

Ashcroft's approval more likely

■ Ashcroft promises not to seek Supreme Court reversal on women's abortion rights and gun control.

THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

WASHINGTON — As his prospects for confirmation as attorney general improved, John Ashcroft promised Wednesday not to seek Supreme Court reversal of a woman's right to abortion and pledged to defend the constitutionality of gun controls he had opposed in the Senate.

Ashcroft picked up his first Democratic vote when Sen. Zell Miller of Georgia announced his support. Other Democrats on the Judiciary Committee predicted Ashcroft's confirmation in the evenly divided Senate.

Under detailed questioning by skeptical Democrats on the committee, the former Missouri senator reaffirmed his personal opposition to abortion.

But he emphasized that he had no intention of attempting to get the high court to reverse the landmark 1973 Roe v. Wade abortion decision, which he once called "a miserable failure."

"The Supreme Court very clearly doesn't want to deal with that issue again," Ashcroft said, adding that pressing the matter would risk undermining the "standing and prestige" an administration has in arguments before the high court.

With a long line of women's rights, civil rights and gun control groups waiting to testify against Ashcroft later in the week, there were favorable signs for him during the second day of his confirmation hearings.

"I would not vote to confirm someone who I thought was a bigot or would hamper the cause of African-Americans," Sen. Miller, who is not on the committee, said in a statement.

"I believe him when he says he will ... enforce the laws of this land, even those he

disagrees with."

In the hearing, both Sen. Herb Kohl, D-Wis. and Sen. Joseph Biden, D-Del., said Ashcroft probably would be confirmed. So far only Sen. Barbara Boxer, D-Calif., is openly committed to opposing him. To block him in a Senate split 50-50, Democrats would need help from Republicans.

But Ashcroft made visible progress among GOP moderates. One, Arlen Specter of Pennsylvania, seemed pleased with Ashcroft's answers to his mild line of questioning. Another, Susan Collins of Maine, acting at the request of President-elect Bush's transition team, appeared as a witness to heartily endorse Ashcroft. Republican leader Trent Lott predicts all 50 GOP senators will back Ashcroft.

Some Democrats expressed new doubts about Ashcroft. "I see a kind of metamorphosis going on. . . Somebody who has been really on the far right. . . is now making a change," said Diane Feinstein of

California.

"Frankly, I don't know what to believe." Under questioning by Feinstein, Ashcroft said that, if confirmed, he would defend the constitutionality of gun controls he had opposed as a senator, including Feinstein's proposal to extend the racketeering laws to cover gun crimes.

He also pledged, as has Bush, to back reauthorization in 2004 of an assault weapons ban that in 1998 he called "wrong-headed."

"I don't believe the Second Amendment to be one that forbids any regulation of guns," Ashcroft said. "There are a number of enactments I would not prefer as policy but which I believe would be constitutional."

Ashcroft did not reassure Democrats on all their concerns.

Biden asked him to denounce Southern Partisan magazine as racist after noting it has praised the conduct of slave-owners and called blacks temperamentally unfit for democracy.

Powell arms defense plan

THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

WASHINGTON — Received with all the respect of a folk hero, Colin Powell told the Senate on Wednesday at a confirmation hearing that the Bush administration will move full-speed ahead with a nationwide defense against missile attack.

In the process, a landmark arms control treaty signed with the Soviet Union in 1972 probably will have to be changed to make way for the controversial and futuristic program, said Powell, who was nominated to be secretary of state.

Brushing aside reminders by Sens. Joseph R. Biden, D-Del., and Lincoln Chafee, R-R.I., that allies and others are skeptical about the project, the retired four-star general said, "When people see something new come along they are terrified, but if it is the right thing to do, you do it anyway."

"In the end of the day, it will benefit the world," Powell said confidently.

Taking a firm stand on another unsettled issue, Powell said the Bush administration would not ask the Senate to ratify a treaty President Clinton signed New Year's Eve to create the world's first permanent war crimes tribunal.

Reflecting concerns in the Pentagon and among congressional Republicans, Clinton had said his successor should not ask the Senate to ratify the treaty until the United States was satisfied its personnel abroad would not be taken to court in frivolous or politically motivated prosecutions.

The proposed court, supported by human rights advocates around the world, could be set up if 60 nations ratify the treaty. Powell made clear the United States would not be one of them. He told the senators not to "stand on their tippy-toes" waiting for the treaty to be submitted.

Soldiers and other Americans could be faced with prosecution without the protection of their rights under the U.S. Constitution, he said.

Committee members took turns praising Powell, the first black nominated to be secretary of state, some assuring him he would be confirmed unanimously. Sen. Paul S. Sarbanes D-Md., called the hearing a "love-fest" and Sen. John W. Warner, R-Va., introduced Powell as "in many respect a role model for generations of Americans."

Powell, who grew up in the gritty Hunts Point section of the south Bronx, went to public high school and college in New York and entered the Army as an ROTC cadet, called his selection to head the State Department "miraculous" and said "it would have been unthinkable" when he was a young officer.

In the seven years since he retired as chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Powell has amassed a sizable fortune, through lucrative corporate connections and high speaking fees.



COURT DATE: Rapper Sean Puffy Combs is flanked by security and court guards as he leaves the New York Supreme Court on Wednesday in Manhattan, New York. The singer attended the first day of his trial in connection with a shooting at a New York City night club in December 1999.

El Salvador quake survivors seek aid

■ Salvadorans fly home to rebuild El Salvador after an earthquake killed 683 people.

THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

SAN SALVADOR, El Salvador — With relatives homeless and hungry and many villages cut off from the outside world, Salvadorans living in the United States flew home Wednesday to help bury the dead and rebuild their country after a devastating earthquake that killed nearly 700 people.

More than 1 million Salvadorans — 15 percent of the country's population — live in the United States, and many spent harrowing days watching television images of corpses being dug out from landslides with no word from relatives. Telephone lines were either down or jammed with calls, and the airport reopened offering limited flights Sunday.

Fathers — some who had not been back for more than a decade — rushed off planes into the arms of weeping children on Wednesday, and peasant families waited in front of the airport for sons to help them rebuild collapsed homes.

Saturday's magnitude 7.6 earthquake killed at least 683 people, including six in neighboring Guatemala. Although more bodies were still being found, many were so mangled by landslides that it was difficult to determine how many had been killed or even recovered.

Others will remain buried at the bottom of remote mountain

valleys.

In Las Colinas, a neighborhood outside San Salvador where a collapsed hillside accounted for more than half of the national death toll, bulldozers ripped through debris and packed dirt while a few remaining families sifted through belongings. The family members waited for a fifth day as officials looked for evidence of those lost.

On the outskirts of the pile, workers dug out a buried house where scrambled eggs still lay on the stove and a strainer sat untouched in the sink. Yet there was no sign of Luis Flores' niece, who was believed to have been inside.

"If only she had been in the kitchen," Flores said. "How can these things survive when she is gone?"

As rescue efforts waned, the focus turned toward feeding and housing 45,000 people evacuated from their homes. Roads to many small villages remained blocked, some nearly completely destroyed by the quake. Damaged pipes made safe drinking water scarce across the country.

The mayor of the town where Las Colinas is located said Wednesday that federal officials are trying to take control of the millions of dollars in aid people are sending him from around the world, and he fears his people will be shut out.

"If you're not going to help, at least don't be a hindrance," Mayor Oscar Ortiz said he told federal emergency officials. "We need to have aid come directly to the people."

Last chance for peace talks

THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

CAIRO, Egypt — Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat flew to Cairo on Wednesday for last-ditch talks with Israeli Foreign Minister Shlomo Ben-Ami aimed at salvaging chances for peace.

The two sides remain far apart and neither appeared to believe they can reach an agreement by their weekend deadline — the end of President Clinton's term. Clinton's mediator has called off a Middle East trip.

Arafat and Ben-Ami met with Egyptian Foreign Minister Amr Moussa at a presidential palace in Cairo. No press coverage was allowed. Egypt's official Middle East News Agency later reported that Ben-Ami left Cairo after a two-hour meeting with Arafat.

Israeli radio stations quoted Ben-Ami as saying his talks with the Palestinian leader were deep and detailed. They did not elaborate.

Arafat was spending the night in Cairo and was to see President Hosni Mubarak on Thursday.

Ben-Ami came to Cairo earlier Wednesday and met with Mubarak and Moussa. The Egyptians, who in 1979 became the first Arabs to sign a peace treaty with Israel, have played a highly visible role trying to bring the Palestinians and Israelis together.

Ben-Ami said after his meeting with the Egyptian president that Mubarak was "full of ideas" and good-will. Ben-Ami said the negotiators were trying to come up with principles for achieving peace on which both the Israelis and Palestinians could agree. The Palestinians have ruled out a partial deal or a declaration of principles guiding the negotiations.

Clinton's peace proposals, which call for a Palestinian state in the Gaza Strip, 95 percent of the West Bank and Arab areas of Jerusalem, are the basis for the talks. Israel and the Palestinians have accepted the ideas in principle but have added serious reservations.

Ben-Ami did not say whether progress was being made or mention a possible meeting with Arafat.

"We are trying to double our efforts in order to bring down the level of violence and hopefully eliminate it all together," Ben-Ami added, a reference to more than three months of bloody Palestinian-Israeli clashes in which more than 360 people, mostly Palestinians, have been killed. Ben-Ami did not directly answer a reporter's question about whether a deal was possible before Feb. 6 elections in Israel, saying only that Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Barak's efforts would continue "regardless of the political calendar in Israel."

In Jerusalem, Barak told Israel's Channel One television that he was confident that an Israeli-Palestinian agreement would eventually be concluded but could not say whether it would be reached before Clinton leaves office on Saturday or before the Jewish state's February elections.

World/Nation

The Associated Press

■ Peru

Clinton appeals fate of American woman in Peru

LIMA — President Clinton has made a last appeal to Peru's interim leader "for a good resolution" in the case of Lori Berenson, an American facing terrorism charges, the government said Wednesday.

Berenson, a 31-year-old New York native, is facing a civilian retrial on charges of collaboration with leftist rebels after receiving a life sentence in 1996 by a hooded military judge. The military sentence was overturned last August.

Clinton, who is finishing his eight-year-term this week, spoke to interim President Valentin Paniagua by telephone Tuesday night, said Paniagua's press secretary Mario Razzeto.

He said Clinton told Paniagua "that before leaving office he was trying to show interest one last time in the possibility that judicial powers in Peru would use some mechanism to find a good resolution to the case."

Clinton did not ask for Berenson's outright release, Razzeto added.

■ Congo

President's son takes power until father recovers

KINSHASA — Cabinet officials thrust President Laurent Kabila's son into power Wednesday, making him head of this vast, deeply troubled African nation's government a day after Kabila was reportedly killed in a palace attack.

Reports that Kabila had died continued to roll in Wednesday. Congolese officials, however, insisted he was wounded but alive when they announced the temporary measures to fill the power vacuum that has threatened to throw Congo into even more turmoil.

"Until President Kabila has recovered, and to ensure stability, the government has decided to give command of the government and military to Maj. Gen. Joseph Kabila."

Communications Minister Dominique Sakombi Inongo said after an emergency Cabinet meeting.

The younger Kabila, who already heads the armed forces, was reported to have been injured in the 30 minutes of intense gunfire Tuesday at the presidential residence in Kinshasa. He made no public appearance Wednesday. State-run television broadcast footage of the uniformed major general sitting silently, twisting his beret, but it was not immediately clear when the images were recorded.

■ Washington

Study shows high school seniors slack off

Even many smart kids are slacking off during their senior year of high school, the Education Department said Wednesday in the final study released by outgoing Education Secretary Richard Riley.

"Our high schools haven't necessarily changed, but the world has changed," Riley said at a news conference. "At this level, we should be more committed to our children, not less."

The report by a panel appointed by Riley and including Education Secretary-designate Rod Paige suggests that high schools are neglecting 12th graders, who in turn are neglecting their classes.

The panel, whose findings were based on existing research and student interviews, offered few solutions in the first of its two reports. It concluded that mass boredom afflicts the student admitted early to college just as the classmate on the brink of dropping out.

Researchers who interviewed seniors last fall said college-bound students often have too few classes to keep them occupied; others, not encouraged to take advanced classes once they have met the minimum required for a diploma and focus on outside work.

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TODAY Mostly cloudy high 32, low 14	TOMORROW Mostly sunny high 29, low 19
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