

Anthrax fear goes global

AFP, New York

Fears of biological attacks sent shudders through the world Monday, after three new cases of anthrax exposure were revealed here and top US officials admitted the country was facing a bioterrorist onslaught.

Health and Human Services Secretary Tommy Thompson said it was clear that the 12 people who were exposed to the deadly anthrax bacteria — including two who were infected, one of whom died — were victims of bioterror.

But the cabinet secretary said no link had been established between the outbreak and the al-Qaeda network of Osama bin Laden, who Washington believes masterminded last month's hijack terror attacks in New York and Washington.

"Well, there's no question it's bioterrorism. It's a biological agent. It's terrorism, it's a crime," he said on CNN Late Edition. "But whether or not it's connected to al-Qaeda, we can't say conclusively."

Attorney General John Ashcroft was more direct, saying that while there was no proof, there was "real suspicion" that the scare over the bacteria was linked to bin Laden.

"It's pretty clear to me from the prevention side that as a policy, we should consider the potential that it is linked," he said in an interview with CBS.

A policeman and two laboratory technicians who handled an anthrax-laced package sent to the New York office of NBC television tested positive for anthrax spores, but have not developed the disease, New York Mayor Rudy Giuliani said Sunday.

The three came into contact with a hate letter addressed to NBC news anchor Tom Brokaw and opened by his assistant Erin O'Connor, who tested positive for anthrax Friday.

So far only two people have been diagnosed with the disease: the NBC employee who contracted skin anthrax and is recovering, and an actor at American Media Incorporated in Florida who died of respiratory anthrax on October 5.

Twelve people — four in New York and eight in Florida — have tested positive for exposure to the bacteria and hundreds of other employees at NBC and American Media are being tested and given antibiotics as a precaution.

In a third confirmed incident, a letter from Malaysia to a Microsoft office in Reno, Nevada, has tested positive for anthrax spores, but the four people who came into contact with it tested negative for the airborne form of anthrax.

But tests were yet to show whether they were infected with the less-dangerous skin anthrax, said Barbara Hunt, a district health officer for Washoe County, where the Microsoft office is located.

Another two employees still were expecting test results, she said.

Thompson said the White House would ask Congress to unblock an additional 1.5 billion dollars for the purchase of antibiotics and for other programs to combat bioterrorism, some reports said.

Ashcroft pointed out that two of the alerts were at media companies, which he said were symbols of the freedom of the United States.

The Centers for Disease Control tried to quell growing fear over the outbreak which has seen police called to deal with more than 100 suspicious packages in New York in 24 hours.

"As long as you give these (exposed) individuals antibiotics to keep them from getting the disease, there is essentially zero likelihood they will develop the disease in the future," CDC doctor Steve Ostroff said.

CDC director Jeffrey Koplan, urged vigilance when opening mail, but said anthrax was relatively hard to weaponise and spread.

Nevertheless, jitters spread across the world.

Some 16 buildings across Australia including US and British consulates were hit by anthrax hoaxes Monday, forcing authorities to step up security across the country.



Afghans gather around an unexploded missile near the Aghna city of Jalalabad on Sunday. The hardline Taliban militia said some 200 civilians were killed by US-led air strikes on the village of Kadam near Jalalabad.



Former Prime Minister of Pakistan Benazir Bhutto talks about the current political situation in Pakistan on NBC's 'Meet the Press' on Sunday during a taping at the NBC studio in Washington, DC.

One killed as crowded train derails in India

AFP, Jodhpur

A child died and 40 people were injured Monday when a crowded passenger train derailed in India's western state of Rajasthan, officials said.

Railway police official Murad Ali told AFP that 11 carriages of the Mandor Express, which was travelling between Delhi and the tourist city of Jodhpur, slipped off the tracks at 6.30 am (0100 GMT).

"One child was killed on the spot. At least 40 people are injured, of which four are reported to be in a serious condition," Ali said.

"Rescue and recovery operations are on. At this juncture we cannot hazard a guess for the derailment."

Taliban deny FM's defection

AFP, Islamabad

Afghanistan's ruling Taliban Monday denied reports that foreign minister Wakil Ahmed Mutawakil had left the country and said their supreme leader Mullah Mohammad Omar had survived US air strikes so far.

Reports of Mutawakil's defection were "baseless, concocted and sheer lies," Mohammad Tayyab Aghal, a spokesman for Omar told the Pakistan-based Afghan Islamic Press.

"He is continuing with his duties in Kandahar," he added. Kandahar is the Taliban's stronghold in southern Afghanistan.

On Omar, one of the targets of US air strikes, the spokesman said: "Mullah Mohammad Omar Mujahid is fine and there is no problem."

20 rebels killed in Chechnya

AFP, Moscow

Russian forces killed 20 Chechen rebels and arrested another 34 in clashes over the past 24 hours, ITAR-TASS quoted the federal military in the North Caucasus as saying Monday.

The Russian army special operations were concentrated on the capital Grozny, the eastern city of Gudermes and the Shali region southeast of the capital, a senior military officer told the news agency.

Meanwhile, five civilians were shot dead in an ambush Sunday outside a house in the capital's Staropromyslovsky district, Chechnya's pro-Russian administration told Interfax.

Russia launched its self-styled "anti-terrorist" operation against Islamic separatists in the southern republic of Chechnya on October 1, 1999.

Manila, MILF talks begin in Malaysia

AFP, Kuala Lumpur

Peace talks opened in Malaysia Monday between the Philippines government and Muslim separatist rebels, a Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) official said.

The five-day talks aimed at ending the MILF's 23-year rebellion follow the signing of a truce in Malaysia in August, which each side has accused the other of violating.

The MILF official told AFP the rebels would press Manila to halt all military campaigns and adhere to the truce agreement.

He said issues on the negotiating table included working out an economic rehabilitation programme for the poverty stricken Mindanao province and defining the territory of the Bangsa Moro people.

The first meeting Monday was "fine", he said.

The MILF is also pressing for an independent group from the Organisation of the Islamic Conference to monitor the truce and observe the talks.

Afghan king's envoys begin talks in Pakistan

AFP, Islamabad

Special envoys from former Afghan king Mohammed Zahir Shah arrived here Monday for talks with Pakistani President Pervez Musharraf on any post-Taliban scenario in Afghanistan.

A Pakistani foreign ministry official said former Afghan foreign minister Hedayat Amin Arsala was leading the king's delegation, which is also understood to include Haji Abdul Khaleq Farahi and Rahim Sherzoy.

He said the former king's envoys had started talks with Foreign Minister Abdul Sattar and were scheduled to meet Musharraf later in the afternoon.

The discussions come hours

before the arrival here of US Secretary of State Colin Powell.

Powell will meet Musharraf to discuss the US-led military action against the Taliban militia and alleged terrorists based in Afghanistan, as well as Pakistan's tense relations with nuclear rival India.

Details of Powell's itinerary have been kept secret amid fears of reprisals for its air strikes against the Taliban, now in their second week.

Powell is also expected to visit New Delhi en route to the Asia-Pacific Economic Forum in Shanghai.

Zahir Shah's delegation left Rome on Saturday night carrying a message to the Pakistani leader from the former king who has lived in

Italy since his ouster in a coup in 1973.

Musharraf earlier this month invited Zahir Shah to send a mission to discuss a post-Taliban Afghanistan should the ruling militia be toppled by the current US-led military strikes.

But royal family sources said the visit had upset the anti-Taliban Northern Alliance which blames Pakistan for supporting the Taliban since its emergence in 1994.

Pakistan is now the only country to formally recognise the Taliban regime as the legitimate government in Afghanistan, but loosened its ties with the Islamic militia in support the US coalition against terrorism following the September 11 attacks on New York and Washington.

11 village guards killed in Algeria

AFP, Algiers

Eleven village guards were killed in an ambush by armed Islamic extremists in Algeria's eastern Tebessa region, local newspapers reported on Monday.

The report could not immediately be verified officially.

The attack took place on Sunday near the village of Bir El-Aterin, about 630 km east of the capital Algiers, the reports said.

They said the guards had been surprised at a water source by about 20 members of the radical Salafist Group for Preaching and Salvation (GSPC), one of two radical groups which have waged a civil war in Algeria since 1992.

Al-Qaeda tried to obtain N-weapons material

AFP, Berlin

The al-Qaeda terrorist network tried to obtain weapons-grade nuclear material with the help of the Russian mafia, the German ARD television network says in a report to be broadcast Monday evening.

Friedrich Steinhäusler, an arms control specialist with California's Stanford University, said in an interview to ARD that an attempt to obtain enriched uranium was foiled in Prague.

"We know that there were very definite attempts by al-Qaeda to obtain nuclear material through

middlemen and representatives of Russian organised crime and that these conversations are believed to have taken place in Europe and are also being investigated by European security services," said Steinhäusler.

He said that several kilograms of highly-enriched uranium of Russian origin had been seized in Prague in connection with the attempted deal. The gang involved had worked with middlemen from Belarus, the Czech republic, Germany and Russia, according to the report.

The report said that according to

the FBI, Osama bin Laden's former finance chief Mamduh Mahmud Salim, who was arrested near Munich in 1998 and handed over to the United States, had tried to obtain nuclear weapons components.

Steinhäusler said in the report that a Stanford university survey showed that nuclear material was not kept under sufficient security by a number of states.

Bin Laden and his al-Qaeda network have been blamed by US investigators for the September 11 attack that devastated the World Trade Center and damaged the Pentagon, leaving about 5,500 people dead.

Violent anti-US protests in Kashmir, dozens hurt

AFP, Srinagar

Police used tear gas to break up an anti-American demonstration in Indian-administered Kashmir Monday, injuring around a dozen people, officials said.

Police and protesters fought in several areas of the Kashmiri summer capital Srinagar, which was also shut down by a general strike.

The violence came after dozens of youths, chanting "Down with America", poured on to the streets of the Kakasarai area of the city and burnt tyres and set up road-blocks, witnesses said.

Police, assisted by paramilitary forces, charged at the protesters with batons and fired tear-gas canisters, but were met with a hail of stones in reply.

Police finally had to fire in air to disperse the protesters. Most shops and businesses in Srinagar were shut because of a strike called to protest against a visit by US Secretary of State Colin Powell to Pakistan and India.

Powell was due to arrive in Islamabad later Monday. Several radical groups in Pakistan opposed to the US-led strikes on Afghanistan had called for the general strike.

In Kashmir, the militant groups

Jaish-e-Mohammad and Harakat ul-Mujahidin — both on a US list of terrorist organisations — promoted the shutdown.

"The strike is to protest Colin Powell's visit to the sub-continent and the banning of Jaish by the United States," a statement from both groups, carried by the local Urdu press, said Monday.

Jaish, held responsible for a suicide attack at the Kashmir legislature building on October 1 that left 38 people dead, was included on a list of suspected terrorist organisations by the US and Britain last week. Harkat-ul-Mujahideen was listed two years ago.

Despite its inclusion, Jaish has said it will continue its campaign until "Kashmir is liberated from India".

The strike also closed down commercial centres in Srinagar and forced traffic off the roads.

"I was about to open my shop when a dozen youths with sticks appeared on the road forcing traffic off the roads," said Abdul Rehman from the Ram Bagh area of the city.

He said the young Kashmiris



A former South Korean comfort woman holds an anti-Japan placard during a protest against Japanese Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi's visit on Monday. Koizumi apologised to the Korean people for their suffering under Japanese rule between 1910 and 1945 during a speech at the former jail after he laid a wreath to a monument to Korean independence fighters tortured and executed by Japanese soldiers at the jail.

Israeli army pulls out of Hebron hotspots

AFP, Jerusalem

The Israeli army on Monday pulled out of two trouble-hit areas of Hebron it re-occupied more than a week ago, an AFP correspondent saw.

Within a few minutes a convoy of some 10 tanks and armoured vehicles withdrew from the Palestinian neighbourhoods of Abu Snehah and Al Sheikh to a sector of Hebron under Israeli control.

The pull-out came after Israeli state radio reports of a security meeting between Israeli and Palestinian representatives in a

building housing the Israeli-Palestinian liaison committee in Hebron.

An Israeli government statement earlier hinted at a pull-out if the Palestinian Authority issues cast-iron assurances there will be no more shooting anywhere in the West Bank town.

On Monday Israel was also expected to ease its blockade of the autonomous Palestinian towns of Ramallah and Jericho in the West Bank.

The army re-occupied the Abu Snehah district on October 5 after Palestinian gunmen wounded two Jewish women.

Palestinian state essential for ME peace: British FM

AFP, London

A Palestinian state is an essential part of efforts to bring long-term peace to the Middle East, British Foreign Secretary Jack Straw said on Monday.

"Recognition of a Palestinian state, in our judgement, has to be part of the long-term path towards peace in the area," Straw told BBC radio.

He was speaking ahead of talks in London between visiting Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat and Prime Minister Tony Blair,

designed to revitalise the beleaguered Middle East peace process.

Straw said London wanted "much more active progress" from both Israelis and Palestinians.

Arafat has come out in support of the US-led strikes against Afghanistan following the September 11 attacks on New York and Washington.

But there is huge populist anger in the Arab world over the US attacks on Afghanistan's ruling Taliban regime and Osama bin Laden, the chief suspect for the attacks on the United States.

The situation in the Middle East, and particularly Washington's support for Israel, is seen as one of the root causes of the hatred behind the September 11 atrocities.

"You've got to reduce the tensions in which terrorism breeds and in which terrorism can hide," Straw acknowledged.

He said Monday's talks were "part of a continuing process to try to secure peace in the Middle East", which was "the area of the greatest conflict and tension across the world".

Kandahar virtually empty

AFP, Quetta

The Taliban's southern capital of Kandahar is virtually empty as thousands of refugees dodge US bombs and Afghan human smugglers in their flight to safety, UN officials said Monday.

United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (UNHCR) spokesman Rupert Colville said about 1,000 refugees were crossing the southeastern Afghan border into Pakistan each day.

"That's 30,000 new arrivals in the last month. Many more have tried but their whereabouts are unknown," he said.

A similar number had crossed the border into Pakistan's North West Frontier Province. The UN's numbers match Pakistani estimates that between 1,000 and 2,000 people are entering here each day.

Colville said human smugglers were cooperating with Taliban troops in Afghanistan, causing friction among tribal elders on both sides of the border.

"The average cost of a trip from Kandahar to Quetta is about 1,000 rupees for each person. That equates to about 100 US dollars per family and this is a huge amount of money in Afghanistan and most people simply can't afford this."

India, Russia begin talks

AFP, New Delhi

Russian Deputy Prime Minister Ilya Klebanov Monday began talks with India on the US-led military strikes in Afghanistan, officials said.

"The Russian deputy prime minister met Indian National Security Advisor Brajesh Mishra. The talks were long," an Indian foreign ministry official said.

Klebanov was also due to meet Indian Foreign Minister Jaswant Singh.

"Klebanov and Singh will be joined during the course of their

discussions by Indian Defence Minister George Fernandes," said a foreign office spokeswoman.

Klebanov will meet Indian President K.R. Narayanan later Monday and will attend a dinner hosted by Finance Minister Yashwant Sinha.

He will meet Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee on Tuesday.

Vajpayee is planning a trip to Moscow on November 4 to return the official visit made by Russian President Vladimir Putin to New Delhi in October last year.

"I am heading a large Russian

delegation to discuss details of all agreements that will be signed during Prime Minister Vajpayee's visit to Moscow," Klebanov told reporters on his arrival in Delhi on Sunday.

Both Russia and India have offered their support for the military action by Washington, and have suggested that building a strong alternative government to Afghanistan's ruling Taliban could prove important in the fight to root out international terrorism.

Both India and Russia have historically had strong ties including the supply of military equipment.