



Investigators search the site where two car bombs exploded yesterday in front synagogues in Istanbul yesterday. Israeli Foreign Minister Silvan Shalom flew into Istanbul 16 November as Turkish investigators hunted for clues to find out who was behind twin car bomb attack at two synagogues that killed at least 23 people and wounded 300.

Hunt under way for Turkey bombers

AFP, Istanbul

Turkish and Israel officials have launched an investigation into who was behind twin bomb attacks on synagogues in Istanbul, which killed at least 23 people and injured 300 others.

Turkish police are reported as saying the attacks were carried out by suicide bombers who blew themselves up in cars.

The Turkish Government says it believes the bombers had international links.

Israeli Foreign Minister Silvan Shalom arrived in Istanbul to inspect the scenes of the attacks.

Israeli security agents and Turkish police picked through debris outside the Neve Shalom and Beth Israel synagogues on Sunday, searching for clues.

The bombs, which went off minutes apart on Saturday morning, badly damaged both buildings and scattered wreckage over a wide area.

Although an unidentified caller to the Anatolia news agency claimed the attacks were the work of a radical home-grown group called the "Islamic Front of Raiders of the Great Orient", Turkish officials believe the attacks were carried out by a foreign organisation, possibly al-Qaeda.

"It is obvious that this is a terrorist incident with international connections," Foreign Minister Abdullah Gul said.

World leaders condemned the bombings at the Neve Shalom (Oasis of Peace) and Beth Israel synagogues,

while Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan called for the establishment of a united front against international terrorism.

US President George W. Bush condemned the bombings "in the strongest possible terms" and telephoned Erdogan to offer his condolences, declaring that the United States "stands resolutely with Turkey" in the face of such attacks.

UN chief Kofi Annan said he was "appalled" by the attacks.

Greece, which fears terrorists could target the Athens Olympics next year, condemned "the barbaric and atrocious" attacks, and Turkey's Kurdish rebels, who are often highly critical of the Ankara government, said: "This is a terrorist act and we do not accept it."

The almost simultaneous bombings were the latest in a series of strikes against Jewish targets in recent months, including suicide attacks in the Moroccan city of Casablanca in May that killed 45 and an attack on an Israeli-owned hotel in Kenya a year ago that left 18 dead.

Six Jews were among the 20 victims of the attacks, Israeli public radio reported, quoting a member of the Turkish Jewish community.

"We have identified six Jews among the people killed in these attacks, including four security guards employed by the community... Most of those killed were neighbouring shop workers," the unidentified Istanbul source said.

No immediate troops withdrawal from Iraq: Rumsfeld

AP, Kadena Air Base, Japan

The new accelerated plan for restoring self-rule in Iraq does not mean US troops will withdraw anytime soon, Defence Secretary Donald Rumsfeld said yesterday.

In an interview en route to a US Air Force base in southern Japan, Rumsfeld was asked about the plan to restore Iraq's sovereignty by June.

"The time table or the way ahead that the (Iraqi) Governing Council has been describing relates to the governance aspects of the country and not to the security aspects," he said. "That's on a separate track."

Rumsfeld said the United States continues to plan to rotate a new contingent of troops into Iraq next year, with no final pullout date set yet. Accelerating the political process will not affect military planning, he said.

"This has nothing to do with US troops and coalition troops in Iraq," he said.

The plan, endorsed by the Iraqi

Governing Council Saturday, reflects Washington's desire to speed up the hand over of power as attacks against American occupation forces grow more sophisticated and deadly. It came as the US death toll since the war began passed the 400 mark.

Rumsfeld was to meet later Sunday with Governor Keiichi Inamine of Okinawa, the southern island where a majority of the 47,000 Japan-based US troops are stationed. He was also scheduled for a visit with US troops, including Marines at Camp Foster, home of the 3rd Marine Division.

While the United States counts Japan among its strongest and most reliable allies, the presence of thousands of American troops on Japanese soil often in urban areas whose residents are disturbed by the noise is a source of friction.

Central to those tensions is the question of whether to extend fuller legal protections to US service members accused of crimes.

At a joint news conference with

Ishiba, head of Japan's Defence Agency, Rumsfeld also thanked the government for the billions of dollars in humanitarian aid it has pledged for Iraq's reconstruction. He gave no hint of disappointment at Japan's delay in sending security troops to Iraq.

Ishiba said the government is closely monitoring the situation in Iraq and is inclined to send troops. "We would like to do it as soon as possible," he said.

A military fact-finding team left Tokyo for Iraq on Saturday to determine where and when it might be safe to send Japanese troops to help with reconstruction and other non-combat duties.

The mission came two days after Japanese government said it would delay long-discussed plans to send peacekeepers because of deteriorating security following a deadly suicide bombing in southern Iraq. Japanese media reported the mission had been hastily organised in a show of solidarity with Rumsfeld.

Blair takes on US president visit critics

Bush to face tough talks, protests during UK visit

AFP, Washington

Alongside the pomp and splendour of the first state visit by a US president to Britain in the coming week, George W. Bush is due to hold urgent talks on Iraq with Prime Minister Tony Blair.

Bush said ahead of his historic visit that it was an "exciting" time for both to be leaders. But in many ways the American president's visit to London will be a test of the so-called "special relationship" between the trans-Atlantic allies.

Bush and Blair maintained a united front against reluctant allies before and during the Iraq war but now both are paying the price of the failure to find any weapons of mass destruction.

Tony Blair has defended George Bush's controversial state visit to Britain as a chance to reaffirm shared values.

He told the London tabloid News of the World the visit was an ideal time to celebrate freedom, security and a "better, more prosperous and peaceful future" for Iraq.

Anti-war campaigners have been fiercely critical of next week's trip, as violence in Iraq continues.

Lord Hattersley, former deputy Labour leader, said it was "propaganda" for Mr Bush's presidential election campaign.

Former foreign secretary Robin Cook, who stood down as Commons leader over the war in Iraq, said on Saturday the decision to give Mr Bush a full state visit was "baffling".

Mr Blair admitted George Bush's critics were "rubbing their hands at the scope for embarrassing him".

The prime minister said he himself

has aired some differences with the US president, over such issues as global warming and steel tariffs.

"But I welcome this visit because it's more important than ever to underline that our two countries share the same values, the same love of freedom and determination to build a safer world," he said.

Speaking in an interview with Sir David Frost being broadcast on Sunday, President Bush gave a robust defence of the situation in Iraq and insisted terrorists would be defeated.

"They want to shake the will of the free world," he said. "The good news about having a partner like Tony Blair is he won't be shaken, and neither will I."

On Saturday the US-led coalition in Iraq announced a speeded-up transfer of power.

US probes Iraq helicopter crash

BBC ONLINE

The US army in Iraq is examining the wreckage of two Black Hawk helicopters which crashed in the northern city of Mosul, killing at least 17 soldiers.

It was the worst US helicopter crash in Iraq so far - but officials are not yet able to say precisely what caused it.

Some witnesses said one of the helicopters was hit by ground fire and then collided with the second aircraft.

Five troops were injured and one is still missing after the crash, which hit 101st Airborne Division forces.

Five US helicopters have crashed in the past three-and-a-half weeks in Iraq with the loss of 39 lives.

In Mosul, the Black Hawks crashed within 250 metres of each other.

The US-led coalition has not yet confirmed the nationalities of those on board.

It said one helicopter was carrying a

quick reaction force and the other was carrying soldiers on a transport mission.

A man quoted by Reuters news agency said he had seen the two helicopters collide after an explosion.

"I looked outside the window and saw two helicopters," he said.

"One was flying low and was on fire. The other was higher up. The first one climbed and hit the higher one."

Mosul is located well to the north of the so-called "Sunni triangle" that has been at the heart of the insurgency.

However, the city is home to both Sunni Muslims and Kurds, and in recent weeks coalition forces in the region have been fighting an increasingly well-organised resistance.

On Saturday, the Iraqi Governing Council said the US-led coalition would hand over power to a transitional government by June 2004.



A crane lifts the remains of one of two US Blackhawk helicopters yesterday which collided in mid-air late Saturday, killing 17 US servicemen. An Iraqi policeman told AFP he saw a Blackhawk helicopter intervening as assailants ambushed a US foot patrol in the area. A missile was then fired at the chopper, which crashed into a second Blackhawk as it tried to dodge the missile, he said. A Central Command official declined to comment on that report, saying, "the incident is still under investigation."

Pentagon to launch 24-hour TV channel in Baghdad

PTI, Washington

In a bid to present a "more comprehensive picture" of the developments in Iraq, the US State Department plans to launch a 24-hour satellite channel from Baghdad "in a week or two" offering exhaustive coverage of its activities there.

The channel mooted by Pentagon "will offer uncut images of government briefings and military ceremonies, and local stations will be notified when an event or interview occurs that is relevant to their geographic area," the Washington Post reported.

The new idea took birth following observation by officials with President George W. Bush's administration that national networks have focused unfairly on violence and setbacks in Iraq.

Concorde mania sweeps Paris

REUTERS, Paris

The sleek needle-nose of the super-sonic Concorde was sold to an anonymous buyer for about \$550,000 at an auction on Saturday, over 30 times the price it was expected to fetch, auctioneers Christie's said.

Over two hundred Concorde souvenirs, from the plane's instruction manual to its engine, were up for grabs in the auction, which brought in a total of about \$3.9 million.

Christie's had expected to bring in a total of only about \$294,000 from the sale, whose proceeds go to the Air France foundation, a charity for under-privileged children.

"This enchanting white bird which made us all dream has once again worked its magic," said Francois Curiel, president of Christie's Europe.

2 Marwari businessmen shot dead in Assam

TNN, Guwahati

In the first attack against Hindi-speaking people following the train violence in Bihar, suspected Ulfa militants shot dead two businessmen belonging to the Marwari community in Dhubri district and injured a Bihari person in Tinsukia district on Saturday evening.

According to police reports, unidentified gunmen killed the two Marwari businessmen, identified as Bijoy Tater and Pradip, at Golakganj market under in Dhubri district at around 7.30 pm. Both of them died on the spot, police said.

Elsewhere in Tinsukia district in

upper Assam, suspected Ulfa militants lobbed a hand grenade at a tailor's shop seriously injuring a Bihari person.

According to initial police reports from Doomsdooma, the incident occurred at around 8 pm at Borhapjan. One Suresh Ram Prasad was seriously injured in the attack. Senior police officials have rushed to the spot to take stock of the situation.

Ulfa commander-in-chief Paresh Baruah, while talking to the BBC on Friday, had issued the threat to retaliate in a big way against Hindi-speaking people following the attacks on train passengers belonging to the North-East for three successive days in Bihar.

Germany not to send troops to Iraq

AP, Berlin

Germany will not send troops to Iraq, a government spokesman said on Saturday, after the European Union's top diplomat suggested that Berlin would have to reconsider if the United Nations asked NATO for help.

In talks with the EU official, Javier Solana, on Wednesday, Chancellor Gerhard Schroeder made "absolutely clear that there will be no German military contribution in Iraq, and thus also no deployment of troops," the spokesman said on customary condition of anonymity.

Solana was quoted by the Bild am Sonntag weekly saying that Germany

had ruled out getting involved militarily in Iraq for the moment, but not in principle.

"If NATO were to participate in the stabilisation of the country at the request of the United Nations, the question of military involvement comes up again for every member," Solana said.

The German government spokesman said that remark was "purely speculative."

Solana also added that there was no indication of NATO receiving such a request.

The German government opposed the war in Iraq and has refused to send troops to help stabilise the country.

Pak police arrest Shiite leader

Hunt launched to nab Masood Azhar

PTI, Islamabad

Shortly after Pakistan Government banned three terrorist outfits that resurfaced with new names, police have arrested a Shiite leader who headed one of the proscribed groups and launched a manhunt for Maulana Masood Azhar, the chief of Khudamul-e-Islam that replaced Jaish-e-Muhammad.

Police on Saturday night raided the homes of Azhar and the headquarters of Khudamul-e-Islam (KI) in his hometown Bahawalpur in Punjab province last night, but drew

a blank, Pakistani TV channel Geo reported yesterday.

Police also raided several KI offices in Lahore, Karachi, Hyderabad and other places in Pakistan, and sealed them. The whereabouts of Azhar were still not known.

Azhar, who formed Jaish after his release from an Indian prison following the hijacking of an Indian Airlines plane from Kathmandu to Kandahar in 1998, founded KI after last year's ban on Jaish by President Pervez Musharraf.

While cracking down on KI,

Pakistan police also arrested Allama Sajid Naqvi Islami, the leader of Shia politico-religious party Tehriki-i-Islami Pakistan (TP), banned on Saturday night along with KI and Sunni outfit Millat-e-Islamiya.

Naqvi, who formed TP after his main outfit Tehrik-i-Jafria Pakistan was banned by Musharraf last year, was arrested in Rawalpindi and was recently charged with the assassination of Sunni extremist leader Mulana Tariq Azam who founded Millat-e-Islamiya party to replace the banned Sepha-e-Sehba.



Israeli Jews hold pictures of their relatives who are still in Ethiopia during a demonstration in front of the Israeli prime minister's office in Jerusalem yesterday. Thousands of Ethiopian Jews held a protest calling on the government to bring some 20,000 of their relatives from Ethiopia to Israel and for an end to discrimination against their community.

Top Palestinian official hopeful of truce

'Suicide bombings will stop if Israeli operations end'

AP, Jerusalem

Palestinian militant groups are willing to halt suicide bombings and other attacks if Israel promises to stop carrying out military operations in the West Bank and Gaza Strip, a top Palestinian official said holding out hope for a truce agreement.

However, Israel has refused to say whether it would agree to such cease-fire terms, while a top Islamic militant leader has ruled out an immediate end to attacks on Israelis.

Early Sunday, Israeli troops killed two Palestinians during an operation to arrest a known arms smuggler in a Gaza refugee camp, Palestinian hospital officials and the Israeli military said.

During the fighting, two Apache helicopter gunships fired heavy machine-guns and Hassan Abu Khatleh,

55, was killed by a bullet wound to the chest, hospital officials said. At the end of the operation, the forces demolished Abu Libdeh's house. There were reports that Abu Libdeh was arrested.

The army said Abu Libdeh fled the house along with two other men, one of them armed. Troops chased after the three fugitives, and killed one. Abu Libdeh was wounded in his hand and taken for treatment in an Israeli hospital, the army said. The third man was arrested, it added.

Bringing about a truce between Israel and the Palestinians is seen as a key step in efforts to revitalise the US-backed "road map" peace plan that has stalled amid violence and Palestinian political crises. On Saturday, Israeli soldiers fired at a group of youths throwing stones in the West Bank, killing a 14-year-old Palestinian boy, according to

Palestinian medical sources.

An agreement could help strengthen new Palestinian Prime Minister Ahmed Qureia after an earlier cease-fire, secured by his predecessor, collapsed over the summer.

Qureia and Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon have been preparing for a possible summit in the coming days to discuss peace moves.

In advance of such a meeting, Qureia has been working to persuade militant factions, including Hamas and Islamic Jihad, to again agree to end attacks, and an Egyptian mediator was to arrive in the region Monday to assist him.

Palestinian Foreign Minister Nabil Shaath said militant factions, including Hamas and Islamic Jihad, were supportive of the idea of an open-ended cease-fire, but were looking for assurances Israel would also observe the truce.

French UN worker shot dead in Kabul

AFP, Kabul

A French woman working for the UN's High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) was shot dead by unknown gunmen Sunday afternoon in the southeast Afghan town of Ghazni, a UN spokesman said.

"At around 12:30 pm (0830 GMT) today two men on a motorcycle drove by a UNHCR vehicle in Ghazni bazaar. The passenger opened fire at point-blank range on the vehicle," he told AFP.

"A French female national suffered fatal wounds and was pronounced dead on arrival at hospital."

Her Afghan driver was shot in the arm but his wounds were not life-threatening, Singh said.

Expatriate UN staff in the main southern city of Kandahar, Gardez in the southeast and Jalalabad in the east have been told to stay in their guest houses and local staff to return home until security is reviewed, Singh said.