friday. He is wanted in 130 cases of sectarian killings," Quetta police chief Pervez Rafi Bhatti told AFP.

Bhatti said police nabbed Mengal after watching him for three days and added that he did not resist arrest.

The government had offered a reward of one million rupees (about 16,800 dollars) for Mengal's arrest since 2001.

"It is a big catch and a severe blow to the network of sectarian militants," Bhatti said.

The investigators have confirmed the identity of the accused and were trying to obtain more leads from him about other members of the network, Bhatti said.

Mengal is believed to have played an important role in last year's suicide attack on a Shiite procession in Quetta in which 50 people were killed and another 50 were killed in another suicide attack on a Shiite mosque in 2003.