

# World powers vow action to fight al-Qaeda

REUTERS, London

Western nations, Russia and Japan pledged new joint action to fight al-Qaeda Friday as Britain erected concrete barriers round parliament and the United States issued precautions against a possible truck bombing.

A Homeland Security Department bulletin obtained by Reuters gave detailed information on threats involving "vehicle borne improvised explosive devices" - commonly known as truck or car bombs.

"(The department) has no specific information to indicate that a truck bombing of any kind is currently being planned in the United States," said the bulletin, whose distribution list included major US companies.

But the department said it wanted to advise the public as well as people who "own and operate facilities" about possible indicators of "terrorist attack planning."

The United States has raised its domestic terror alert status to orange -- the second-highest level -- and many other countries have stepped up warnings to citizens since bloody suicide bombings in Saudi Arabia and Morocco last week.

In London, dozens of concrete blocks, each about the size of a single bed, were erected to prevent vehicles loaded with explosives from smashing into parliament and Big Ben.

Police said the operation, after nightfall Thursday, was "carried out on a precautionary basis" and was not a response to specific intelligence about terror attacks.

"While our message is still 'alert not alarm', we will reiterate appeals for the public to remain vigilant," London's Metropolitan Police said in a statement.

Britain has long feared it might be attacked because of its unflinching support for the US-led war on terror. British troops fought along-

side the Americans in Afghanistan and Iraq.

The Group of Eight world powers -- the United States, France, Britain, Germany, Italy, Canada, Russia and Japan -- said Friday they were "totally mobilised against international terrorism."

"We pledged to pursue our effort further...by supplementing measures relating to the financing of terrorism," said a statement issued after G8 foreign ministers met in Paris. It gave no further details.

But French officials have said measures to be studied at a summit of G8 leaders in Evian, France next month would include aid to help poor countries crack down against terror funds, as well as steps to enhance transport security.

In a tape broadcast by Arab television channel al-Jazeera this week and said to be from a top aide to al-Qaeda leader Osama bin Laden, threatened Jihad (holy war) against Britain as well as the United

States, Australia and Norway.

Al-Qaeda or groups linked to it have not carried out any successful bomb attacks on Western countries since the Sept. 11 attacks in the United States in 2001. They have focused instead on targets in Kenya and Bali and, most recently, Saudi Arabia and Morocco.

But other countries in Europe, besides Britain, remain vigilant.

"We have always been on high alert and we remain on high alert," said a security source in Italy, who declined to be named. "We are not taking the terrorist threat lightly."

A week ago, France raised its terror alert level to "orange" against a "plausible risk of terrorist action."

The decision was taken after suicide bombings in the Saudi capital Riyadh and the Moroccan city of Casablanca that together killed 75 people.



PHOTO: AFP

Iraqi electricity employees joyfully handle Iraqi dinars at a power plant on Saturday in central Baghdad after the Office of Reconstruction and Humanitarian Assistance (ORHA), assisted by US military police, collected more than 739 million Iraqi dinars and 180 thousand US dollars from the Rafidain Bank to distribute emergency salaries to 6,000 electricity workers. The US-led coalition began paying Iraq's 1.4 million state employees their wages for the first time since the fall of Saddam Hussein.

## US fires state workers to rid Iraq of Saddam links

REUTERS, Baghdad

Iraq's US governor, wielding powers newly endorsed at the United Nations, fired hundreds of thousands of state employees on Friday as part of what he called a drive to rid the nation of links to Saddam Hussein's era.

But many Iraqis criticised the move, saying under Saddam people hoping to get a job or advance in the government had to show loyalty to his Baath Party. Critics said the mass sackings could drive Saddam loyalists underground from where they could plot a return to power.

In a sign Iraq was returning to the world fold, international companies jostled for contracts in oil and other industries, now free to trade after Thursday's UN Security Council vote to scrap sanctions imposed during Saddam's era.

UN Secretary General Kofi Annan named UN human rights

chief Sergio Vieira de Mello as his special representative for Iraq, clearing the way for the world body to begin fleshing out its role in Iraqi reconstruction.

Japanese Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi told President Bush that Tokyo would take an "active role in the reconstruction of Iraq," a Japanese official said after the two leaders met at Bush's Texas ranch.

Striving to halt the lawlessness that has gripped Iraq and hampered reconstruction efforts since US-led forces invaded two months ago, the American military announced plans to try and disarm the millions of civilians now carrying weapons.

US forces also said they had seized a suspected \$500 million worth of gold bars from a truck near Qaim on the Syrian border.

Hours after the UN ended 13 years of sanctions and soothed pre-war divisions by endorsing sweep-

ing powers for US and British officials to run Iraq and its oil trade for the next year, US administrator Paul Bremer abolished the defence and information ministries and military and security courts.

"These actions are part of a robust campaign to show the Iraqi people that the Saddam regime is gone and will never return," his administration said in a statement in Baghdad.

The order disbands the elite Republican Guards and regular army, suspends conscription, hands property of dissolved bodies over to the US-led administration and dismisses all employees of the dissolved entities -- more than 400,000 of them.

Defeat last month had already effectively destroyed the armed forces. The US administration has also banned Saddam's Baath party and vowed to bar its leaders from future public office. It plans to rebuild a new Iraqi army from scratch.

## Venezuela govt, foes reach accord on referendum

REUTERS, Caracas

Venezuela's government and opposition, seeking to end months of feuding, have agreed a political pact to hold a referendum on Hugo Chavez's presidency after Aug. 19, officials said on Friday.

The accord follows more than six months of negotiations between the two sides, which have been locked in fierce conflict over Chavez's rule.

Organisation of American States Secretary General Cesar Gaviria, who has brokered the talks, achieved a consensus late on Thursday on the framework agreement, an OAS official said.

"There is an agreement," the official told Reuters on condition of anonymity. He added the accord should be signed by Wednesday.

Despite the accord, an opposition party, Accion Democratica, planned to go ahead with an anti-government rally Saturday in a strongly pro-Chavez district of west Caracas.

## Life clues on Red Planet

BBC ONLINE

Scientists may have identified what could be the best place to look for life on the Red Planet. It is the Russell Crater in Mars' southern hemisphere.

Observations of the region made during the local autumn and spring, when frost covers the dunes and then recedes, indicate liquid water could be present on the surface at certain times of the year.

Detailed analysis suggests this water could be mixing with soil to create frequent mudflows.

"The water we believe is there means that it could be the best place we know of so far where you could dig into the surface to look for life," researcher Dr Dennis Reiss told BBC News Online.

"There are extraordinary features in Russell Crater, features resembling terrestrial mudflows," said Dr Reiss, of the German Aerospace Centre.

He has studied high-resolution images from the Mars Global Surveyor spacecraft in orbit around the planet.

## ME summit in sight as Israel backs roadmap

REUTERS, Jerusalem

Israel's prime minister has said he is ready to back a US-backed "road map" peace plan and seek his cabinet's approval, opening the way for a possible Middle East peace summit with President Bush.

The cabinet next meets on Sunday. It is expected to approve the road map, breaking a deadlock in peace efforts, because the United States said on Friday it would address Israel's reservations about the plan as it is being implemented.

Bush said soon after Israel's announcement that he would consider calling a summit with Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon and Palestinian Prime Minister

Mahmoud Abbas.

He did not say where or when they might meet but US officials said the talks could take place in early June in Geneva or at the Egyptian Red Sea resort of Sharm el-Sheikh.

"If a meeting advances progress toward two states living side by side in peace, I will strongly consider such a meeting," he told reporters in Crawford, Texas, after talks with Japanese Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi.

Bush has deepened his commitment to ending the Israeli-Palestinian conflict since the end of the US-led war that ousted Saddam Hussein in Iraq.

"I think optimism is justified now and every day until then (the meeting)," former US Senator

George Mitchell, author of an earlier peace plan which failed, told CNN television. He said that holding a summit would provide "a sense of momentum."

Edward Abington, an ex-diplomat who advises the Palestinians, said: "My feeling is for the first time Bush is really pushing very hard and maybe we can see a break in the deadlock."

The "road map" is the only peace initiative on offer nearly 32 months after the Palestinians began their uprising for an independent state.

The plan, drafted by the United States, European Union, United Nations and Russia, sets out reciprocal steps leading to the establishment of an independent Palestinian state by 2005.

## US says no to talks for Uday's surrender

AP, Baghdad

American military commanders are making it clear that the Bush administration will accept nothing less than unconditional surrender from Saddam Hussein's eldest son - and, by implication, his top advisers and Baath Party members still hiding in Iraq.

The commander of US ground forces in Iraq, responding to a report that Uday Hussein might be seeking to surrender, said Friday he knew of no negotiations being held with envoys of Saddam's eldest son, and he insisted the US military isn't seeking to cut any deals.

"Nobody's brought an offer from Uday to me, and I would facilitate his coming on in. But it would be unconditional," Lt. Gen. David McKiernan said at a security briefing in Baghdad.

## US sees new terror threats in Morocco

AFP, Washington

The United States said Friday that Moroccan police have reported receiving anonymous threats of terrorist attacks on hotels, nightclubs and restaurants throughout the country, and urged US citizens there to redouble their security.

The State Department, through the US embassy in Rabat, said the threatened attacks were similar in nature to last Friday's suicide bombings in Casablanca that killed 41 people, but could not speak to their credibility.

"Moroccan police are receiving anonymous threatening phone calls indicating that hotels, nightclubs and restaurants in Rabat and other cities may be the target of terrorist attacks similar to those that occurred in Casablanca on May 16, 2003," the embassy said in a notice to US citizens in the country.

"US citizens are encouraged to maintain a high level of vigilance and to take appropriate steps to increase their security awareness," it said.

The notice, a copy of which was provided to AFP in Washington by the State Department, said Moroccan authorities were particularly concerned about security over the coming weekend.

In addition, it said that the police had issued a bulletin looking for a stolen Renault 19 automobile that had last been seen heading from the town of Khemissat to the capital.

The notice gave no information as to why the vehicle was of interest to Moroccan authorities.

In a similar notice issued on Thursday, the embassy reported that a diplomatic license plate with a number similar to those used by US diplomats had been stolen from a European Union vehicle outside the Mandarin Hotel in Rabat.

The theft, it said, coupled with the bombings in Casablanca and other recent events, including the broadcast of an audiotape purported to be from Osama bin Laden's top deputy urging new attacks against US interest, has deepened fears of possible imminent strikes.



PHOTO: AFP

People queue at Terminal 1 of the Los Angeles International Airport as Memorial Day weekend begins, in Los Angeles on Friday. Americans took advantage of the long weekend despite the increase on the threat level to "orange" or "high" following intelligence reports claiming that more attacks on American targets were planned by terrorist groups.

## IAEA confirms plans to send inspectors to Iraq

AFP, Vienna

The International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) said Friday it would soon send inspectors to a nuclear facility in Iraq after reaching an agreement with the United States.

IAEA spokesman Mark Gwozdecky said the inspectors' mission was to ascertain the situation at the nuclear plant at Al-Tuwaitha, south of Baghdad, that has been pillaged, raising fears that radioactive material has been removed.

"We are planning to send a team to the Iraqi nuclear research centre at Tuwaitha soon to verify the nuclear material under safeguards," he told AFP.

Gwozdecky said this mission "will be limited to verifying Iraq's safeguards obligations" to the IAEA under the nuclear non-proliferation treaty and did not constitute a resumption of arms inspections in Iraq.

"The dispatch of such a mission has been agreed to with the US government," he added.

The State Department earlier announced that it had agreed to the mission, saying it expected IAEA officials to travel to Iraq "within the next week."

The Al-Tuwaitha Nuclear Research Centre, one of Iraq's

main nuclear complexes, had been under seal since the 1991 Gulf War but was hard hit by a wave of looting that followed the fall of Saddam Hussein's regime.

The agreement was reached after IAEA chief Mohamed ElBaradei warned of a potential humanitarian disaster if nuclear material were to fall into the wrong hands.

Meanwhile, the United States and the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) are putting the finishing touches on plans for agency officials to head to Iraq next week, the State Department said Friday.

"The US and IAEA are finalizing plans to send an IAEA team to Iraq under the protection and auspices of coalition forces to conduct a safeguard inspection of the nuclear material near Tuwaitha," department spokeswoman Julie Reside said.

"We anticipate the departure of an IAEA team within the next week," she added, without offering any other details on the mission.

Washington said Wednesday that it expected IAEA inspectors to head to a nuclear facility in Al-Tuwaitha, south of Baghdad, after agency chief Mohamed ElBaradei warned of a potential humanitarian disaster if nuclear material were to fall into the wrong hands.

## Taiwan declares SARS outbreak under control

AFP, Taipei

The Taiwan government insisted Saturday the SARS epidemic on the island is being brought under control as the number of new cases fell sharply after hitting record levels in recent days.

The Department of Health (DOH) reported 10 new cases of Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) on Saturday, taking the number of infections on the island to 548. The new cases were sharply down from 55 reported Friday and a record 65 on Thursday.

"We expect the number will continue to go down, and we are very sure about this trend," Li Ming-liang, head of the cabinet's SARS control task force, told a press conference.

"I can tell our people here and now that the epidemic in Taiwan has been stabilised. Everyone please take it easy and restore your normal life as best you can," Li said.

The department did not announce any more deaths from SARS, with the official toll remaining at 60.

Recording more than 300 infections in the past week, Taiwan has been a major cause for concern to those battling the outbreak, which appears to be waning in other SARS hotspots in Asia.

## Shiite cleric questions US rule over Iraq

AFP, Karbala

April 9.

"We reject occupation. We want and are working for an authority, an administration and a government which does not play with words, an Iraqi government representing all Iraqis."

Hakim, who lived in neighbouring Iran during years of exile which saw the Baath regime brutally crush any voice of Shiite dissent, blamed the coalition for the lawlessness that has gripped Iraq.

The prolonged state of war, despite the end of military hostilities, "allows American and British soldiers to kill Iraqis at any moment under the pretext that they feel threatened," Hakim said.

"If they are not able to bring security, these young men can do it," he said gesturing to his followers.

Hakim defended himself against charges that he sought to impose a theocracy in Iraq.

"We do not want a war for hegemony waged by the clerics to take power. We want a modern government, but one that respects Islam and its values," he said.

Hakim entered Karbala before an ecstatic crowd chanting the traditional vows of sacrifice, previously reserved for Saddam: "With our souls and with our blood, we will sacrifice ourselves for you Hakim!"