

## Bioterrorism fear grips US

AFP, New York

The United States was Saturday gripped by mounting fears of bioterrorism after a second person was stricken with anthrax and envelopes with suspicious white powder were sent to several organisations.

As health officials pleaded for calm and said there was no evidence linking the cases to the September 11 terrorist attacks on New York and Washington, Vice President Dick Cheney warned that Osama bin Laden's al-Qaeda network has tried to acquire biological weapons.

A woman working for NBC News, whose name has not been released, tested positive Friday for skin anthrax, becoming the second person to get the deadly disease and the fourth to be exposed to it.

She opened a letter containing the mysterious powder on September 25 and later developed a rash and a fever, New York Mayor Rudolph Giuliani told reporters.

Her illness is much less serious than the respiratory anthrax that killed a man in Florida last week, and

she is expected to make a full recovery after taking the antibiotic ciprofloxacin.

The powder mailed to NBC was found to be negative for anthrax, but a biopsy taken from the woman was shown to be positive for skin anthrax.

The third floor and several other parts of NBC's offices in Rockefeller Center were closed off to allow health officials to make sure no anthrax spores remained in the area.

Giuliani said said any other people who may have come into contact with the powder were also being tested and given the antibiotic ciprofloxacin as a precaution.

An envelope containing white powder also triggered the evacuation of the New York Times newsroom as investigators examined powder contained in an envelope sent to Judith Miller, a veteran correspondent specialising in the Middle East, who has written a book on bioterrorism.

The State Department in Washington interrupted a televised briefing after a suspicious package was found there. Many major news

organisations responded by refusing to accept new mail.

But health officials in the southwestern state of Nevada said late Friday that a second round of tests on a suspicious letter received by the Reno branch of software giant Microsoft has tested negative for anthrax.

Authorities said more tests would be carried out Saturday after the powdery material enclosed in a letter from Malaysia initially tested positive for anthrax, but a later test yielded a negative result.

New York FBI chief Barry Mawn said the letters sent to NBC and the New York Times had been sent from St. Petersburg, Florida, on September 20 and October 5, respectively, and were simple business-like envelopes.

Police in St. Petersburg said they were cooperating with the New York Police Department.

St. Petersburg is about 300 kilometres (200 miles) across Florida from Boca Raton, where three cases of anthrax have been discovered at American Media Inc.

(AMI). A 65-year-old photo editor at the company died from the illness last week.

Nearly 1,000 people who spent time in the offices of AMI have been tested and given antibiotics, but no further cases of exposure were found when the tests concluded Friday.

Mawn said the investigations were being carried out separately and that there was no evidence of a letter being sent to AMI.

"Anthrax has been found on a mail bin and the keys of a computer, so there has been no tie to a letter down there," he said.

The vice president said US intelligence officials were aware that bin Laden's al-Qaeda network had tried to acquire biological and chemical weapons and had been experimenting at camps in Afghanistan.

Cheney, speaking on PBS public television said that "nobody's made a direct link yet" with bin Laden, but added:

"I think the only responsible thing for us to do is proceed on the basis that it could be linked."



Northern Alliance soldiers prepare their gun at their position, close to the village of Dasht-I-Qala on Friday a few kilometres from the front line in Northern Afghanistan. Afghanistan's anti-Taliban Northern Alliance has grounded its aircraft after a demand from the United States as a precaution to prevent accidents, opposition officials said Friday.

## US, Uzbekistan confirm deal on anti-terror war

AFP, Washington

The United States and Uzbekistan said Friday they had reached a formal counter-terrorism agreement that will allow US troops and warplanes to use Uzbek airspace and military bases.

The announcement of the pact, which also pledges "urgent" bilateral security talks if Uzbekistan faces direct threats from terrorists, came as Afghanistan's Taliban militia said it had deployed thousands of troops to its border with the former Soviet republic.

In a joint statement released simultaneously in Washington and Tashkent, the United States and Uzbekistan said they had committed themselves "to eliminate international terrorism and its infrastructure."

"For these purposes, the Republic of Uzbekistan has agreed to provide the use of its airspace and necessary military and civilian infrastructure of one of its airports, which would be used in the first instance for humanitarian purposes," the statement said.

## Vajpayee set to expand his Cabinet

PALLAB BHATTACHARYA, New Delhi

Indian Prime Minister AB Vajpayee is set to expand his Cabinet on Monday next with the induction of a couple of new faces and change the portfolios of some ministers.

Vajpayee himself said yesterday that he would undertake the exercise on Monday but declined to specify the changes he is going to make in his council of ministers.

The exercise, highly-placed sources in the government said, is likely to see the induction of a full-time Defense Minister and the name doing the rounds most prominently is that of senior politician K C Pant who is Vajpayee government's interlocutor with political and separatist groups in Kashmir.

## Abu Sayyaf beheads 2 Filipino Christians

AFP, Zamboanga

Abu Sayyaf Muslim rebels, holding 14 American and Filipino hostages, beheaded two Christian farmers seized in the southern Philippine island of Basilan Saturday, the provincial police chief said.

Abu Sayyaf members, who are fleeing from military pursuit, entered an isolated farming district in Lantawan town, seized four Christian coconut farmers and later beheaded two of them, Senior Superintendent Bensali Jabarani said.

The other two farmers escaped and informed the police, Jabarani said, adding they had told the military of the guerrillas' last position and they were now trying to cut the rebels off.

## 'Prince Charles had dinner with Laden kin'

AFP, London

Prince Charles, the heir to the British throne, had dinner with a relative of Osama bin Laden, the prime suspect in anti-US attacks, two weeks after terror strikes in America last month, St James' Palace said Saturday.

Charles met Bakr bin Laden, a prominent Saudi businessman, to discuss the Islamic faith, said a spokeswoman for St James' Palace, the prince's official residence in London.

"We can confirm that the prince did attend a dinner for the Oxford Centre for Islamic Studies (in central England) and that a member of the extended family of Osama bin Laden was at that dinner," the spokeswoman said.

"It is a recognised centre which promotes greater understanding of the Islamic faith and the arrangement was made months ago," before the atrocities in New York and Washington, which Osama bin Laden is suspected of having masterminded.

## Fierce fighting in breakaway Abkhazia

AFP, Kodori Gorge

Fierce fighting raged early Saturday in the breakaway region of Abkhazia in Georgia after Tbilisi sent reinforcements into the zone.

The sound of the fighting could be heard in the Kodori gorge, around 15 km from the Abkhaz capital Sukhumi, in western Georgia.

Earlier this week Georgian partisans and displaced Chechen guerrillas launched a bid to retake Sukhumi from the Abkhaz separatists.

Several hundred regular Georgian army troops were sent into the upper part of the gorge overnight.

## US House approves anti-terrorism bill

AFP, Washington

The US House of Representatives approved legislation Friday giving the federal government expanded powers to fight terrorism in the wake of the September 11 attacks on the United States.

The House voted 337-79 to approve the measure that gives federal law enforcement agencies broader wiretap powers as well as new rights to keep suspect immigrants in detention.

The Senate voted 96-1 late Thursday to approve similar piece legislation.

The differences between the bills will have to be ironed out in conference between members of both chambers.

Democrats in both the House and Senate criticised the House version however, which does not contain measures to fight money laundering. "You can't deal with counterterrorism unless you take up

money-laundering," said Senate Democratic Majority Leader Thomas Daschle.

"A bill that gives full powers and weakens the constraints is an inadequate bill," echoed Representative Barney Frank of Massachusetts.

President George W. Bush commended the vote and urged quick passage of a compromise bill.

"The House and Senate bills are virtually identical," he said. "I urge the Congress to quickly get the bill to my desk."

"We must strengthen the hand of law enforcement to help safeguard America and prevent future attacks, and we must do it now," he said.

The legislation, which grants to the Bush administration considerably enhanced powers, was ironed out during difficult negotiations, in which lawmakers and administration officials pointed to the need for granting the government new tools to fight terrorism while protecting personal freedoms.

## Asian films shine at Vancouver festival

AFP, Vancouver

Major motion pictures, documentaries, experimental films and clan-taste Chinese features showing here at Vancouver's International Film Festival prove Asian cinema is one of the most dynamic in the world, says programmer Tony Ryans.

The "Tigers and Dragon" program, which debuted here in 1989, is presenting some 40 southeastern Asian films during the festival, which concludes here Friday.

"We show a lot of films that are getting their premieres here, films that are not otherwise seen in the Western world, very often in the presence of the directors," Ryans said in a recent interview.

"Many, many now well known east-Asian filmmakers from Korea, China, Japan, Taiwan, Hong Kong have had their first festival screenings here in Vancouver over the last 10 years."

## US freezes assets of Kashmir rebel group

AFP, Washington

The United States on Friday froze the assets of a Kashmiri rebel group suspected of a suicide attack in Srinagar this month as Secretary of State Colin Powell prepared to travel this weekend to South Asia.

The Treasury Department added the Pakistan-based Jaish-e-Mohammed, or Army of Mohammed, to its list of entities to be sanctioned for terrorist activities or support of them as part of an overall update, officials said.

Jaish-e-Mohammed is believed responsible for the October 1 attack on the legislature in Srinagar which

killed 38 people in the worst terrorist attack since the September 11 strikes in New York and Washington.

The group was among 39 individuals and groups, including three others based in Pakistan, to be added to the list which is aimed at affiliates of Saudi militant Osama bin Laden, the prime suspect in the September 11 attacks.

India has accused Pakistan of harbouring Jaish-e-Mohammed which it says is linked to the Afghanistan-based bin Laden.

After the attack in Srinagar, Indian Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee, who has pledged his country's full support in the US-led

anti-terrorism coalition wrote to US President George W. Bush asking that Jaish-e-Mohammed be outlawed.

US officials would not say whether the group had been added to the list at New Delhi's request but its inclusion on the list on Friday came two days before Powell is to leave for India and Pakistan for what are likely to be delicate talks with leaders of the rival nuclear powers.

Pakistan is crucial to the success of the coalition because of its ties and proximity to Afghanistan's ruling Taliban, but it faces domestic opposition to the campaign from Islamic militants eager to keep fighting in Kashmir.

## Lawsuit filed against Laden

AFP, New York

A woman who lost her husband in the World Trade Center terrorist onslaught has filed a lawsuit citing Osama bin Laden, the prime suspect in the attacks, her lawyer said.

The suit was filed late Thursday in US District Court in Manhattan on behalf of the unidentified New Jersey woman whose husband was killed when a hijacked jetliner smashed into his office in Tower One of the World Trade Center.

It is the first lawsuit stemming from the September 11 terrorist attack on New York, said her lawyer James Beasley, who maintained it does not conflict with a moratorium

on lawsuits related to the attacks.

US lawyers have called for a moratorium on filing suit against any landlords, airlines or municipalities for liability in last month's attack.

But Beasley, who is seeking five million dollars in damages for the death of the man he would only identify as "T.S." said that it did not exclude lawsuits against bin Laden.

"I'm going to give bin Laden the same moratorium that he gave people in the Twin Towers," Beasley said. "I'm going after him and everything he owns."

Beasley's suit also names Afghanistan, its Taliban leaders and bin Laden's militant network al-Qaeda as defendants.

The lawyer said "T.S." was at his job in 1 World Trade Center when American Airlines Flight 11 struck it at 8:45 a.m. (1245 GMT).

"He was able to navigate to the roof of the building with a co-worker," Beasley said, hoping for rescue by helicopter.

"Unfortunately, the building imploded before that could happen," said Beasley.

Meanwhile a Chicago lawyer and specialist in aviation litigation said half a dozen clients who had retained his firm's services in the wake of September 11 would likely file civil suits against the airlines and other agencies.

## Car bomb blast in Madrid: 17 hurt

AFP, Madrid

Seventeen people were slightly injured in a car bomb explosion in a Madrid underground car park overnight blamed on Basque separatist organisation ETA, only hours after Spanish national holiday celebrations, officials said Saturday.

The device exploded at 11:50 pm (2150 GMT) under the central Colon square, where a military parade marking Spain's national holiday had been held earlier in the day attended by the royal family and the government.

Six police officers suffered from smoke inhalation, two women broke their shoulders and another broke a leg, emergency services said.



From left - Italian President Carlo Azeglio Ciampi, his wife Franca, president of the chamber of deputies Pierferdinando Casini and Italian Premier Silvio Berlusconi attend the memorial service in Milan on Saturday for the victims of the plane crash last Monday at Milan's Linate Airport when a passenger plane and a small Cessna aircraft collided on the tarmac, leaving 118 people dead.

## Ukrainian missile downed Russian plane, Kiev admits

AFP, Kiev

Ukrainian Defence Minister Oleksander Kuzmuk acknowledged on Saturday that a Ukrainian missile sent a Russian airliner crashing into the Black Sea on October 4 killing all 76 on board.

The head of the country's air defences has offered to resign over the accident. "We know we are implicated", Kuzmuk told reporters, referring to the mid-air explosion that brought down the Tu-154 airliner flying from Tel Aviv to Novosibirsk in western

Siberia, been hit by a missile warhead.

The crash had been initially attributed to a terrorist act or a mechanical failure.

The commander of Ukraine's air defences, General Volodymyr Tkashov, said on Saturday he and his deputy had offered to resign on Wednesday over the crash but that President Leonid Kuchma had not yet taken a decision on whether to accept it.

On Thursday Kuchma said Kuzmuk had offered to resign "immediately" after the crash but that

"I apologise to the friends and families of the people who tragically died in this disaster, as well as to the president of Ukraine, the government, the parliament and the Ukrainian people for having damaged the authority of our state."

Kuzmuk, who had previously denied his country's involvement in the downing more insistently than any other Ukrainian official, was speaking after Russian investigators concluded on Friday that the plane had been rejected the resignation.

## Israel, PA take timid steps towards resuming talks

AFP, Jerusalem

The meeting Friday between Israeli Foreign Minister Shimon Peres and two senior Palestinian officials could be the prelude to a restart of Israeli-Palestinian dialogue, as relative calm is gradually restored between the two sides.

"The Israeli prime minister is due to discuss measures aimed at easing the blockade on the (Palestinian) territories during his weekly cabinet meeting Sunday," a senior official from Ariel Sharon's office told AFP Saturday on condition of anonymity.

"This is in line with our long-standing policy of avoiding suffering for innocent Palestinian civilians in sectors of the territories where there are no terrorist activities," he added.

Top Palestinian negotiator Saeb Erakat told AFP Saturday that during his talks Friday with Peres and Palestinian parliamentary speaker Ahmed Qorei, the Israeli dove "promised measures easing the blockade

on the Palestinian territories."

"The meeting was very serious and positive... But experience has taught us to remain cautious, and what will actually happen on the ground in the next days remains to be seen. It will be a test of how serious the Israelis are," Qorei told the Al-Ayam daily.

The talks held Friday between the three men were not officially confirmed by Israel, but according to Israeli public radio, Sharon discussed the meeting Friday night with US Secretary of State Colin Powell.

Political sources quoted by the radio however warned that these confidence-building measures would be scrapped the moment the ceasefire is breached in these areas.

Radio also said the joint Israeli-Palestinian security high committee was due to meet at the beginning of next week.

During Friday's three-way meeting, "there was a discussion on how to move the Mitchell report forward," a Palestinian official who spoke on condition of anonymity had said Friday night.



Palestinian militants of the radical Hamas movement, criticising the detention of several fellow activists by Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat's Authority, demonstrate in the West Bank town of Nablus on Friday protesting the US-led military campaign against Afghanistan.

## Nepali House passes land reform bill

AFP, Kathmandu

A controversial law which aims to redistribute land in rural Nepal has been passed by MPs.

The Land Reforms Act Bill was passed by the House of Representatives Friday despite strong protest by opposition parties.

Proposed by Prime Minister Sher Bahadur Deuba, the bill aims to ease the burden on the 4.5 million people living below the poverty line.

Under current law, individuals can own a certain number of hectares of land for agricultural use. The bill will cut that from 18.2 hectares (45.5 acres) to 7.15 hectares in the lowland region known as Tarai, from 4.8 to 3.75 hectares in the mountains and from 2.9 to 1.5 hectares in city areas, including the capital Kathmandu.

## Fighting erupts in Tajik border

AFP, Dushanbe

Tajikistan sent reinforcements to its border with Taliban-controlled areas of Afghanistan on Saturday as Russian forces here report fighting overnight on the Afghan side.

Speaking on condition of anonymity, a border official said 500 soldiers, all members of Tajikistan's special border guard, and 20 armoured vehicles had been sent to the southern region of Plandj, which borders both Afghanistan and Uzbekistan.

Separately Russian border guards helping guard the border reported fighting inside Afghanistan near to the Tajik border.

The press service of the Russian border guards, also in the region of Plandj, said they had heard artillery fire from the Afghan village of Khodjagar, around eight km inside Afghanistan's border with Tajikistan.

## 22 people killed in Somalia fighting

AFP, Mogadishu

At least 22 people were killed and scores wounded when heavy fighting broke out between rival militias in the Somali capital Mogadishu early Saturday, militia and medical sources said.

Among those killed were three children, a Somali doctor running a clinic in the vicinity of the clashes said.

Mortar shelling and the exchange of heavy gunfire forced residents of the Huruwa district in the southeast of the capital to flee to other safer areas of the city, witnesses said.

## Japan may host Afghan rehabilitation meeting

AFP, Tokyo

Japan has offered to host an international meeting on rehabilitating Afghanistan after US-led strikes on the country end, a former foreign minister said in an interview published Saturday.

Masahiko Komura said he conveyed the Japanese intention to Iranian President Mohammed Khatami, according to the Daily Yomiuri, the English-language edition of Japan's best-selling Yomiuri Shimbun.

Komura visited Iran last week as a special envoy of Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi to explain the policy of cooperating with other countries to fight against terrorism after the September 11 attacks in the United States.