

Al-Qaeda looks for loopholes in aviation net for attacks: US

AP, Washington

The United States has credible information, including some that prompted this week's rise in the national terror threat level, that al-Qaeda continues to study potential weaknesses in America's revamped aviation security net looking for ways to strike again through the air, US officials familiar with recent intelligence say.

The information has been gleaned from sources as diverse as al-Qaida mastermind Khalid Shaikh Mohammed and low-level terror network members in Saudi Arabia and has led US officials to quickly adapt security procedures several times in recent months, the officials said.

For instance, US officials have been discreetly working with their counterparts in Canada and Mexico on improved security measures after intelligence indicated al-Qaeda might use in an attack an international airliner that simply passes over US soil, the officials said.

## Bush asks people to stay normal amid terror alert

### False alarm in Washington

AFP, Washington

US President George W. Bush told the US public Monday to try and make it business as usual after authorities issued a high security alert warning of a potential attack in the end-of-year holidays by al-Qaeda.

"Hard working Americans will be working over the holiday season to do everything we can to protect Americans from harm," Bush said during a ceremony in which a Menorah was lighted in the White House to celebrate the Jewish Hanukkah festival.

"American citizens need to go about their lives but as they do so they need to know that governments at all levels are working as hard as we possibly can to protect the American citizen."

Earlier in the day the US president met with his top anti-terror advisors after the government on

Sunday raised its nationwide security level from yellow, denoting "elevated" risk, to orange, or "high" risk, amid concerns of an impending domestic terrorist attack.

Bush called a meeting of the Homeland Security Council, including officials from the Justice Department and the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI), as organizations and cities nationwide stepped up their security levels.

Homeland Security Secretary Tom Ridge said that at the meeting "we reviewed the specific plans and the specific action we have taken and will continue to take."

Ridge and other top officials said the threat of a devastating year-end attack by Osama bin Laden's al-Qaeda network was the most serious since the terrorist strikes of September 11, 2001.

In television broadcasts blar-

keting US airwaves Monday, Ridge said terrorists might attempt to use airplanes to carry out a strike and analysis that came after reviewing recent monitored domestic communications or "chatter" among terror groups.

Security has also been boosted at airports, border crossings, shopping centers and other sites where large crowds are likely to gather this week for holiday events.

The North American Aerospace Defense Command and US Northern Command issued a statement Monday to say "appropriate action" had been taken to ensure people's protection.

"In an increased threat environment, we may take actions such as increasing our fighter presence, both alert and airborne around the nation," said spokesman for both Norad and Northcom Mike Perini.

The spokesman said that since the September 11 attacks, Norad

on more than 1,600 occasions scrambled fighters or diverted air patrols to respond to possible threats.

Ridge said terrorists hoped to "rival or exceed the scope and impact" of the September 11 attacks, which left nearly 3,000 people dead. On Monday he told CNN that authorities had received the tip-off "from many, many sources from around the world."

Meanwhile, police closed a busy downtown Washington street for several hours Monday after receiving a report of potentially hazardous materials in a dumpster but the discovery turned out to be a false alarm.

Several blocks of 15th Street were shut down to traffic after a "mysterious white powder" was found on the scene said. The substance turned out to be harmless, he added.



A South Korean protester shouts slogans during a rally against government's decision to send South Korean troops to Iraq near the National Assembly in Seoul yesterday. South Korea plans to send 3,000 troops, possibly including special operations forces and combat-ready marines, to the northern Iraqi oil town of Kirkuk as early as April to help US forces rebuild the war-torn nation.

## US troops net militants tied to Izzat Ibrahim

REUTERS, Baquba

US troops have detained three Muslim militants with ties to fugitive Izzat Ibrahim al-Douri, a former top aide to toppled Iraqi leader Saddam Hussein, a senior US military official said yesterday.

"We detained three individuals in the extremist religious organizations with ties to high value target number 6, Izzat Ibrahim al-Douri," Lieutenant Colonel William Adamson, head of the US task force in Baquba, told Reuters.

Izzat Ibrahim, who has a \$10 million bounty on his head, is number six on the list of 55 Iraqis most wanted by the United States.

He is believed to play a role directing the insurgents and is one of the top former Iraqi officials still wanted on the so-called American list of 55 on a deck of playing cards.

The US military has been trying to determine possible links between Saddam loyalists and Muslim militants who may have crossed Iraq's border to wage a holy war against the US-led occupation.



A Palestinian woman with her children runs away from clashes between Palestinian gunmen and Israeli troops during an Israeli army operation at the Rafah refugee camp in the southern Gaza Strip yesterday. At least seven Palestinians and two Israeli army officers were killed in the Gaza Strip during one of the bloodiest bouts of violence in the region in recent months.

## GCC leaders seal anti-terror accord

AFP, Kuwait City

Oil-rich Gulf Arab monarchies sealed an accord to fight terror, adopted steps to speed up economic unity and welcomed US plans to transfer power to Iraqis, at the end of their annual summit here Monday.

The leaders of the six-nation Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) said the pact will coordinate their efforts in the fight against terror following a wave of deadly bomb attacks in Saudi Arabia.

"Expressing keen interest in boosting joint security cooperation and coordination to fight terror, the summit approves the signing of the GCC agreement to combat terrorism," said the final communiqué, read by Secretary General Abdulrahman al-Attiya.

The GCC groups the gas- and oil-rich states of Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE).

## Britain plans 'tripartite' pressure on Syria

AFP, London

Britain plans to combine with France and Germany to put pressure on Syria over weapons of mass destruction, terrorism and Iraq, a London newspaper said yesterday.

The report follows Libya's surprise agreement on Friday to dismantle its weapons arsenal and give up its pursuit of weapons of mass destruction.

The plan, according to The Guardian, is for a joint initiative by Britain, France and Germany and is modelled on a similar tripartite effort which persuaded Iran to accept nuclear inspections.

London and Berlin have already demanded that Damascus make stronger commitments to abide by international laws on illegal weapons as the price for a closer relationship with the European Union.

The most obvious goal, The

Guardian said, would be to persuade Syria, facing the threat of UN sanctions, to sign up to the chemical weapons convention.

If agreed, the newspaper said, British Foreign Secretary Jack Straw and his German and French counterparts would visit Damascus together, mirroring their joint mission to Tehran in October.

Meanwhile, Libyan leader Muammar Gaddafi told CNN late Monday that his government had taken "corrective" action in renouncing weapons of mass destruction and that nations such as North Korea, Iran and Syria, suspected of having nuclear arms, should follow its lead.

"In my opinion I should believe that they should follow the steps of Libya, take an example from Libya, so that they prevent any tragedy being inflicted upon their own people," Gaddafi said in an exclu-

sive interview with CNN.

Gaddafi reasoned that such a step would "tighten the noose around the Israelis, so they would expose their programs of weapons of mass destruction."

Libya on Friday took the world by surprise admitting after years of denial that it had weapons of mass destruction and vowing to renounce them.

Gaddafi, however, told CNN that Libya did not possess nuclear, biological or chemical weapons.

"We have not these weapons," he told CNN's Andrea Koppel during his interview in a tent a half an hour's drive outside the Libyan capital Tripoli.

The programs to be dismantled, Gaddafi said, "would have been for peaceful purposes -- but nevertheless we decided to get rid of them completely."

## Sonia asks Congress to prepare for election

PTI, New Delhi

Congress president Sonia Gandhi on Tuesday asked party men not to be disappointed over the party's defeat in the recent assembly polls and prepare themselves for the coming Lok Sabha elections.

"I am aware that a great deal of disappointment exists amongst us after the recent set back. But it does not help carry on in this mood. We have to step out of it. We have to be fully prepared and ready ourselves for the coming challenge," Sonia said addressing the general body meeting of the Congress Parliamentary Party (CPP).

Observing that the next few months will see elections in Andhra Pradesh and that the party rule out possibility of the Lok Sabha polls, Sonia, who is the chairperson of the CPP, said "steps to put together election management teams and strategies are already being taken. You will be kept fully informed and involved".

## US expresses confidence over Pak pledge on nukes

PTI, Washington

Amidst new reports that Pakistan allegedly handed over nuclear technology to Iran and Libya, United States has expressed confidence over President Pervez Musharraf's assurance that no such technology transfer was taking place.

"President Musharraf has assured us there are not any transfers of weapons of mass destruction-related technologies or know-how in the present time," White House press secretary Scott McClellan told reporters on Monday.

Asked whether Pakistan President's assurances were credible and real, McClellan said Musharraf "while, State Department spokesman Richard Boucher said United States is bearing on Musharraf's assurance to Secretary of State Colin Powell in October 2002 that" Pakistan was not leaking any technology."

## Bhutan troops in 'hot pursuit'

# India offers safe passage if rebels surrender

AFP, Guwahati

Indian authorities have set up hotlines to encourage the surrender of anti-Indian rebels fleeing a military crackdown against them in neighbouring Bhutan, an army official said yesterday.

The move came as Bhutan said its forces were "in hot pursuit" of the rebels.

More than 2,000 guerrillas were being pursued after Bhutan launched the offensive December 15 to expel the rebels from camps in the south of the tiny Himalayan kingdom from where they have staged hit-and-run strikes against Indian targets for a dozen years.

"Any militant willing to surrender should not fear or hesitate. Our doors are open for them," an Indian military commander told AFP in Guwahati, capital of the

revolt-racked state of Assam bordering Bhutan.

"The surrender offer is now the best possible option for militants fleeing Bhutan. If they try to sneak into Assam, our soldiers will be forced to react."

Assam's state government has published telephone numbers in local media for any militant to call to arrange their surrender when crossing the border.

India has not said what will happen to surrendering rebels but militants in the past giving themselves up have received vocational training and other help.

Indian soldiers claim to have sealed the 262-kilometer (164-mile) border Assam shares with Bhutan to sever rebel lines of retreat.

"The flushing out operations

are still continuing with troops in hot pursuit of the rebels who are on the run," a Bhutanese Foreign Ministry official said by telephone from the kingdom's capital, Thimphu.

Bhutan, which launched the crackdown under pressure from its giant neighbour, has said 500 rebels have already surrendered to its soldiers.

India, which helps train Bhutan's army, has said some 100 rebels are in its custody and has reported the deaths of at least 128 rebels and eight Bhutanese troops and logistical personnel since the start of the offensive.

Bhutan has so far given no casualty figures and has rejected a request by the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) to allow a team to visit and possibly help evacuate non-combatants.



Red Cross volunteers carry injured landslide survivor Geraldine Duloso at the evacuation center in San Francisco village in the central island of Leyte yesterday. More than 300 people were feared killed and missing in landslide and flood that struck the central and southern Philippines during the weekend.

## Lanka on alert amid fears of religious clashes

PTI, Colombo

Sri Lankan police were put on high alert ahead of Christmas as authorities feared outbreak of violence during the funeral of a popular Buddhist monk who had led a campaign against religious conversion.

President Chandrika Kumaratunga ordered police to remain on full alert to ensure that the Christmas celebrations were not marred by violence during the cremation in Colombo on Wednesday of monk Gangoavla Soma, 56, who had died in Russia earlier this month.

She also warned of tough action against those inciting violence.

The monk was known for the campaign against conversions from Buddhism to Christianity and posters had come up in the city blaming Christians to his death.

# US to consider lifting Libya sanctions

## We don't want to hide anything: Gadhafi

AFP, AP, Washington/Vienna

The United States Monday cautiously raised the prospect of lifting sanctions against Libya after its leader Colonel Muammar Gaddafi's surprise decision to renounce weapons of mass destruction.

"As Libya's policy changes, Libya's behaviour changes, Libya's circumstances change, we'll be willing to look at those things," said State Department spokesman Richard Boucher.

"At some point, we may be in a position to make some changes."

Libya's economy has suffered a severe blow from US economic sanctions and a trade and travel ban imposed during the Reagan administration.

US officials have said they would have to see concrete proof that Libya has renounced nuclear weapons, and support for terrorism before all sanctions are removed.

"Terrorism is a different issue

that has to do with, I'd say largely the residual contacts and support that they might have had for terrorist groups," Boucher said.

"Each of those issues would be looked at on their merits, but we're willing to look at them as the circumstances change."

Boucher also said that Washington was not yet ready to lift a ban on Americans travelling to Libya, imposed in 1981 and reissued for a year last month.

"In terms of the use of US passports, obviously the question is the safety and security of American citizens who might be considering travel there."

"To the extent that Libya is taking these steps to ease tensions and to lower the tensions that might exist for Americans, that may contribute to a review of the passport ban."

"We renewed it recently, but said it could be reviewed and changed at any time."

The United Nations suspended sanctions against Tripoli in 1995,

but did not fully lift them until September when Libya admitted its role in bombing of a US airliner over Lockerbie, Scotland in December, 1988, which killed 270 people, and began to pay compensation.

AP adds: The head of the UN atomic watchdog agency said Monday he will lead the first inspection of Libya's nuclear facilities as soon as next week, aiming to kick-start the elimination of the country's programs for weapons of mass destruction. Libyan leader Muammar Gaddafi said he had nothing to hide. "Come and see what it is, we don't want to hide anything," he told CNN.

Speaking of other nations with nuclear weapons, Gaddafi said they should also open themselves to inspections.

"In my opinion they should follow the steps, or take the example of Libya, so that they prevent any tragedy from (being) inflicted on their people," he said.