

US faults France on terror alert

REUTERS, Washington

One or more terror suspects may have escaped due to a premature disclosure in France of the security concerns behind the cancellation of Christmas flights to Los Angeles, US officials said Friday.

Six flights between Paris and Los Angeles were canceled on Wednesday and Thursday at the urging of Washington after US officials spotted what they believed were suspicious names on lists of those due to board the planes.

Air France made clear at the time the cancellations had been ordered for security reasons.

US law enforcement and intelligence officials had hoped all the suspects could be detained as they showed up for the flights, said a senior US official familiar with the situation who did not want to be identified.

Tens of thousands shiver outdoors in quake zone

AFP, Bam

Tens of thousands of people spent the night out in the streets in bitter cold early yesterday after 25,000 were killed when a massive earthquake devastated Iran's historic southeastern fort city of Bam and its surrounding district.

A source in the provincial governor's office, speaking on condition of anonymity, said that more than 20,000 people died and 50,000 others were injured in Friday's quake.

The tremor, which struck before dawn as most of the area's residents were asleep, was met with a swift response from the international community pledging immediate and long-term aid.

Bam is built almost entirely of mud brick and is ill-equipped to withstand a big quake.

The city had a population of 90,000 people, with the district home to some 200,000 residents.

Most of those who escaped were spending the night outdoors as the temperature plunged and concerns mounted for those still buried beneath the ruins.

Bereaved residents wandered the streets of Bam pleading for the authorities to speed up rescue efforts.

The city's two hospitals were destroyed in the earthquake, and while field hospitals were set up, they were overwhelmed by the magnitude of casualties.

Kerman provincial Governor

Mohammad Ali Karimi said: "One thing is sure: the historic quarter of Bam has been completely destroyed and many of our countrymen are underneath the ruins. The situation is very worrying."

Interior Minister Abdolvahed Mussavi-Lari said the top "priority is to get help to the injured who are under the rubble. It is very cold in the region, and we are very concerned" for them.

"Our second priority is to get the wounded to hospitals in the region," the minister said, adding that five military aircraft were shuttling between Bam and Kerman.

Iran's supreme leader Ali Khamenei conveyed his "heartfelt condolences to the noble Iranian nation and the bereaved families of

the victims," state news agency IRNA reported.

"I pray to God for the fast recovery of the injured people and call the executive bodies to take immediate action in rendering aid to the needy people," he said.

President Mohammad Khatami declared the earthquake a "national disaster which requires collective collaboration and cooperation of all executive and military organizations to mobilize all their facilities to help the victims."

More than 90 percent of the old city, one of the wonders of Iran's cultural heritage, was destroyed. Besides the flattened homes, the 2,000-year-old citadel, once the largest mud-brick structure in the world, was gone forever.



PHOTO: AFP

Iranian children cry in the rubbles in quake-devastated southeastern Iranian city of Bam. Some 25,000 people were killed in the killer hquake that hit the ancient Iranian city on Friday.



PHOTO: AFP

The gas well fire still burning at the Chuangdongbei gas field in Chongqing municipality's Kaixian county on Friday. Rescue teams fanned out across a mountainous region of southwest China that turned into a "death zone" by a massive explosion at a natural gas field killing 198 people. The search for survivors was given priority and then the Chuangdongbei gas field well was plugged that had released the deadly fumes.

Technicians seal burst Chinese gas well

AP, Chongqing

Technicians yesterday sealed a burst gas well in China's southwest that had spewed toxic fumes, killing at least 198 people and forcing 41,000 to flee the remote, mountainous area, the official Xinhua News Agency reported.

The disaster was China's worst recent industrial accident, leaving a 10-square-mile "death zone" strewn with bodies of adults and children, some overcome as they tried to flee.

On Saturday, emergency crews began pouring thousands of cubic feet of mud down the well, which had spewed fumes for four days, Xinhua said. Minutes later, it sent a bulletin announcing, "Cap operation is completed successfully."

Xinhua said Saturday that the official death toll had risen by seven to 198, but the one-sentence report didn't say when or how the additional deaths occurred.

The disaster began Tuesday night when a poisonous mix of natural gas and hydrogen sulfide erupted from the well, which Xinhua said was broken open by a drilling accident.

Some 9,185 people were treated for gas poisoning and other injuries, and 431 were still hospitalized 17 in critical condition, Xinhua said Friday. Newspaper photos showed children with red faces and their eyes swollen shut from chemical burns.

Technicians ignited the geyser of toxic gas on Wednesday, sending huge flames shooting into the sky in an effort to burn off the fumes and keep them from spreading.

People in nearby towns were sending truckloads of donated food and clothing for evacuees living in schools and government buildings, local officials and news reports said Saturday.

Donations included 20,000 sets of bedding, tons of rice, thousands of cases of noodles, more than 10,000 sets of clothing and 1,400 pairs of shoes, the newspaper Chongqing Economic Times reported.

"People from different districts of Chongqing have spontaneously donated relief materials and cash," said an official of the Civil Affairs Bureau in Kaixian county, where the gas field is located. He would give only his surname, Li.

'Libya doesn't appear close to making nuke'

IAEA experts fly in to Tripoli

REUTERS, Amsterdam

The head of the United Nations' nuclear watchdog said yesterday Libya, which this month opened its nuclear facilities to international inspection, did not appear to have been close to building an atomic bomb.

International Atomic Energy Agency Director-General Mohamed ElBaradei, flying to Tripoli from IAEA headquarters in Vienna, said there were no signs Libya had enriched uranium -- a step that, were it taken, could be the first move to a bomb. "From the look of it, they were not close to a weapon, but we need to go and see it and discuss the details with them," he said in an interview with Reuters on the way to Tripoli.

"The important thing for me is to get a comprehensive understanding of the program -- the origin, its history, its extent, and then agree with the Libyan authorities on a plan of action to eliminate whatever needs to be eliminated that is not linked to peaceful activities."

Libyan leader Muammar Gaddafi's oil-rich state, long on the US list of sponsors of terrorism, now wants trading benefits, including an end to US sanctions for his promise to abandon weapons of mass destruction.

Libya's moves to scrap its illicit weapons programs mark an about-face for the mercurial Gaddafi, who seized power 34 years ago in the desert nation of 5.5 million.

ElBaradei could begin talks with senior Libyan officials as early as Saturday afternoon.

Vienna-based diplomats who watch the IAEA said they believed ElBaradei would meet Gaddafi, who has pledged to let UN experts assess and dismantle banned weapons projects.

ElBaradei was accompanied by a team of nuclear experts with experience in both Iraq, whose secret atom bomb program the IAEA dismantled in the 1990s, and Iran, which Washington accuses of having an Iraq-style nuclear weapons program.

Fireworks blast kills 5 in Pak city

REUTERS, Islamabad

Fireworks exploded inside a flour mill in the Pakistani city of Rawalpindi yesterday, killing at least five people, officials and rescue workers said.

"The explosion was caused by fireworks," Information Minister Sheikh Rasheed Ahmed told Reuters. "It is not an act of terrorism," he said.

Five people had been killed, he told state-run Pakistan Television, while hospital officials said nine had been injured.

It was not immediately clear why fireworks were stored inside the mill.

Witnesses said clouds of smoke billowed from the flour mill where the explosion occurred and from an adjacent building in a congested neighborhood.

The blast shattered glass in nearby buildings, they said.

"Three dead bodies have been taken to hospital," an official of the Edhi Welfare Foundation said. "We are waiting for more details."

The blast occurred two days after suicide bombers narrowly failed to kill President Pervez Musharraf in the city, causing a panic.

Al-Qaeda vows attack on US by Feb

REUTERS, Dubai

A London-based Arab magazine said Friday that al-Qaeda leader Osama bin Laden has vowed to launch a "back-breaking attack" on the United States by February, confirming an earlier message by the militant network.

The weekly al-Majalla said it received an e-mail from Abu Mohammed al-Ablaj, a little known al-Qaeda member, saying bin Laden would release a video tape in which he affirms his group's determination to fight the United States.

"A messenger of bin Laden informed him (Ablaj) that the al-Qaeda leader will appear on a televised tape after the execution of an operation which bin Laden described as back-breaking and which would change the order of things," al-Majalla said in a report in its latest edition, a copy of which was sent to Reuters.

"They (Americans) should prepare...their coffins, hospitals and graves. The coming days will be full of surprises and great events which will make them a historic

example," the magazine quoted Ablaj as saying.

The report came after US officials ordered their color-coded alert system raised to orange, the second highest level, citing possible year-end attacks.

Air France canceled Christmas flights to Los Angeles on Wednesday after US officials relayed information that extremist groups were planning "near-term simultaneous attacks that would rival September 11."

Al-Qaeda is believed responsible for the September 11, 2001 attacks on US cities.

In the e-mail, which could not be immediately authenticated, Ablaj echoed his previous statement carried by al-Majalla in November saying the attack would take place before a Muslim feast which is celebrated on the last days of January or the first days of February.

The e-mail did not say what type of weapons would be used in the attack which Ablaj hinted would involve a series of strikes on the United States and other countries, the magazine reported.



PHOTO: AFP

A little girl clings to her father's legs as a US Army soldier frisks him at a checkpoint in Baghdad Friday. Eight US soldiers have been killed across Iraq over the Christmas period as a series of attacks battered the Iraqi capital. So far 209 US soldiers killed in action in Iraq since US President George W. Bush declared major combat over on May 1.



PHOTO: AFP

Lebanese Hamzeh Hammud is stretchered into Beirut's American Hospital yesterday after surviving an airplane crash just off the coast of Cotonou. A Union des Transports Africains (UTA) aircraft crashed on takeoff on December 25 killing at least 119 people, mainly Lebanese expatriates heading home. Of the 156 passengers and seven crew, just 22 people were confirmed to have survived, said Benin's Transport Minister Hamed Akobi. UTA is run by Lebanese business interests but is registered in the West African state of Guinea.

Hamas calls off attacks inside Israel

AP, Jerusalem

Hamas, the Islamic group responsible for most suicide bombings during three years of violence, has called off attacks inside Israel, and a full ceasefire could come in a matter of weeks, Israel's military chief said in comments published Friday.

In response, Israel will hold off targeting Hamas leaders but will still go after other Palestinian militants in retaliation for a suicide bombing this week, security sources said.

Since the start of fighting in September 2000, Israel has routinely hunted down and killed militant leaders often in a manner similar to a helicopter airstrike in the Gaza Strip on Thursday.

Three militants and two civilians were killed in the Israeli attack, which came moments before a Palestinian suicide bombing near Tel Aviv that killed four Israelis. The suicide bombing did not appear to be coordinated as retaliation for the airstrike.

Israeli officials and Palestinian

militants both pledged retaliation, but Israel said it would not target Hamas leaders, reinforcing the comments by Israel's army chief of staff.

"It is no coincidence that a group like Hamas decides to stop attacks within Israel, it comes from the realization that their organization is in danger," Maj. Gen. Moshe Yaalon told the Yediot Ahranot newspaper in an interview published Friday.

Yaalon said a truce could be achieved soon and 2004 could be the quietest year since fighting began three years ago.

"It is possible that we will reach a ceasefire in the coming weeks," Yaalon was quoted as saying. "The Palestinian-Israeli conflict will be with us for many years to come, but I believe we have now passed the peak of the violent struggle."

It was not clear when Yaalon made the comments, specifically whether he spoke before Thursday's violence. Hamas officials were not available for comment Friday so it was not clear if the group was sticking to ceasefire efforts.