

World airlines scramble to clear passenger backlog

Airports tighten security checks

AFP, Frankfurt

Airlines around the world said travel was easing yesterday after the chaos caused by an alleged plot to blow up US-bound planes from Britain, but tighter security measures threaten to inconvenience passengers for a long time to come. Passengers faced tougher restrictions on hand luggage and authorities were trying to clear a backlog of thousands of air travellers who were stranded when flights were cancelled on Thursday. The new guidelines were causing delays on flights to the United States, with travellers across the globe forced to empty their carry-on bags and pack the contents into luggage for checking into the hold. The restrictions were introduced hastily after it emerged that the alleged plot involved carrying liquid explosives in hand luggage on board flights from London's

Heathrow airport to at least three US cities. European airports said flight schedules to Britain were slowly returning to normal, but services from Heathrow were still experiencing delays. British Airways said it expected to operate the vast majority of flights, although it cancelled at least 96 flights on Friday. That was a substantial reduction on the airline's 364 short-haul flights and two long-haul services out of Heathrow, which were grounded on Thursday after the plot was uncovered. Passengers at airports in Asia and the United States also faced delays after the introduction of the new hand luggage rules, which ban liquids, including shampoos, and deodorants as well as electronic goods from being brought on to planes. The US Department of

Homeland Security posted notices at Hong Kong airport saying passengers could not carry "liquids or gels of any size at the screening checkpoint or in the cabin of the aircraft". Travellers forced to re-pack their bags at Hong Kong said they understood the need for the increased security. Michael Rollings, a 42-year-old businessman from Chicago, said: "They let me keep my Aspirin but I've just lost my deodorant and my toothpaste. It is a small price to pay for preventing terrorist acts. I'm happy to be travelling today. We can't let these punks affect our everyday lives." In Pakistan, where at least seven suspects including two Britons were arrested in connection with the London plot, extra armed police were deployed at airports in Karachi, Islamabad and Lahore. "Passengers were not allowed to

carry hand luggage in all the foreign flights," said a security official at Karachi's Jinnah International airport. Authorities in the United States placed all flights arriving from Britain under a core-red threat warning, the highest alert issued since the system was created following the September 11, 2001 attacks. European airlines said they were dealing with a logistical nightmare as people who were unable to fly on Thursday clamoured for seats on flights. In Madrid, the Iberia airline switched its biggest aircraft, the Airbus 340-600, capable of carrying 400 passengers, onto routes between Spain and Britain in an attempt to clear the backlog. A spokesman for Frankfurt airport in Germany, one of Europe's busiest, said traffic had returned to normal.



An Indian paramilitary soldier (L) speaks with foreign travellers as he stands alert at the entrance to Indira Gandhi International Airport in New Delhi yesterday. The US embassy has warned that the Indian cities of New Delhi and Mumbai could be targeted by al-Qaeda militants ahead of next week's Independence Day celebration. Indian authorities immediately raised the alert in the capital and the financial hub, which had already been under heightened security for the August 15 celebration.

Muslim states call for UN probe into Israeli attacks on civilians

AFP, Geneva

Islamic nations tabled a draft resolution at the UN Human Rights Council Friday calling for an urgent "high level" commission of inquiry into "systematic" Israeli attacks on civilians in Lebanon. The 47 member human rights forum was likely to vote on the draft, which can still be modified, during a special session on Friday on the situation in Lebanon. The draft resolution proposed by Algeria, Bahrain, Bangladesh, Indonesia, Jordan, Malaysia, Morocco, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia and Tunisia "strongly condemns grave Israeli violations of human rights and breaches of international humanitarian law in Lebanon". It also called on Israel to "immediately stop military operations against civilian population and civilian objects resulting in death and destruction" and for the urgent dispatch of "a high level commission of inquiry".



Smoke billows following Israeli bombardment on the southern suburbs of Beirut yesterday. Israeli warplanes carried out 14 raids on the near-deserted southern suburbs of Beirut killing 11 more civilians.

US, France close to ME truce deal

Objections from combatants may force delay

REUTERS, United Nations

The United States and France were close to agreement yesterday on a UN resolution aimed at halting the bloodshed in Lebanon and Israel but objections from combatants could force another delay. Throughout Thursday, negotiators believed they had achieved a breakthrough. But the deal came apart when Beirut rejected deployment of additional UN troops under Chapter 7 of the UN Charter, which allows for the use of force rather than just self-defence. US Ambassador John Bolton and French Ambassador Jean-Marc de la Sabliere worked late into the evening to change some wording in their UN Security Council draft that would be sent to Lebanon and Israel for their approval overnight. Meanwhile, Russia, impatient at the non-stop negotiations, introduced a council resolution calling for

a 72-hour truce so humanitarian supplies could reach civilians suffering from the five-week war between Hezbollah militia and Israel. More than 1,000 Lebanese and 121 Israelis have been killed in the five-week-old war. "War is raging in Lebanon and the humanitarian situation is getting catastrophic," Churkin told reporters. If the US-French resolution were adopted, he said, he would withdraw his measure. However, Bolton said of the Russian text, "I don't think it is helpful to divert attention. We are seeking to get a permanent and sustainable solution with the approach that we and the French have been taking." US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice planned to be in New York on Friday in anticipation of a vote, as was British Foreign Minister Margaret Beckett.

Bolton said he had not yet given up "on the prospect that we might yet vote" on Friday. But the resolution has not yet been formally introduced to the 15-nation Security Council, prompting some diplomats to predict a Saturday vote because members often send a draft to governments before adoption. The text calls for a "cessation of hostilities," but negotiations repeatedly stalled on the question of how and when Israeli troops would withdraw from southern Lebanon. The Beirut government had rejected an international force not under UN control while Israel, which has delayed plans to deploy more troops in Lebanon, insisted on a strong multinational force before it would withdraw.

UK plot similar to failed 1995 effort

AP, New York

Two terror plots, roughly 11 years apart, had eerie similarities. The first was designed to blow a dozen American airliners out of the sky with liquid bombs smuggled aboard in innocent-looking containers. The failed plot was developed in late 1994 and early 1995 by the man who masterminded the 1993 World Trade Centre bombing Ramzi Yousef. The second one that British authorities on Thursday said they thwarted was similar to Yousef's recipe for terror: the simultaneous explosions of 10 aircraft heading to the United States using liquid bombs hidden in ordinary containers and smuggled aboard in hand luggage. Yousef, serving life without parole at the federal supermax prison at Florence, Colo., for the 1993 bombing, is isolated now from the world of terrorists that still copy his blueprint for such acts as the plane plot of 11 years ago.

"The parallels with Bojinka are amazing, the number of targets, explosive solution," said Roger Cressy, former director of counterterrorism on the National Security Council under President Clinton and President Bush. "It is something right out of the playbook." "It has to be something either inspired by or directed by al-Qaeda," he said. Cressy said it was no surprise that terrorists were still trying to carry out Yousef's ideas. He was an egotistical man known in that world for his creativity. "He has a proven track record. They admire his brilliance and his bomb-making skills," Cressy said. Yousef, who once boasted that he wanted to write a book of his exploits, said as he was sent to prison for life: "I am a terrorist and am proud of it." Pat D'Amuro, a former FBI assistant director, said the London plot showed that terrorists "like to come back to areas, like they did the World Trade Centre."

Dissent mounts in Israel over Lebanon war

AFP, Jerusalem

Dissent in Israel over the government's handling of war in Lebanon started to mount yesterday, as international diplomatic efforts intensified to bring the month-old bloodshed to an end. For the first time, opinion polls showed a sharp drop in support for the Israeli government over its handling of the offensive in Lebanon and mainstream parties and movements outright withdrew their support for the war. In a survey published by the Haaretz daily a month after the offensive was launched, 73 percent of respondents said Israel could not claim to have won the war against the Lebanese Hezbollah militia if the fighting stopped now. Since it killed eight soldiers and captured two others in a July 12 border attack, the guerrilla group has continued to rain rockets on Israel, inflicting 120 Israeli casualties. Only 48 percent of those polled said they were satisfied with Prime Minister Ehud Olmert's performance since the start of the offensive a month ago.

In a front-page article titled "Olmert Must Go," the independent Haaretz daily piled blame on the premier for a series of mistakes. "There is no mistake Ehud Olmert did not make this past month," senior editorialist Ari Shavit said. "He went to war hastily, without properly gauging the outcome. He blindly followed the military without asking the necessary questions. "The day Nasrallah comes out of his bunker and declares victory to the whole world, Olmert must not be in the prime minister's office. Post-war battered and bleeding Israel needs a new start and a new leader. It needs a real prime minister." Shavit echoed growing criticism that Olmert, who has little military experience, was now having cold feet after ordering Israel's largest military operation in a quarter century. Right-wing lawmaker Yuval Steinitz also said that "if it accepts a ceasefire, the government will have to resign because it will have handed an unprecedented victory to Hezbollah".

Tyre residents go hungry as shelves go bare

AFP, Tyre

Waiting anxiously in his small store in the south Lebanese city of Tyre, surrounded by empty shelves, Mohammed Qassem prays for the safe return of his son who is out dodging Israeli shells to try to buy more bread. "For a week now I have been the only one who dared to open and people fell over each other to get into my shop. Now I have nothing left -- no rice, no sugar, nothing," lamented the 69-year-old shopkeeper. "Yesterday I sent my son out with a driver I paid 500 dollars to go fetch bread and other supplies from Sidon," the main southern city 42km north up the coast. "I pray to God that he returns safe and sound," he said. Cut off from the rest of the country by the Israeli offensive, those inhabitants of Tyre who have not fled north are now facing shortages of food and essential items. The Israeli army has dropped leaflets warning that it would strike any vehicle travelling south of the Litani river, an area that includes this city, and aid agencies have warned

it is almost impossible to deliver relief. Tyre's central market, which would have been thronging with morning shoppers before the war, is now almost deserted, except for the cats and dogs wandering among the empty fruit and vegetable stalls. In one corner, all that 56-year-old Ali Mussa Farran has left to sell are some rather ripe tomatoes and cabbages. "Normally fruit and vegetables come from the villages around Tyre but now they have been abandoned. We haven't received anything since the start of the war," he said. Farran admits that his produce is already two weeks old but he says that will not stop people eating it. "Lots of people come without any money and we give them what we have for free. People are starting to go hungry. I don't know what the people of Tyre are going to eat," Farran said. Elsewhere in the city, one man has managed to get three sacks of flour, which he is using to bake bread on a small wood fire. A long queue has formed.

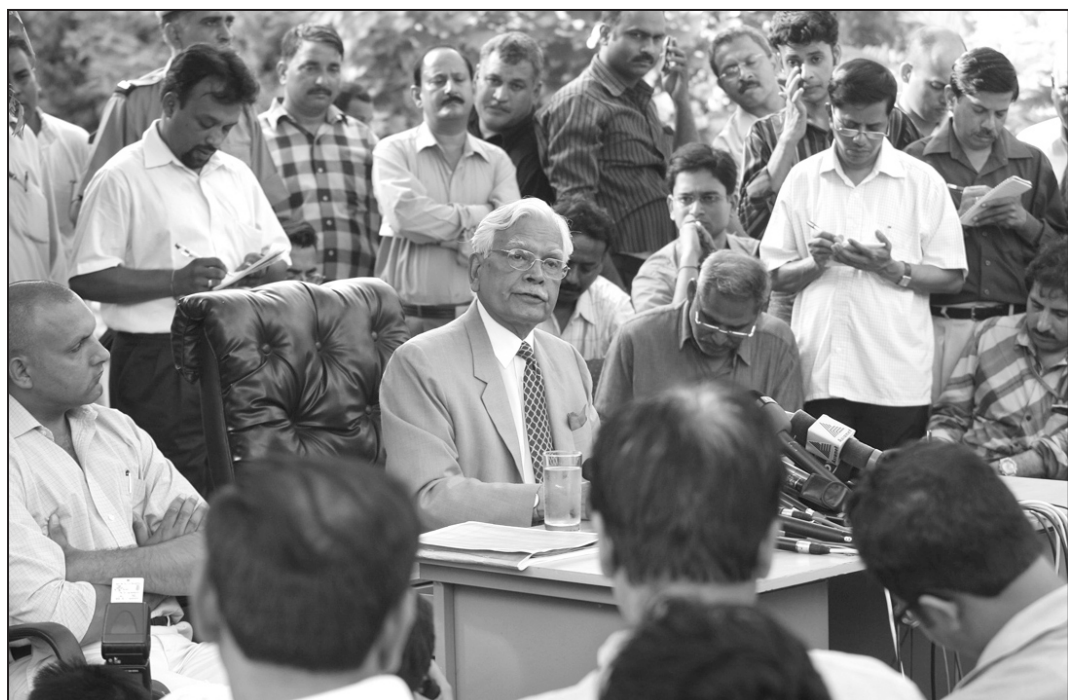


Muslim men protest after attending Friday prayers in Colombo yesterday and denounced the attacks on Muslim civilians in the island's north-east region. Police stepped up security after Muslims stoned a few Tamil-owned shops in a busy commercial area of the city.

US mulls Israeli request for cluster munitions

AFP, Washington

The US government is considering an Israeli request for M-26 artillery rockets with cluster munitions it wants to use against Hezbollah missile sites in Lebanon. The New York Times said yesterday. A senior US official said the request was likely to be approved shortly, but other officials said the State Department is delaying approval amid concerns the munitions might cause civilian casualties and complicate diplomatic efforts to end the war. The senior official said there was discussion to block the sale because during Israel's 1982 invasion of Lebanon civilians were killed with the weapon, but added that the rockets would likely be delivered and that Israel would be told to "be careful." Month-long battles between Israel and Hezbollah militias have left more than 1,000 civilians dead in Lebanon and 38 in Israel, while diplomats at the United Nations have been wrangling over the wording of a proposed resolution urging an end to hostilities.



Former Indian foreign minister and suspended senior Congress Party leader Natwar Singh (C) speaks during a press conference at his residence in New Delhi yesterday. Singh said Manmohan Singh was a weak prime minister and the nation needed a decisive and forceful leadership. Natwar Singh said during his entire stay in Baghdad, no discussion or talks took place with any Iraqi authority on oil, bank accounts, vouchers or receipts.

Sonia is great for Natwar

PTI, New Delhi

Suspended Congress leader Natwar Singh yesterday said Sonia Gandhi has so far not said anything against him and "neither will I say anything against her". "In her generosity and greatness, she has not said anything against me till today. Neither will I say anything against her," Singh told a crowded press conference. Singh contended that during his entire stay in Baghdad in January, 2001 when he led a Congress delegation to Iraq, there was no discussion with any Iraqi authority on the oil-for-food Programme. "There was no discussion on oil contracts, vouchers, receipts or bank accounts. Ours was a political delegation," he said. On his return to India, Singh said he had "fully briefed" Sonia Gandhi about his meetings in Baghdad. "Ours was a political delegation". Singh went on to say that "not a leaf moves in the Congress party without Sonia Gandhi's knowledge." This was based on his long experience with the party, he said.

Lanka army pushes on with offensive

REUTERS, Trincomalee

Sri Lanka pushed on with an offensive yesterday to win control of a waterway from Tamil Tiger rebels, as calls mounted for an independent probe into the killing of 17 aid workers in the midst of the fighting. The military said it exchanged intermittent artillery and mortar fire with the Tigers as the fighting, the worst since a 2002 ceasefire, entered a 17th day. But the army said the intensity was far lower than previous days. Army trucks towed fresh heavy gun parts toward the battle zone after an army camp was wrecked overnight when an artillery gun accidentally exploded, igniting an arms dump. Officials said three troops were injured in the blasts, but said there were no fatalities as feared late on Thursday.

"The operation to defend the water continues," said Major Upali Rajapakse, senior coordinator at the National Security media centre. The government says it will not halt operations until it controls a disputed sluice and an irrigation reservoir that feeds it. The Tigers say the land is theirs, and say continued army attacks are an effective declaration of war. Fighting over the water, which feeds farms in government territory, began late last month, effectively ending the tenuous truce between the Tigers and the government. Army artillery and air force jets pounded rebel positions in the east on Thursday as ambulances ferried dozens of wounded troops to hospital and the military moved tanks, munitions and fresh soldiers to the battlefield. The Tigers said on Thursday more than 50 civilians were killed

and 200 wounded in their territory from army shelling. Doctors said six troops were killed and more than 50 wounded during an abortive push to capture the sluice. The Tigers have long demanded a separate homeland for ethnic Tamils in the north and east but President Mahinda Rajapakse has ruled this out. The rebels say any return to stalled peace talks is a distant prospect. Aid groups accuse the government of forcing civilians to flee Tiger areas by shelling and deliberately blocking aid. "The military and government are blocking the flow of aid into Tiger areas which is a violation of the ceasefire," Jeevan Thiagarajah of the Consortium for Humanitarian Agencies said late on Thursday. "We can't reach people in need."

Three al-Qaeda militants killed in Afghanistan

AFP, Kabul

Three al-Qaeda militants were killed in eastern Afghanistan yesterday in a joint raid by Afghan forces and the US-led coalition, the coalition said. Another three "associates" were arrested in the operation near the village of YaQubi in Khost province, which targeted an al-Qaeda member "considered a significant threat to Afghan and coalition forces", it said. "Credible intelligence linked the targeted terrorist to remote-controlled improvised explosive device and vehicle-borne improvised explosive device attacks in Khost province," the coalition said in a statement. The three "terrorists" opened fire using small arms and were killed when the Afghan and coalition forces returned fire, while the others were detained without incident, it added.