State prepares for Pope

NEW ORLEANS (AP) — The site where 277,000 people will crowd to see Pope John Paul II was busy Tuesday, as crews hung color-coded banners to show people where to stand and raised the papal throne so they will be able to see him.

“It’s kind of festive out there now,” said Ames Albro of Walk, Haydel and Associates, the management consultants for the site.

He said organizers decided after a detailed rehearsal Friday that the throne needed to be eight inches higher so that John Paul would be easier to see. So, after the long Labor Day weekend, work began on that.

Another crew was installing a large crucifix behind the throne, and others were installing hundreds of portable toilets in rows around the site.

“We think we have about 150 Portalets there. That means there are still 225 to go,” he said.

Other workers were setting up some of the 27,000 folding chairs rented for VIPs. Only a few ticket booths were up and 2,000 big plastic-covered pasteboard trash containers were yet to be placed around the site.

Although risers were not yet up for the choirs which will sing for the waiting crowds before the pope arrives, there was music. Thirty-two bursts of religious tunes sounded intermittently to test the public address system set up for the Mass.

At the other end of the city, nearly 400 gold and white papal flags and an equal number of American flags lined the avenues where the popemobile will carry John Paul from a French Quarter reception to meetings and a youth rally at the Superdome.

Close to the Mississippi River, a few banners still proclaimed the first anniversary of the Riverwalk, a “festival marketplace” created from the former warehouses which held the international pavilion during the 1984 world’s fair.

“Those will be coming down and being replaced by additional flags,” said Barbara Johnson, deputy director of the Downtown Development District.

A number of merchants have festooned their facades with papal banners and gold and white bunting. Johnson said she expects about half the stores — including all the biggest ones — to be so decorated by Saturday.

A number are also setting up window displays with photographs and posters of the pope, she said.

“A lot of things don’t happen until the last minute,” Albro said.

For instance, Kentwood Spring Water Inc. won’t be bringing its 70,000 gallons of water until Friday night, and Ogden Allied Services Inc. won’t bring the food to be sold there until early Saturday.

“There’s some sensitive furniture that doesn’t come in until Friday night, like chairs for the top of the altar,” Albro said.

Also to be delivered Friday: 1,500 pots of gold and yellow chrysanthemums for the altar.

“There’s one tree left to be trimmed,” he said.

The only tree actually standing on the site was trimmed earlier, he said. However, one which stands nearby has branches too low to let the 9½-foot-high popemobile through. So those must be trimmed.