

UN asks nations to join fight against terrorism

AP, United Nations

Secretary-General Kofi Annan has appealed to all nations to join a long-term campaign to defeat terrorism in which he expects the United Nations to play a leading role.

The 189 UN member states must stop providing shelter and logistical support for terrorists, halt the laundering of money used to finance terrorist acts, and share information on terrorists and their organizations, he said.

"That is the only way we are going to defeat terrorism," Annan said.

The United Nations has been fighting international terrorism for nearly 40 years. A dozen legal agreements are on the books and the General Assembly is debating two new treaties. The Security Council said after last week's terrorist attacks in New York and Washington that it is ready to take all necessary steps ... to combat all forms of terrorism."

But diplomats are struggling to decide how to have the quickest impact.

Most are waiting for the United States as the wounded superpower to take the lead.

"The United Nations certainly has a role to play," US deputy ambassador James Cunningham said. "We're having discussions literally on a global basis about next steps. We haven't made any decisions yet, but we will be taking those decisions soon."

Immediately after hijacked jets deliberately crashed into the World Trade

Center and the Pentagon on Sept. 11, the Security Council and the General Assembly unanimously adopted resolutions condemning the attacks.

The Security Council's resolution recognized America's right to self-defence, defined the attacks as a threat to international peace and security, called for the perpetrators to be brought to justice and stressed that those responsible for harbouring them would be held accountable.

"That resolution is about the most sweeping statement of support for the right of a member state to act militarily that I have ever seen," said David Malone, Canada's former deputy UN ambassador who now heads the International Peace Academy, a New York think tank.

He said the current indecision is a combination of the United States not being ready to put a proposal before the Security Council, and some countries particularly from the Middle East not wanting the council to formally approve any US-led military action that would be controversial back home.

Once the US retaliates militarily, Malone said, it will be easier for the council to swing into action with other measures that could include financial, political and other forms of mandated activity."

The council was briefed Friday by UN legal counsel Hans Corell on the dozen anti-terrorism conventions and protocols and the obstacles to getting General Assembly approval of a new comprehensive convention on terrorism backed by India and a convention against nuclear terrorism proposed by Russia.

India reaffirms facilities to US for strikes

AFP, New Delhi

A senior Indian minister said Saturday New Delhi would consider granting the United States refuelling and logistical help if requested in the event of strikes against terrorist bases in Afghanistan.

Home Minister L.K. Advani told the Indian satellite television channel Aaj Tak that New Delhi had already agreed to give intelligence inputs on terrorist bases in Afghanistan and Pakistan to the United States.

Asked whether India would agree to grant Washington use of its military air bases and refuelling facilities, the minister said the United States had not made any such demand so far.

"We will consider the request for refuelling and other facilities while keeping in mind India's sovereignty," he said, adding India was backing Washington as it too was "directly affected by terrorism".

Last week, Indian Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee told US President George W. Bush by telephone that New Delhi would offer its "fullest cooperation" in the war on terrorism.

Afghan turmoil opens window for king's return

AFP, Kabul

Expressions of popular support for the return of former king Mohammad Zahir Shah are beginning to emerge in Afghanistan, as the threat of US military strikes places the future of the ruling Taliban regime in doubt.

Afghanistan's monarchy was ousted by a Soviet-backed coup in 1973, and king Zahir Shah, now in his late 80s, has lived in exile in Rome ever since.

But with the country in turmoil and the hardline Islamist Taliban facing US retribution for its refusal to hand over Osama bin Laden -- the main suspect in the terrorist attacks on New York and Washington -- some see the king's return as the

best hope for restoring a semblance of stability.

"Among all the players in Afghan politics today, King Zahir is the best. People are more optimistic about him than anybody else," said Khan Haji, a 50-year-old trader in Kabul.

"I have to say he will not be able to solve all the problems, but at least he can establish an administration which might be pro-democratic," Haji said.

The former king is especially popular among Afghans who can remember the peaceful and relatively prosperous decade of the 1960s.

Having kept out of the bitter political and military wrangling of the past 28 years, he is also seen as a truly independent figure.

Islamabad-based diplomats shifting families to India

AFP, New Delhi

Western diplomats based in Islamabad were shifting their families to India fearing unrest in Pakistan following its decision to support the United States in its fight against terrorism, media reports said Saturday.

The Hindu newspaper said the daughters of the US ambassador to Islamabad, Wendy Chamberlin, had arrived in New Delhi on Thursday.

Diplomats from industrialised nations meanwhile were seeking "up to 5,000 rooms of five-star standard" in the northern city of Amritsar, The Asian Age said.

Quoting unidentified Indian government officials, the newspaper

said several family members and dependents of British diplomats in Islamabad have already shifted to Amritsar in the past two days.

The large-scale evacuation was prompted by fears that Pakistan's President General Pervez Musharraf would not be able to contain radical Islamists opposed to his support for the US campaign to bring to book dissident Saudi millionaire Osama bin Laden, the newspaper said.

US President George W. Bush has said bin Laden, believed to be in Afghanistan, is wanted "dead or alive" in connection with the September 11 terror strikes on New York and Washington that killed more than 6,300 people.

Taliban bomb opposition bases in N Afghanistan

AFP, Kabul

Ruling Taliban forces were pounding opposition-held posts in northern Afghanistan's Samangan province for the second straight day Saturday, the opposition said.

"The Taliban have brought in reinforcements and launched a dozen offensives since this morning," said opposition alliance spokesman, Mohammad Ashraf Nadeem.

The Taliban push was part of a counter-attack launched Saturday after an opposition offensive in Samangan succeeded in seizing several areas from the Islamist militia.

Nadeem said Taliban planes

and heavy artillery had targeted opposition positions near the Dara-e-Souf valley, around 75 kilometers (47 miles) south of the provincial capital Aibak.

He gave no details of any opposition casualties.

The Taliban have stepped up offensives in northern Afghanistan in the past week, in an apparent attempt to exploit the death of opposition strongman Ahmad Shah Masood.

Masood was widely seen as the sole hurdle to the hardline militia's total control of the country, and his death raised fears of the possible collapse of the fragile anti-Taliban alliance.

Nadeem said Taliban planes

Hollywood goes on alert

REUTERS, Los Angeles

Major Hollywood studios tightened security on Friday canceling tours and setting up metal detectors and barriers after the FBI warned they could be the "target of a terrorist bombing."

FBI spokesman John McLaughlin said the agency met the heads of major studios on Thursday hours after receiving an "uncorroborated yet credible" threat against the filmmakers.

Many in Hollywood have worried that studios might be targeted by Muslim extremists who view the film and TV industries as purveyors of decadent American values.

The studios warned were Fox Entertainment Group Inc.'s 20th Century Fox, Sony Corp.'s Sony Pictures Entertainment, Walt Disney Co., Vivendi Universal's Universal Pictures, Viacom Inc.'s Paramount Pictures, Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer Inc. and AOL Time Warner Inc.'s Warner Bros.

UK suspends N Ireland Assembly

AFP, Belfast

Britain bought more time to break the deadlock in Northern Ireland's political process by briefly suspending the province's power-sharing legislature at midnight Friday (2300 GMT).

Northern Ireland Secretary John Reid did not specify how long the suspension would last but government sources suggested it would be for just 24 hours.

The tactic triggers a six-week review, allowing more talks on crunch disputes between Catholics and Protestants over disarmament and policing.

Suharto's son to surrender

AFP, Jakarta

The fugitive son of former Indonesia dictator Suharto, Hutomo "Tommy" Mandala Putra, is ready to surrender to police after 10 months on the run, one of his lawyers was quoted as saying Saturday.

But the former billionaire playboy will decide when the time is right, lawyer Elza Syarief said according to Satunet online news.

"My client says he will hand himself in at the appropriate time," Syarief told reporters at the police headquarters.

Accident kills 36 in China

AFP, Beijing

A bus slid off a road and fell into a reservoir in southern China, killing 36 passengers and injuring 14, the Beijing Morning Post said Saturday.

The accident occurred early Friday near the tourist resort city of Guilin in southern China's Guangxi region. The bus fell into the Lehuang reservoir, the report said.

The long-distance bus, packed with 50 passengers, was travelling from Dongguan city, in neighbouring Guangdong province and bound for Kaiping city, Guizhou province.

Fierce fighting despite ME truce

AFP, Jerusalem

truce.

In Brussels, meanwhile, EU leaders decided late Friday to send a top-level delegation to the Middle East a renewed bid to promote peace efforts seen as more urgent following last week's terror attacks on the two sides.

No injuries were immediately reported in the fight, which comes as Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat and Israeli Foreign Minister Shimon Peres edged closer to holding a meeting to consolidate the

control.

The clash was just the latest in a series of violent incidents which have undermined the ceasefire declared by both sides on Tuesday.

On Friday, 24 Palestinians were wounded in clashes between stone-throwers and Israeli soldiers in the West Bank and Gaza Strip, hospital sources said, while on Thursday an Israeli settler woman was killed and Israeli soldiers shot dead a Palestinian.



PHOTO: AFP

Anti-US demonstrators and supporters of the Taliban rally in Islamabad during a nationwide strike on Friday by Pakistan's radical Islamic parties. The demonstrators supported Saudi dissident Osama bin Laden and denounced the US threat of military attacks against Afghanistan. Four people were killed after demonstrators and police clashed in southern Karachi city.

Afghan airfields prime targets of US strikes

AP, Washington

Whether it would begin with cruise missiles from Navy ships, bombs from Air Force jets or quick strikes by Army special forces, an American attack on Afghanistan's Taliban probably would aim to knock out airfields, communications links and other targets that sustain the religious militia.

War on the Taliban would be like little the US military has undertaken before. But at least would offer more of what Defense Secretary Donald H. Rumsfeld calls "high-value" targets than would the shadowy terrorist network of Osama bin Laden that President George W. Bush has promised to root out.

Bush told the nation the Taliban

are "committing murder" by aiding the terrorists who attacked the World Trade Center and the Pentagon. Bush demanded they turn over Bin Laden and other leaders of his Al-Qaida organization or face swift punishment.

Taliban leaders, who have given refuge to Bin Laden since 1996, say there is no proof he was behind the terror attacks, and on Friday they rejected Bush's demand that they hand him over.

In addition to US forces, Rumsfeld spoke Friday of the potential for enlisting the help of the Northern Alliance, the main Afghan resistance group opposing the Taliban.