



Police attempt to rescue an injured person trapped in a car following a powerful bomb explosion in an indoor carpark of a posh nightclub frequented by Colombia's top politicians in Bogota. At least 20 people were killed on Friday night in the car bomb blast.

Car bomb blast kills 20 at elite Colombian club

REUTERS, Bogota

A powerful car bomb wrecked one of the most exclusive clubs in the Colombian capital Bogota on Friday, killing at least 20 people, injuring more than 100 and sending panicked socialites staggering into the debris-strewn streets, authorities said.

The government said the car bomb, apparently packed with 440 lb of explosives, was planted by unidentified attackers inside a car park on the third floor of the 12-story Club Nogal, a gathering place for the war-torn nation's political and financial elites and foreign diplomats.

It was Friday evening and the club was packed. None of the armed groups fighting in Colombia's four-decade-old war immediately claimed responsibility for the blast, but it was one of heaviest blows against Colombia's urban elite for years.

The increasingly drug-fueled war, waged by leftist rebels fighting the US-backed military and far-right paramilitary outlaws, claims thousands of lives a year but is mainly confined to the lawless countryside.

The blast, which brought memories of a devastating bombing campaign by powerful drug lords in the 1980s and 1990s, tore off parts of the outer shell of the building in an exclusive section of the Andean city and caused its second floor to collapse. The US ambassador's residence is just nearby.

Hard-line President Alvaro Uribe, who is boosting military spending to crack down on rebels, far-right militias and drug traffickers, pledged to defeat "all terrorist groups."

"This tragedy is the daughter of the mix between drugs and violence," a grim-faced Uribe said early on Saturday after he toured the building, which was known for its extremely tight security. Uribe did not blame any particular group.

Large pools of blood lay outside the club on a residential street. Smartly dressed club members and staff, blackened with soot and dripping blood, staggered from the building choking for breath. Dazed survivors lined up for ambulance crews to give them a turn on oxygen masks.

"I fear that there are more than 20 people dead," said Mayor Antanas Mockus, adding more than 100 people were hurt.

The Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia -- a peasant rebel group known as FARC -- has carried out several spectacular urban attacks since Uribe took office in August.

On Jan. 16, FARC rebels killed five people and injured 32 when they planted a car bomb in a parking lot adjacent to a state prosecution office in the northern city of Medellin. In December, FARC rebels planted a suitcase bomb in a restaurant on the 30th floor of a downtown Bogota building housing congressmen, wounding 30 people.

Uribe, a close ally of the United States in the war on drugs, has also launched an aggressive campaign to cripple Colombia's cocaine industry and arrest drug lords. The South American nation is the world's No. 1 cocaine producer. Justice Minister Fernando Londono is a former club president.

The blast, which occurred at about 8:10 p.m. (0110 GMT on Saturday), laid waste to the plush brick building, which boasts some of Bogota's finest restaurants, a hotel, conference rooms, pools, squash courts and even a terrace golf driving range.

Debris littered the road outside and windows were shattered blocks away. Police ordered the evacuation of nearby buildings and cordoned off the streets. Rescue workers wearing oxygen masks carried away wounded people, many with deep cuts.

The chaotic scenes were reminiscent of those when drug lords, led by the late cocaine kingpin Pablo Escobar, bombed buildings, shopping centers and even a commercial airplane in mid-air as part of an anti-government campaign against extradition to the United States.

"It was a loud explosion. I was in the bar on the fifth floor. There was a lot of smoke. I was choking. I was lucky and jumped through a window and onto the roof of a house nearby," student Esteban Jaramillo told Reuters.

By early Saturday, rescue workers had evacuated all of the survivors. Earlier, witnesses saw people trapped on the fifth and seventh floors as orange flames soared into the night sky and smoke billowed from windows and the roof. Some of those trapped called loved ones on cellular phones, asking for help.

Thailand reopens border with Cambodia

THE NATION/ANN, Bangkok

Thousands of Cambodians rushed through reopened checkpoints into Thailand to stock up on food and other necessities as Thai authorities open the border on Saturday following a nine-day closure after devastating anti-Thai riots in Phnom Penh.

At the Aranyaprathet-Poi Pet crossing in Sa Kaew province, well over

1,000 Cambodians packed the crossing since the break of dawn, waiting eagerly to cross following confusing statements from the Thai government about the opening date.

The que stretched well over 200 metres. The influx were greeted with about 200 Thai border officials.

Thai merchants who flocked to the border markets earlier last week were still furious at Deputy Prime Minister Chavalit Yongchaiyudh who had previously said the border would be open by then. Their meat and vegetable were spoiled along with their mood.

US asks diplomats to leave ME

Washington, London preparing war resolution

AP, Washington

The State Department advised nonessential US diplomats and family members on Friday to leave Israel, Jordan, Syria and Lebanon. Private US citizens also were advised to leave those countries and Americans were cautioned not to travel to Israel.

At the same time, the department urged Americans to stay away from Iraq and said it was closing the Polish office in Baghdad that provided consular service to Americans in the absence of US relations with Iraq.

US citizens in Iraq were urged to leave.

"The Iraq regime's continuing refusal to cooperate fully with UN weapons inspectors has led to mounting tension between Iraq and the international community," the department said.

The statement said foreigners in Iraq had been used in the past as "human shields," and there are credible reports they may be kidnapped.

Officials said the decision was made on the advice of American diplomats in the embassies and not because of a specific threat to US personnel.

The moves coincided with grow-

ing indications that President Bush may authorize the use of force against Iraq to get rid of its suspected weapons of mass destruction.

"This decision results from an overall assessment of the security situation in the region, a rise in anti-American sentiment and the potential for violence and terrorist action against American targets, especially as the international community continues to focus on the issue of Iraqi disarmament," Lou Fintor, a department spokesman, said.

Hundreds of US diplomats and family members could be involved in the departures. Meanwhile, US and British diplomats began considering options for a new UN resolution Friday, including one that would give Saddam Hussein a brief window to relinquish power to avoid a war, diplomats told The Associated Press.

One idea being floated would threaten war unless Saddam removes himself from power or is removed by his own people by a certain deadline, possibly 48 hours, according to Security Council diplomats speaking on condition of anonymity.

It's unlikely that this option would win enough support but it might be presented as a tough starting position that the United States and Britain could later soften.

Other options included a resolution that would note negative findings from the weapons inspectors; reiterate that Iraq was in violation of its obligations; and remind Saddam that he faces "serious consequences." That option, while not explicitly authorizing force, could garner wide support because all 15 council members would be eager to back the inspectors and keep up the pressure on Iraq to comply.

But a British diplomat said the resolution, which would be offered after the inspectors deliver their next assessments on Feb. 14, will need to authorize force in some way. "That's our red line," the diplomat said, speaking on condition of anonymity.

Britain's UN Ambassador Jeremy Greenstock told PBS' "NewsHour With Jim Lehrer" on Friday that his delegation had been working on the wording of a resolution for some time.

But, Greenstock said, "I have no instructions to bring this language to other members of the Security Council at this point."

Council diplomats said another possibility is that countries opposing a rush to war might introduce a resolution supporting the continuation of inspections for six months.

Private American citizens in Israel, the West Bank or Gaza



Iraqi General Amer al-Saadi (L) an aide to Iraqi President Saddam Hussein smiles as he welcomes UN weapons inspectors chiefs Hans Blix and Mohammad al-Baradei (R) upon their arrival in Baghdad's Saddam International Airport on Saturday. The fate of Iraq was hanging in the balance as UN chief weapons inspectors began a new mission that would spell the difference between war and peace in the face of US threats to invade and occupy the country.

US raises terror alert

AP, Washington

Law enforcement and private business braced for a possible terrorist attack after the starkest warning since the September 11 anniversary, stopping more cars at borders, readying Coast Guard cutters, and tightening security from airports to theme parks.

Worries were raised New York once again could be a target.

While stepped-up protection stretched across the country, a high-ranking law enforcement source told The Associated Press intercepted communications between suspected terrorists suggested a potential threat to New York.

The communications, some intercepted as late as Thursday night, raised specific concerns about hotels and subways in the city and the East Coast, said the source, who spoke on condition of anonymity.

Airports, subways, nuclear plants, hotels, even plans for Sunday's NBA All-Star Game in Atlanta received new attention after the federal government upgraded the terror alert color to "orange," warning of a growing possibility that the al-Qaeda network would launch an attack to coincide with Muslim holy days.

All options open to rein in North Korea: Bush

REUTERS, Seoul/Washington

President Bush, preparing for possible war in Iraq, said all options were open to end the nuclear stand-off with North Korea which warned of "horrible nuclear disasters" should the United States attack.

Bush said he hoped the problem could be resolved diplomatically and the United States has repeatedly stressed that it has no intention of attacking North Korea, which Bush last year branded part of an "axis of evil" along with Iraq and Iran.

"All options are on the table, but I believe we can solve this diplomatically," Bush told reporters in Washington on Friday when asked whether he was prepared to use military force in North Korea, which the United States suspects of building nuclear weapons.

US bombers, fighter jets and warships have been put on alert for possible deployment to the western Pacific to deter any aggression by North Korea in the event of a war in Iraq.



Muslim pilgrims walk in Makkah, Saudi Arabia on Friday. The Hajj officially begins today when the mass of faithful moves from Makkah to the nearby valley of Mina, ahead of Monday's ascent of Mount Arafat, which is the climax of the pilgrimage.

Pilgrims get ready for Hajj

AFP, Makkah

More than two million faithful launch the annual Muslim pilgrimage here Sunday under heavy security imposed by Saudi authorities determined to crush any disturbances sparked by US threats to attack Iraq.

The journey of faith will get under way in the early hours of Sunday when pilgrims make their way on foot to the Mina valley to begin the sacred rituals.

An estimated 1.3 million pilgrims from 170 countries had arrived by Tuesday according to official figures, with the final number expected to reach two million.

Saudi authorities have taken extra security precautions this year amid heightened regional tensions as the United States pursues a military buildup in the Gulf ahead of a possible attack on Iraq, a Muslim nation and Saudi Arabia's northern neighbor.

Pakistan blames India for 'diplomatic terrorism'

'No MFN status to Delhi without Kashmir talks'

AFP, Islamabad

Pakistan Saturday slammed what it called India's "diplomatic terrorism" after New Delhi expelled the acting head of the Pakistani embassy, accusing him of funding Kashmiri separatists.

"The fanatical Hindu nationalist government is bent upon heightening tensions between the two countries in a systematic manner for internal electoral motives," Information Minister Sheikh Rashid Ahmed told AFP.

India ordered Pakistan's top envoy here Jilil Abbas Jeelani and four aides to leave the country within 48 hours after charging him with "activities incompatible to his diplomatic status."

Indian officials have charged that

Jeelani on Thursday handed over to a Kashmiri woman 6,250 dollars destined for militants in the Himalayan province, which is divided between the two countries.

"We have taken our action on the basis of hard evidence," foreign ministry spokesman Navtej Sarna said.

The Pakistani minister said India's BJP government was "blatantly contravening all international diplomatic norms and conventions in its mad pursuit to whip-up anti-Pakistan hysteria."

"Their disgraceful and despicable conduct is nothing but a kind of diplomatic terrorism whereas they have already subjected the oppressed people in Indian occupied Kashmir to unrelenting worst state terror."

He said it would be apparent to any independent observer that the accusations against Jeelani were "preposterous and weird."

PTI adds: Contradicting recent assurances by President Pervez Musharraf, Pakistan on Friday denied granting of the Most Favoured Nation status to India saying it would be given only when New Delhi agreed to resolve the "Kashmir issue."

Pakistan would consider MFN status to India only if it agreed to resolve Kashmir dispute, Commerce Minister Humayun Akhtar told reporters here.

Akhtar said Pakistan was ready to hold talks with India on bilateral trade provided all outstanding political issues including Kashmir are resolved.

Sharon holds direct talks with Palestinian officials

REUTERS, Jerusalem

Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon held his first direct talks with Palestinians in nearly a year, meeting senior officials to discuss ending more than two years of violence, Israeli political sources said on Friday.

They said Sharon met Palestinian Legislative Council speaker Ahmed Korei on Wednesday. "They discussed ways to reach a cease-fire and resume their talks," one said.

Asked to comment, Korei did not directly confirm or deny the meeting occurred. He told Reuters: "It's too good to be true. I can't say yes, because it's not true. And I can't say no, because it's not good to say no."

Another Palestinian official, however, confirmed the talks took place.

The reports by Israeli political sources and Israeli Channel One

television came at a time when the United States wants to dampen violence in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict as it prepares for a possible war on Iraq that could suck in Israel.

The reports also coincide with efforts by Sharon's right-wing Likud party to bring its main rival, center-left Labor, into a unity coalition.

Labor has so far declined because of what it calls Sharon's refusal to consider resuming peace talks with Palestinians and withdrawing from some lands.

Sharon has not had direct contact with Palestinian officials for nearly a year, the sources said.

Dov Weisglass, a senior aide to Sharon, met Palestinian officials including Palestinian Interior Minister Hani al-Hassan on Thursday, the political sources said.

Sharon has refused to meet Yasser Arafat, saying the Palestinian leader is irrelevant and foments violence.