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AP Photo

Women sentence life in prison for her tutor's death

BY BILL HETHERMAN
Staff Writer

SANTA ANA – A former Covina High School honor student described as “cold” by a prosecutor was sentenced to life in prison without the possibility of parole Friday for plotting the death of her former math tutor.

Orange County Superior Court Judge Kazuhara Makino said Yichen “Eric” Liu died senselessly and Tien Hsian “Helen” Mo was a prime mover in making it happen. “I’m only 20,” Mo said, weeping as she heard the sentence.

Mo then turned to look at her father, Lien Mo, 72, and mother, Tien S. Mo, 56, sitting in the back of the courtroom.

Mo, 20, of Monterey Park was convicted Nov. 30 of first-degree murder and lying in wait in the death of Liu, 20, of El Monte.

Liu tutored Mo when both were students at Rio Hondo Community College near Whittier. Irvine police detectives said Liu was stabbed with a meat cleaver at Mo’s Hellman Avenue home Jan. 24, 2000.

Liu’s body was later found in the trunk of his burned-out car in Irvine. An autopsy showed he died of strangulation from being bound and that he was not alive when his car was burned.

Mo’s motive for the murder was to avoid going to prison under the three strikes law – she had two prior

Please see WOMAN/A4



AP Photo

‘Cutie Pie’ takes the longest flight

BY DIANNA L. ROEMER
Staff Writer

SAN DIMAS – A tiny owl no larger than a sparrow took the longest flight of its life recently and did it without ruffling a feather.

A 5-inch Elf Owl was flown in the cockpit of a commercial jetliner from Ontario to its native state of Arizona after it was found in Whittier and nursed back to health at the San Dimas bird refuge Wild Wings.

It remains a mystery as to how the owl got to Southern California, but experts say it was lucky it was rescued rather than becoming some animal’s lunch.

The bird, nicknamed “Cutie Pie,” was flown in an America West cockpit on March 3 as part of a voluntary program by the airlines started by pilot Terry Stevens.

Stevens spearheaded the program 12 years ago. He and about a dozen other pilots fly mostly bats, pelicans and hawks back to where they belong after they’ve been blown off their migratory courses by storms. They always ride in the cockpit in a cage, Stevens said.

“Birds get easily stressed. Riding in a cockpit is less stressful on the little guys,” he said.

Stevens makes all the arrangements for all of the trips: checking flights, calling available pilots and seeing the birds get from the refuge center to the airport.

“I pretty much spend all my time when I’m not fly-

Please see CUTIE PIE/A7

State law to allow cell phones at schools

School districts to decide whether to let their students use cell phones at school

BY MIKE SPRAGUE
Staff Writer

LOS ANGELES—Students could be allowed to bring cellular telephones to school next year under legislation the state Senate Education Committee approved Wednesday on a 12-0 vote.

Senate Bill 1253, which is expected to go the Senate floor in a couple of weeks, would give school districts the discretion to make their own decisions on whether to allow cell phones on school

grounds. State law now bans cell phones from schools.

Whittier-area educators applauded the bill, saying it would give them more local control but said they aren’t sure what policy changes they might adopt in response, if the bill passes.

“We will have a pretty good discussion on that topic before we allow them,” said Anthony Avina, superintendent of the Whittier Union High School District.

“Safety is a big concern because kids are often times wait-

ing for parents to pick them up,” Avina said. “On the other hand, (cellphones) can interrupt the classroom. How many cellphones can go off in an hour?”

The bill was one of three dealing with the issue that went to the Senate committee Wednesday. Lawmakers voted to move the version by state Sen. Liz Figueroa, sending it to the floor for a vote, which could happen within a couple of weeks, she said.

“This was the hardest committee. We should enjoy a positive result now,” said Figueroa, D-Fremont.

Sen. Bob Margett, R-Arcadia, and Assemblywoman Carol Liu, D-Pas-

adena, carried similar bills. Their measures were in essence folded into Figueroa’s legislation and they will now be listed as principal co-authors of Figueroa’s bill.

Margett said he was willing to give up authorship because there is no sense in having three bills. “I thought it was a good practical approach to the thing,” he said. “The bill will give parents some comfort in knowing where their children are if there is a calamity.”

Charles Gomer, a Glendora Unified School District trustee, told the committee that districts should make the decision, not the state.

“As a board member, I’ve

found that parents want students to have a cell phone for safety,” Gomer said.

But Dorothy Fagan, superintendent of the East Whittier City School District, said weighing safety against potential disruptions caused by cell phones will be a difficult issue for district administrators.

“I know with the emphasis on safety, especially since Sept. 11, parents are concerned,” she said. “We also don’t want to have a disruption in the classroom.”

Fagan said the district may choose to give principals discretion, depending on the age of the child.

‘American Idol’ auditions kick off Tuesday



The Associated Press

Hundreds of music fans waiting outside Rose Bowl for the auditions of “American Idol” for Sixth Season. Participants under the sun with warm and moist weather in Los Angeles wait since 4 a.m. in the morning waiting their turn for the audition on the career building medal of “American Idol.”

Over 10,000 attend the audition, rejected get chances in other auditions too

BY JENNIFER MCLAIN
Staff Writer
San Gabriel Valley Tribune

PASADENA – Some cried, some laughed, but most importantly, everyone sang, all with the dream of becoming the next “American Idol.”

Fox’s popular television talent show kicked off its national auditions Tuesday at the Rose Bowl, where an estimated 10,000 people attended.

This was the first of seven auditions that will be held nationwide for the show’s sixth season.

Some of those auditioning arrived late Monday and stood in line through the early morning. They passed their time with coffee, energy drinks, singing and dancing before the tryouts began at 10 a.m.

Ken Fitzgerald, 27, of Cupertino may have been the first to lead the line when the gates opened around 8 a.m., but it was the Kentucky-

born, bubbly redhead, Carrie Jo Hubrich, 24, who was the first to receive the nod from the producers to continue on to the next level.

After recently moving to Sherman Oaks to pursue her singing career, Hubrich is hoping to follow the footsteps of last year’s “Idol” runner-up, Katharine McPhee, who is also from Sherman Oaks.

Only Hubrich, of course, wants to capture the “American Idol” title, she said. Hubrich, along with the others who were chosen by producers to go on to the next stage, will have another tryout Sept. 23, where executive producers will make the decision.

The show’s famous judges Simon Cowell, Paula Abdul and Randy Jackson will not begin judging until later rounds, spokesman George Cabico said.

Thousands of people ages 16 to 29 showed up convinced they were the next superstar.

The talent show that has produced

such stars as Kelly Clarkson, Carrie Underwood and, most recently, Taylor Hicks, gives those who say they have an undiscovered talent a minute to shine.

But few continued on to the next level, despite how far they traveled, how long they stood in line or what they wore.

As the “American Idol” hopefuls awaited their destiny, they applied the finishing touches to their makeup, called family members and listened to their headphones.

Participants also turned in a signed release form, which gives producers permission to air even their most embarrassing moments.

Will Tijerina, 27, of North Hollywood said he signed it, “but I’m just hoping I won’t be caught on camera doing anything stupid.”

For some, such as the banana-costume clad Solphat Peou, 20, of Long Beach, getting on camera was one of his primary goals.

“I needed a gimmick,”

said Peou.

Other outfits included an Uncle Fester costume, military uniforms and cowboy get-ups.

Some traveled from out of state, from Utah to Mississippi to Ohio. Even though locals such as Clay Nel, 17, a Pasadena resident; Michael Taylor, 21, from El Monte; and Amber Calles, 16, from Pomona, didn’t travel far, they were still hoping to be discovered.

Taylor, cut from the first round, said he would not let the dismissal prevent him from pursuing his singing career.

“This is just a stepping stone and I’m looking past it,” he said.

Police officials said the event ran smoothly.

The next audition is Friday in San Antonio.

Auditions wrap up in Seattle on Sept. 19.

Those who are rejected from the first rounds can try out at the other auditions.

Anti-terror bureau in LA opens

Nation’s first joint intelligence center

By BETH BARRETT
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San Gabriel Valley Tribune

NORWALK – Nearly five years after the Sept. 11, 2001, attacks, law-enforcement officials opened the nation’s first regional command center to better share intelligence on terrorist threats Thursday.

The \$5 million Los Angeles Joint Regional Intelligence Center will eventually include 62 analysts from the FBI, LAPD, Los Angeles Sheriff’s Department and other law enforcement agencies across seven Southern California counties.

“This is a new era, a new day,” Los Angeles police Chief William Bratton said. “The name of the game is intelligence.”

“This center is for the gathering, analysis and sharing of information. Instead of the bureau being over there, LAPD here, Sheriff’s Department there, we’re all in the same room, talking. We need those relationships.”

“It’s truly a model for the rest of the country.”

Lodged adjacent to an inter-agency narcotics-fighting center, the JRIC will operate around-the-clock with experts analyzing classified information and databases from numerous agencies, including the U.S. and California offices of Homeland Security.

“There will be more analytical capacity than just about anywhere in the country,” Bratton said.

He said the center recognizes the shift in terrorist threats from those initially associated with al-Qaida and other foreign groups to more “home-grown” organizations.

Sheriff Lee Baca said the JRIC is part of a regional system that assumes a possible terrorist attack because of the high number of attractive targets in the Los Angeles area.

“We have to go into this

Please see BUREAU/A4



The Associated Press

Belly dance instructor Catharae Smith shares her knowledge of the oldest form of dance to her students during the introduction to belly dance session. She also teaches cultural history, myths and facts of the dance.

Teens enjoy belly dance in their learning session

Belly dance carries cultural importance

The Associated Press

LA VERNE – Teens and adults learned how to handle a cymbal, drape a veil and move their bodies in the art of belly dancing July 19.

Dressed in their belly dancing outfits, the 20 students in the Introduction to Belly Dancing session learned the basics of the artistic dance while those in the advanced class went over choreography and more difficult dance steps.

“I enjoy teaching because it’s just another piece of yourself. You find a new piece of you and can

incorporate it into your life and expand it and share it with others,” said instructor Catharae Smith.

Each Wednesday, Smith shares her knowledge of the dance with her students. Aside from dance moves, she offers cultural history and myths and facts of the dance.

Smith explained how the Hollywood type of myth which depicts belly dancers as women who dance in the marketplace as men toss coins at them is wrong.

“The fact is that this type of dancing has gone on for centuries and it may be one of oldest art forms existing today and in fact it is passed down from woman to woman and generation to generation,” Smith said.

City and State

Teen on trial at juvenile court for abandoning her newborn

‘sexual assault is the main cause of baby’s conception,’ Hopkins

BY LISA FAUGHT
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PASADENA – A 16-year-old girl accused of abandoning her newborn son in a Monrovia trash bin will be tried as a juvenile, a judge decided Tuesday.

The district attorney’s office initially wanted to try her as an adult. But her clean record and tragic home life played into the decision to keep her case in juvenile court, said her attorney, Joe Hopkins.

“Her home life is quite a story,” Hopkins said. “It’s a tearjerker.”

The girl’s name is not being used by this newspaper because she is allegedly a rape victim, an assault that led to the baby’s conception, Hopkins said.

In a seven-page letter written while she was in custody, the girl detailed some of the hardships she faced growing up in Inglewood, Hopkins said.

She faced beatings from family, parents who called her vulgar names and friends who dated gang members, he said.

“When I would be a normal kid and get into trouble at school for talking too much, writing letters and having bad behavior, just the basic things kids go through, my mom and my dad would both whip me,” the letter reads.

Her brothers would hold her down while her parents beat her, leaving bruises on her

arms and legs, Hopkins said.

“Sometimes I would break loose of my brothers’ grip and run in a corner by my dresser. That didn’t stop me from getting hit ...” the letter reads.

Her parents broke up when she was 12. After the split, she bounced around between the two before moving into her aunt’s Monrovia home last year.

On Jan. 19, a young man taking out the trash at an apartment complex on Foothill Boulevard heard what sounded like a kitten mewling in one of the Dumpsters.

When he returned with a flashlight, he found an infant, its umbilical cord still attached, wrapped in towels inside a garbage bag.

The girl was arrested on suspicion of attempted murder and child endangerment one week later and has been in custody since.

After recovering at Huntington Hospital from several head injuries, the boy – dubbed Baby Andrew by hospital staff – was temporarily placed with a foster family, then returned to his grandfather.

Hopkins claims his client was raped by an older man in Inglewood, resulting in her pregnancy. Inglewood police are investigating the claim.

On Tuesday, two aunts attended a hearing on behalf of the girl, but her mother and father did not. Hopkins argued the girl could be rehabilitated because she has no record with the juvenile justice system.

Deputy District Attorney Lia Martin could not be reached for comment.

Because the girl will be tried as a juvenile, the case will continue behind closed doors.

FBI arrest dozen on drug smuggling

BY IAN HANIGAN
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DOWNEY – Federal agents seized more than 3 tons of marijuana from a Downey home on Tuesday and arrested a dozen people nationwide to cap a sweeping 18-month investigation of an international drug smuggling ring.

The FBI confiscated about 4 tons of marijuana from several homes in the Los Angeles area, but most of it had been stashed in the living room and two bedrooms of the two-story house on the corner of Barlin Avenue and Cheyenne Street, according to FBI spokeswoman Laura Bosley.

Hours after the morning raid, nearby residents said it had been several months since they last saw tenants of the peach, stucco dwelling, which is located less than a block from Ward Elementary School. But two neighbors said lights and a television set turned on every night at about the same time,

as if set on an automatic timer. “Every day, I would never see anybody,” said one nearby resident, who declined to give his name. “But every night, the lights came on.”

The investigation, dubbed “Operation Jaguar,” was conducted by the FBI and the Inland Regional Narcotics Enforcement Team. It began in July 2000 when an Indianapolis area shipping company reported several suspicious boxes with a Los Angeles-based shipping company identified on their labels. The FBI searched the boxes and discovered about 500 pounds of marijuana.

An inquiry in Los Angeles revealed that Jose Manuel Barraza Jr., also known as “Junior,” used the local shipping company to transport large amounts of marijuana to New York, Indianapolis, Nashville and Miami, according to an FBI statement.

A federal indictment accuses Barraza of paying workers to operate “stash houses” – like the one in Downey – to store and pack marijuana that was supplied from Mexico. Once packed, the drug was

shipped or trucked to destinations throughout the United States. Couriers would deliver the proceeds back to Los Angeles, where they would be sent to Mexico.

Agents believe the ring has ties to Ismael Zambada, an alleged drug lord who authorities say is poised to replace Tijuana’s Ramon Arellano Felix, who was recently killed.

“This organization has been distributing marijuana for some of the significant cartel members in the northern part of Mexico, and we hope this investigation will lead us into other areas that we’re looking at,” FBI Agent Richard Garcia said.

Seventeen people were named in Tuesday’s indictment.

The bureau said more than 10 tons of marijuana, 41 kilograms of cocaine and more than \$1 million in drug proceeds have been seized from Barraza’s organization during its investigation. Seven additional people had been taken into custody prior to Tuesday’s arrests.

The commotion in Downey started at about 6 a.m., when FBI

agents broke down the door at on the 12000 block of Barlin Avenue and began removing dozens of large pallets wrapped in green plastic. By late afternoon, only a few large pieces of wood used to board up a hole-riddled front door and a broken upstairs window served as evidence of the raid.

Neighbors said tenants moved into the home over the summer, but were seldom seen in recent months. Property records show the home was built in 2000 and purchased in April for \$330,000 by a couple not listed in the federal indictment.

“The first two months, there were people there,” said Fred Jones, who lives across the street. “They weren’t friendly, though. They didn’t talk.”

Jones, 52, said he always assumed the lights and television set were on an automatic timer because they turned on at the same time each evening, despite the apparent absence of occupants.

“I haven’t seen anybody there for months,” he said.

Firefighters find experience tougher than they expect

BY PAM WIGHT
Staff Writer
San Gabriel Valley Tribune

SANTA FE SPRINGS – Working as a firefighter is much harder than Jeff Stitt expected.

As a member of the Rio Hondo Fire Academy’s “Roadrunners” crew, Stitt returned Thursday from his first harsh lessons in real-life firefighting after two weeks deployment in the Angeles National Forest.

The Roadrunners were called up by the Forest Service two weeks ago to replace the Dalton “Hot Shots” crew in Glendora who were sent to help with several stubborn large-scale fires in Arizona and Nevada.

While stationed at Glendora’s Dalton Camp, the Roadrunners helped fight three different fires in the Angeles National Forest.

“You can’t just go out and think you can do it,” said Stitt, 20. “You

have to be prepared on your own before they call you up. You have to hike on your own, carrying weight on your back and eat healthy. It’s a lot harder than I expected.

“But it was awesome. I can’t wait to go again,” he added.

Stitt credited the Fire Academy for giving recruits a good idea of how fit they should keep themselves between deployments. Before the students graduated, instructors took them out on a 13-mile run and a 10-hour hike, he said.

All recruits are expected to be able to be ready to leave for a 21-day stint within two hours from the minute they are called. That means always having a supply

of clothes and meals ready to eat in their cars, Stitt said.

Tracy Rickman, coordinator of the Fire Academy, said the deployment was an important introduction to the teamwork that is central to a firefighter’s work.

“This is a very significant experience for them,” said Tracy Rickman, coordinator of the Rio Hondo Fire Academy. “They started training in January and graduated in late May. This is their first opportunity to use what we taught

them and to go out and be a part of a team in the Forest Service.”

The fire technology program is so rigorous that only 42 students graduated out of a beginning class of 61, Rickman said.

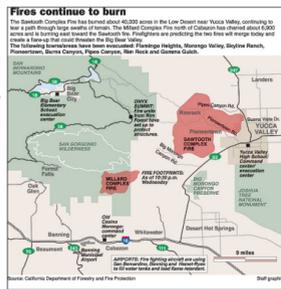
“It’s a very tough program,” he

said. “When you go through your first 8-mile hike in all your gear, you’re out in hot temperatures for 12-hour operational periods, camping in the dirt... you know after that if it’s what you want to do.”

Rickman said the Forest Service expects the 2006 fire season to be an especially busy one for firefighters. He pointed to the numerous large fires currently burning in Yucca Valley, Nevada, Arizona and several other Western states – most caused by lightning.

As the only female firefighter out of the 20 Roadrunners deployed, Sarah Duncan, 23, found the experience tougher than she expected, but she said she is ready to do it again.

“It was a wake-up call for me,” said Duncan, who traded a fashion design major for firefighting. “But I knew it would be tougher as a woman. I just need to work harder on my upper body strength. You have to be in the mental mode. I figured if they \ could do it, so could I.”



Woman charges with first-degree murder

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felony convictions – after she stole a necklace worth \$300 from Liu and he threatened to call police.

Mo conspired with her boyfriend – fellow Rio Hondo College student Sonny Joshua Wong, 24, of La Puente – and three others to lure Liu to her home and kill him, trial testimony showed. When Liu arrived to get the jewelry, her accomplices – allegedly led by Wong – ambushed and stabbed him, according to testimony.

Mo testified during her trial that she did not know the others intended to kill Liu, though she admitted she stole money, credit cards, bracelets and a necklace from him. Mo was arrested within two weeks and was the first of four people to stand trial for the slaying. She was on probation at the time for two West Covina burglaries and other crimes she committed when she was 17.

Outside the courtroom Friday, Orange County Deputy District Attorney Deborah Lloyd

called Mo a con artist.

“She’s such a cold-blooded person,” Lloyd said.

Mo was vice president of the Asian Culture Club at Covina High School and graduated in 1999 with a high school GPA of 3.8.

Liu lived in a modest home on Maxson Road with his sister, Annie Liu. The sister and her husband were in court Friday, but declined to comment.

However, Mo’s probation report quoted Annie Liu as saying she was shocked by her brother’s murder. The death hit the traditional Chinese family hard because Eric was an only son, Annie Liu said.

Liu came to the United States about two years before he died. He and his sister helped run their parents’ import jeans business.

Makino noted Liu’s parents have returned to Taiwan and said he understood why they would no longer feel safe in the United States.

Mo’s legal problems began when she met a boyfriend who was a student at Princeton Univer-

sity and committed crimes for the excitement of it, said her former attorney, Joseph K. Borges.

The boyfriend convinced her to be a look-out for him as he burglarized a West Covina home on Larkwood Street in July 1998, court records show.

The next month Mo tricked a locksmith into letting her into the West Covina home of a schoolmate on Rowland Avenue, court records show. She made herself at home by staying there and driving their car because she knew the family was away.

She also stole credit cards and bought thousands of dollars in personal items, including a set of car wheels, court records said.

Separate trials are pending in April, May and June for Wong and two of the alleged accomplices in the killing.

They also face possible life prison sentences without the chance of parole if convicted.

The fourth defendant awaiting trial, a juvenile, testified against Mo and will do the same against the others, Lloyd said.

Child dies after drinking leftout wine

BY DIANNA ROEMER
AND KAREN RUBIN
Staff Writers

WHITTIER – A 2-year-old girl died Monday after drinking cheap wine left out by her mother’s boyfriend, sheriff’s detectives said Tuesday.

Joseph Smith told police he fell asleep and left out a cup of Night Train wine while baby-sitting Debbie Cumo and her brother and sister, said Detective Richard Ramirez of the county sheriff’s homicide bureau.

“Apparently, the baby picked up the cup,” Ramirez said.

Debbie was pronounced dead that night at Whittier Presbyterian Hospital. Her vein was too small to take a blood sample to determine whether alcohol poisoning was the cause of death.

The county coroner could perform post-mortem tests as early as today to determine the cause of death, Ramirez said.

Smith, 20, was arrested

on charges of child endangerment. He is being held at Men’s Central Jail in Los Angeles.

The District Attorney could file charges today, Ramirez said. Smith could be arraigned at Whittier this week.

Debbie’s mother, Jennifer Cumo, 28, who was at work Monday when Debbie began vomiting and was rushed to the hospital, appeared to be in shock as she folded clothes at her home in the 2100 block of Cogswell Road on Tuesday.

She defended her boyfriend, whom she met 18 months ago.

“He did not abuse my daughter,” Cumo said in a monotone voice, while staring at the floor. “He was a good father. He was helping her, something was in her mouth.”

Cumo said Smith helped raise Debbie and her brother, 7, and sister, 9, but sometimes fed alcohol to Debbie.

“There are times we would sit and watch television and

he would give her little sips of beer, but it was not an everyday thing,” Cumo said.

Smith told detectives a similar story, Ramirez said.

“The man admitted he on occasion provided her with beer.”

Cumo’s children are staying with her sister.

Whittier police were the first on the scene Monday, and handed over the case to the county sheriff’s homicide unit.

Smith told detectives he left a cup of the wine on a table and fell asleep, Ramirez said.

Night Train is 17.5 percent alcohol. Most wine is 11 percent, said Jim Hasbun, owner of Latty’s Liquor in Glendora.

“It gets you really messed up. I won’t even carry it,” he said.

When Smith awoke, the cup was empty and Debbie was not moving, Ramirez said. A 911 call was made at 7:30 p.m.

Smith was performing CPR on Debbie when police arrived.

A local resident rescues ‘Cutie Pie’

Continued from A1

ing doing rescues,” he said. Cutie Pie -- whose sex was never determined by officials -- was rescued in September by a resident who saw the bird on the ground fending off a cat, Wild Wings founder Judy Everett said.

No one had ever brought an Elf Owl to Everett’s way station before, she said. The owl was very sick when she got it.

“I had to nurse it back to health with a feeding tube,” she said.

Her friend, bird fancier Bruce Thoman, contacted the Pomona Audubon Society.

“Audubon went berserk thinking we have Elf Owls in Whittier,” Thoman said.

Thoman said he told them there aren’t, adding that Cutie Pie was just visiting.

It took more than six months, but the owl, who Fox thinks was blown off course and Everett

thinks was brought here by a human, was ready to go home.

The bird returned to its normal feisty self before the America West flight, Everett said.

“I’d go in to change his cage and he’d come to me with those talons. I thought, ‘Wait a second, who do you think you are, a Great Horned Owl?’” she said, laughing.

America West pilot Bob Carlton delivered the bird to Phoenix.

Cutie Pie is now with Arizona bird expert Samantha Fox at her refuge, Wild at Heart, in Cave Creek, Ariz.

Elf Owls are rarely turned in to refuge centers, even in Arizona where they are common. That’s because if they’re injured, a cat or dog usually gets them, Fox said.

The little owl only needs a few more feathers before it can be released, Fox said. This owl is very lucky, she said.

“They’re so small nobody ever finds them,” she said.



Center focuses on gathering, analysing and sharing information on terror

Continued from A1

The JRIC has an open layout, with low walls between desks to make communication easier among analysts. Display screens with maps and other readouts line the walls.

The center is limited to intelligence gathering and analysis,

rather than investigations. A threat squad assigned to review leads will refer tips on possible terrorist activity to FBI and LAPD investigators assigned to the Joint Terrorism Task Force and traditional crime leads to

the appropriate agencies.

Bratton said the JRIC has moved the region into the forefront of intelligence gathering.

“In light of what’s happening in the world today ... we’re ahead of the curve.”