



Passengers crowd at the check in of Terminal 1 at the airport in Frankfurt yesterday. German airline Lufthansa said it was cancelling all its flights to Britain after British police said they had foiled a plot to blow up plane flights between Britain and the United States.

British bomb plot causes worldwide airline chaos

AFP, London

Air travel to and from Britain was plunged into chaos yesterday in the wake of the discovery of an suspected plot to blow up airlines on transatlantic flights.

Many airlines said they were cancelling all flights to Britain and to the epicentre of the threat, London Heathrow, one of the world's busiest airports.

The inter-connected nature of international air travel meant the disruption was rippling out across the world.

British anti-terrorist police said the plot involved explosives concealed in hand luggage, which led to security being beefed up at most of Britain's airports, a measure which was causing delays.

British Home Secretary John Reid said police were confident that the main suspects in the plot "have been accounted for" but explained that the country's security alert had been raised to "critical" as a precautionary measure.

As a result, passengers on flights from around the world which were still flying to Britain were subject to new restrictions and increased security checks.

Hand luggage was banned, except for items such as baby food and some medicines.

British Airways said it was cancelling all its short-haul flights on Thursday between Heathrow and other British and European cities as well as the Libyan capital Tripoli.

It said it was also cancelling some of Thursday's domestic and

shorthaul services in and out of Britain's second biggest airport, London's Gatwick.

Lufthansa of Germany said it was pulling all flights to Britain until 1500 GMT. It said 22 flights and 3,041 passengers would be affected, but that it expected flights later in the day to go ahead as planned.

Spain's Iberia said its service to Britain would be halted until at least 1200 GMT.

Alitalia grounded all its flights to Britain and aviation authorities in the Netherlands said they were cancelling all flights to Heathrow until at least 1500 GMT.

French airline Air France said it had cancelled its three morning flights from Paris to London due to the situation at Heathrow and was to

review the situation at 1200 GMT.

Six British-bound flights from the Mediterranean city of Nice -- four operated by British Airways and two by the low-cost carrier Easyjet -- were also scratched, leaving hundreds of passengers stranded, airport officials said.

Turkish Airways said it was scrapping all of its flights to Heathrow and Greek carrier Olympic Airlines advised passengers travelling to Britain to expect cancellations.

Airports in Denmark and Sweden also increased security and suspended flights to London.

Airlines ban hand luggage from UK

REUTERS, London

Airlines banned hand luggage on flights out of the United Kingdom on Thursday and warned of massive delays after British police said they had disrupted a plot to blow up aircraft in mid-flight.

All carriers, including British Airways, United Airlines and Virgin Atlantic, stepped up security on news of the plot to smuggle bombs on board a flight between Britain and the United States.

Passengers were banned from carrying any hand luggage on board flights, including mobile phones and handbags, airlines and airport authorities said.

All liquids were banned on board except for essential medicines. Milk for babies would be allowed on board but must be tasted by the accompanying passenger, UK airport operator BAA said in a statement.

US-French split delays UN action on ME war

REUTERS, United Nations

The United States and France were still at odds yesterday over when and how Israel should withdraw from Lebanon, delaying a UN resolution aimed at ending the five-week war between Israel and Lebanon-based Hezbollah guerrillas.

After a late Wednesday meeting among the five Security Council members with veto power, US Ambassador John Bolton told reporters some progress had been made but no agreement had been reached.

Despite pressure on the council to end the escalating conflict, the dispute made it unlikely a draft

resolution would be introduced formally on Thursday in preparation for a vote 24 hours later, participants in the negotiations said.

The main obstacle is that France, backing Lebanon, wants Israel to begin withdrawing 10,000 troops when Beirut's army, supported by UN peacekeepers, deploys in southern Lebanon, now controlled by Hezbollah's militia.

But the United States supports Israel's position that it keep its troops in Lebanon until the arrival of a larger and better-armed international force, which France may lead.

The United States, France, Britain, Russia and China meet

again on Thursday to review proposals sent to their respective governments overnight, especially an amendment from France.

This says that as 15,000 Lebanese troops begin to deploy in the south, the Israeli army should start to "withdraw behind the blue line," a UN-demarcated border between Israel and Lebanon, two council diplomats who asked not to be named because of the secrecy of negotiations, told Reuters.

The operation would be aided by a beefed-up UN peacekeeping force before the international troops arrive.

Lebanon crisis seen pushing US credibility in ME to all-time low

AFP, Washington

The United States' credibility as a diplomatic broker in the Middle East has been pushed to an all-time low by the Bush administration's handling of the conflict in Lebanon, experts say.

But despite its dwindling influence, Washington continues to be seen as the dominant player in any effort to ease the violence that has long plagued the region.

The fighting between Israel and Lebanon's Hezbollah militia escalated into its fifth week Thursday with diplomats still at loggerheads over details of a UN ceasefire deal and the United States increasingly isolated

from its European and Arab allies.

For many analysts, the administration of US President George W Bush -- already badly damaged by its handling of the crisis in Iraq -- has painted itself into a diplomatic corner by siding too closely with Israel in its month-old offensive against Hezbollah.

More than 900 Lebanese civilians have been reported killed in Israeli air and artillery strikes as diplomats have wrangled over the terms of a possible ceasefire, compared to several dozen Israelis who have died in Hezbollah missile attacks.



An Israeli soldier covers his ears as mortar shells are fired at Hezbollah targets located in southern Lebanon from along the Israeli-Lebanese border yesterday. The Israeli army has not yet begun the broader ground war in Lebanon approved by the security cabinet, a government spokesman said yesterday after tank units pushed into south Lebanon overnight.

US threatens to make Castro's health a state secret

AFP, Havana

Cuba on Wednesday justified the death of news on ailing President Fidel Castro's health, arguing that the country faces a clear and imminent threat from the United States.

Castro, who has presided over the island's communist government for almost 48 years, temporarily handed over his duties to his brother Raul, the defence chief, on July 31. Neither Castro has appeared in public since.

Due to "concrete threats" from Washington, "the information that we give about this whole situation has to be careful, limited to inform what is indispensable," National Assembly speaker Ricardo Alarcon said in an interview with Radio Rebelde.

Sources close to Fidel Castro's circle, however, said that the surgery was believed to have been performed early July 27, and that a few days later Castro was ingesting light food, and that now he reads documents.

Alarcon justified limited disclosure, referring to the 10-year-old US Helms-Burton law that establishes the US goal "to put an end to the revolutionary government."

Gaza crisis deepens

AFP, Gaza City

The month-old international crisis sparked by Israel's devastating offensive in Lebanon has stolen the spotlight from the Gaza Strip, which continues to be pounded daily by Israeli forces and is suffering a major humanitarian crisis.

At least 171 Palestinians and one Israeli soldier have been killed since Israel launched its "Summer Rain" operation against the Palestinian territory on June 28.

The largest Israeli offensive in Gaza since the withdrawal of troops and settlers a year ago was ordered following the June 25 capture of an Israeli soldier by militants.

One of the three groups that nabbed the 19-year-old corporal is

the armed wing of the Hamas movement, which shocked Israel and the West when it won Palestinian elections in January and took the helm of government in March.

"The Palestinian government led by Hamas is under constant pressure from the Israeli army," said analyst Nicholas Pelham from the International Crisis Group think-tank.

"The Palestinian Authority simply cannot function because the ministers cannot move in the Palestinian territories" between the Gaza Strip and West Bank.

Israel, which has so far refused an exchange of prisoners, has arrested eight ministers, the parliament speaker and dozens of other Hamas political officials. It also

struck several ministries and Prime Minister Ismail Haniya's office.

Israel's wide-ranging assault on the crowded territory has deepened the humanitarian crisis there, with air raids against a power plant and the closure of the Strip leaving the 1.4-million population in dire need of basic supplies.

Since June 28, Israel has also staged several raids and ground operations in the northern Gaza Strip to prevent militants from firing rockets on nearby Israeli towns.

However, militants have continued to fire Qassam rockets -- named after and manufactured by the armed wing of Hamas -- and wounded a dozen Israelis since the end of June.

KL urges countries to cut off ties with Israel

AFP, Kuala Lumpur

Malaysia yesterday urged other countries, particularly those in the Middle East, to sever diplomatic relations with Israel over its military operations in Lebanon.

Malaysia, the current chair of the Organisation of the Islamic Conference (OIC), said it was time that other members of the world's biggest Muslim grouping axed their ties with Israel.

"At present, definitely the view of the international community is that Israel has breached international law," said Foreign Minister Syed Hamid Albar.

"If that is so, it's only proper for countries with diplomatic relations

to cut relations with Israel. Especially countries in the Middle East," he told reporters.

"I would have imagined we should have cut off ties long ago, once there was an incursion," he said when asked if his message was targeted at the 57-nation OIC.

Malaysia last week hosted a meeting of OIC nations, which demanded an immediate ceasefire in the Middle East and warned that boiling anger over the Israeli offensive could launch a new wave of terrorism.

Predominantly Muslim Malaysia does not have diplomatic ties with the Jewish state but has close links with Palestinians, backing their struggle for an independent state.



Lebanese women search for personal belongings yesterday amid the rubble of buildings destroyed by Israeli bombardment in Shiah, a suburb of southern Beirut.

Dwindling energy supplies threaten Lebanon with standstill

AFP, Beirut

Lebanon's dire fuel shortage caused by an Israeli sea blockade and the bombing of power station fuel tanks could set off a chain reaction that threatens to bring the country to a standstill.

"If there is no fuel, there is no electricity. And if there is no electricity, there is no life," said an employee of a Lebanese power company who did not wish to be named.

"We are in desperate need of fuel. All these ships that have been evacuating their citizens needed to bring us fuel," he said bitterly.

The south of the country, hardest hit by Israel's military offensive, has

been paralysed. Desperately needed humanitarian supplies have not been able to reach residents after roads and bridges were bombed.

The UN force in Lebanon said on Wednesday that the continued operation of some of its positions could be at risk if they are not resupplied with fuel in the next 48 hours.

But even in central Beirut, which has largely been spared Israeli strikes, residents are having to alter their daily routines in a desperate measure to save on the dwindling energy supplies.

A petrol shortage and frequent power cuts have isolated people in their homes. And the threat of water

shortages is creeping closer to the war-ravaged country.

"I can't get petrol which is a disaster for me," said Soliman Khaled, a taxi driver in Beirut.

"I know the man at the petrol station, so he helps me get petrol when he can, but others are not so lucky," he said, pointing to the queue of more than a dozen cars which had formed outside a closed petrol station in Beirut, clogging traffic in all directions.

For personal errands, Soliman would rather avoid car trips all together.

"If I can walk, I'd rather walk. I need to save petrol. What if I have an emergency at home and need to take someone to hospital?" he said.