

4th hijacked jet headed for White House

AFP, Washington
Detained al-Qaida leader Abu Zubaydah has told interrogators that the hijacked airliner that crashed in Pennsylvania on September 11 was headed for the White House, NBC News reported Wednesday.

A total of four US passenger planes were seized on that day by 19 suspected hijackers, according to law enforcement officials. Two of them were flown into the twin towers of the World Trade Center in New York, and a third rammed the Pentagon building outside Washington. The fourth plane, however, crashed into a field in rural Pennsylvania, after its passenger put up resistance. Zubaydah, who had been captured in Pakistan in March, provided his interrogators with new information that indicates that the White House was the target of the fourth plane, NBC News reported, citing unidentified sources.

Intense diplomatic drive to pull India, Pakistan back from brink

AFP, New Delhi

Intense international diplomatic efforts were underway Thursday to pull India and Pakistan back from the brink, as Indian security chiefs held a war strategy meeting and Pakistan prepared to redeploy troops from Africa. Analysts, meanwhile, detected a sliver of hope in a Pakistani government statement pledging to crack down on cross-border militancy being launched from its section of disputed Kashmir. As British Prime Minister Tony Blair pleaded with the nuclear-armed rivals to hold off a potentially disastrous conflict, a US official said preventive diplomacy on the issue was "intense as it has ever been." Washington, worried its war against al-Qaida militants in Afghanistan and Pakistani border areas will be compromised, said it had come up with specific ideas to defuse tensions between the two countries. British Foreign Secretary Jack Straw, who heads to the region next week, spoke overnight by telephone on the crisis with Secretary of State Colin Powell, US officials said. Blair meanwhile described the India-Pakistan crisis as "grave" and called for restraint. US Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld also stepped into the fray, warning "the situation is a tense one." "There is no question but that the entire administration has been in touch with associates in Pakistan, and associates in India," he said.

Apart from the diplomatic flurry by telephone, three political heavyweights are due in the region in the coming days in a bid to persuade the two sides to stave off a conflagration. European Union foreign affairs commissioner Chris Patten is due in New Delhi on Friday after visiting Pakistan and Afghanistan, followed by Straw on Monday. US Deputy Secretary of State Richard Armitage is expected in India and Pakistan in early June. Fears the two rivals were hurtling towards a new confrontation were fuelled on Wednesday when Indian Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee told Indian troops in Kashmir to prepare for a "decisive fight." Though he did not mention Pakistan by name, and foreign ministry officials hastened to explain he was referring to India's war against terrorism, most Indian newspapers and analysts interpreted the comments as being directed squarely at Islamabad. Pakistan for its part warned it would fight back, but following a cabinet meeting chaired by President Pervez Musharraf, issued a statement reiterating it did not support terrorism. While much of the statement reflected typical comments by Musharraf, it added: "The meeting emphasised that the government will not allow Pakistan's territory or any territory whose defence is the responsibility of Pakistan to be used for any terrorist activity anywhere in the world."



Indian Defence Minister George Fernandes (L), Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee (C) and Home Minister Lal Krishna Advani (R) attend the Unified Command Council meeting in Srinagar on Thursday. After sending a blunt warning to Pakistan, Vajpayee met with top Kashmiri security officials to plot their next steps in fighting separatist militancy.



Missing intern Chandra Levy's body found

AFP, Washington

Police identified on Wednesday the remains of Chandra Levy, the 24-year-old Washington intern whose disappearance over a year ago ended the career of US Congressman Gary Condit. A man walking his dog discovered skeletal remains and clothing early Wednesday in a heavily wooded area in the US capital known as Rock Creek Park, located near what used to be Levy's home. "In fact, the remains are of Chandra Levy," Washington DC police chief Charles Ramsey told reporters after medical examiners confirmed her identity through dental records. "This is no longer a disappearance case." The young Californian came here to serve as an intern at the Bureau of Prisons and disappeared without trace on April 30, 2001.

Britain plots crackdown on illegal immigrants

AFP, London

Britain is considering plans for a huge crackdown on illegal immigrants trying to enter the country, including the deployment of navy warships to intercept people-traffickers, according to a newspaper report published here Thursday. Under the radical plans, seen by The Guardian, bulk deportations of rejected asylum seekers would be carried out using army transport planes, while development aid to countries of asylum origin could be tied to commitments to take back illegal immigrants.

Such countries would include Somalia, Sri Lanka and Turkey, said the broadsheet. Following talks Monday with British Prime Minister Tony Blair, Spanish counterpart Jose Maria Aznar announced that his government was drawing up tough measures against illegal immigration to put before EU leaders at their summit next month. Immigration has moved to the heart of the European political battleground after the stunning recent electoral successes of anti-immigrant candidates in France and the Netherlands. The Guardian said Britain's interior ministry had drawn up a

confidential "action plan" to "deliver a radical reduction in the number of unfounded asylum applications." It was commissioned for Blair and a copy was circulated to senior ministers in advance of a meeting chaired by the prime minister on May 15 -- before Aznar's announcement. A memo accompanying the plans and written by government policy adviser Olivia McLeod said: "It has become clear from the prime minister's discussions on this (immigration) issue that concerted action is needed across government if we are to deliver a radical reduction in the numbers (of asylum seekers)."

Israeli embassy fire in Paris accidental

AFP, Paris

The fire which gutted the Israeli embassy in Paris overnight was accidental, police said Thursday. "According to the first indications it is of accidental origin," a police official said. He said the blaze could be linked to renovation work that was being carried out at the embassy building near the Champs Elysees in the fashionable eighth district of the capital. Earlier Israeli ambassador Elie Barnavi said the fire, which broke out shortly after 2:00 am (0000 GMT), was possibly caused by a short-circuit.

Claudia Schiffer to tie the knot

AFP, London

German supermodel Claudia Schiffer, whose image can sell a thousand products, marries her British fiance Saturday in the seclusion of the English countryside a million miles from the catwalk. The catwalk queen and her film producer boyfriend Matthew Vaughn are tying the knot somewhere in rural Suffolk, eastern England. Expect secrecy. In a bid to keep nosy journalists off the scene, guests are being kept in the dark about the precise location and have been asked to keep their cameras at home.

World watches warily as India talks of war

REUTERS, New Delhi/Islamabad

India's prime minister meets his security advisers in disputed Kashmir today after telling troops confronting Pakistani forces to prepare for action after a week of cross-border firing. Atal Behari Vajpayee, on a three-day visit to the state at the root of two of the three wars between the South Asian neighbours, has sent extra troops to India's border with Pakistan and extra warships to the Arabian Sea off its coast. With the nuclear-armed nations trading bellicose warnings and cross-border fire, the United States

and its European allies said they were working behind the scenes to stop the two sides slipping back into war. "The message clearly to everyone is that it is a dangerous situation and that our hope and all of our efforts are aimed at encouraging them to lessen the tension along the border, both in Kashmir and elsewhere," US Defence Secretary Donald Rumsfeld told reporters in Washington on Wednesday. Rumsfeld said he had spoken to Indian Defence Minister George Fernandes and expected to talk to him again soon. State Department officials e-

choed Rumsfeld's concern. "What we want to do right now is prevent a war," one senior official told reporters. India blames Pakistan for attacks by Islamic militants in Kashmir, its only Muslim-majority state, and further afield. A December attack on the Indian parliament in the capital New Delhi triggered the latest military standoff between the rivals. Vajpayee, who meets his security advisers in Indian-controlled Kashmir's main city of Srinagar, told his troops on Wednesday to prepare for action. "Be prepared for sacrifices. But our aim should be victory."

ME back on warpath after new suicide bombing

AFP, Jerusalem

The Middle East slid back toward its desperate cycle of violence Thursday after a suicide bomber sent to avenge the death of a Palestinian militant killed in Beirut hit Rishon Letzion, a Tel Aviv suburb rocked by a human bomb just two weeks ago. As Israelis absorbed the shock of the blow -- the third suicide attack in Israel since Sunday -- another bomb set fire to a tanker truck in the country's main fuel depot in a populated area north of Tel Aviv, but the blaze was quickly extinguished by the plant's emergency services. The Israeli army, which had been poised after the devastating May 7 bombing in Rishon Letzion to invade the Gaza Strip as it had done the West Bank the month before, moved quickly in the wake of the latest attack. Tanks rolled into Palestinian-controlled areas of Hebron and small towns around Jenin overnight and

arrested 19 Palestinians, Israel and Palestinian security sources said. Thirteen were arrested in Hebron, in the southern West Bank, three of whom were wanted by Israel in connection with anti-Israeli attacks. The others were detained near Jenin, in the northern West Bank. The latest suicide bombing in Rishon Letzion left the bomber from the Al Aqsa Martyrs Brigades and two Israelis dead in a crowded area of cafes near the town's main promenade. More than 30 people were also injured. The radical group, an armed offshoot of Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat's Fatah movement, said the attack was payback for the death of Jihad Jibri, a military chief of the radical Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine-General Command, killed by a car bomb in Beirut Monday.

Tigers-Govt direct talks could be delayed

AP, Colombo

A top Tamil rebel leader has told a Norwegian peace delegation that direct peace talks with the government could be delayed due to a cease-fire agreement not being fully implemented, rebel radio said Thursday. Anton Balasingham, the rebels' chief negotiator, held almost three hours of discussions with Norway's Deputy Foreign Minister Vidar Helgesen, peace envoy Erik Solheim and Kirste Tromsdal of the Norwegian Foreign Ministry at his home in London on Wednesday, the rebels' Voice of Tigers radio reported. "We are disappointed with the lack of progress in implementing the truce, this could cause delays in holding the Thailand talks," Balasingham was quoted as telling the Norwegians, who have been shuttling for over two years to bring the two sides to the negotiating

Of surviving on rats, roots

AFP, Kokrajhar

Tribal refugees living in state-run camps in India's northeastern state of Assam are so poverty-stricken they are eating rats and some have even sold off their children. Bosko Chermako, a tribal leader at the Sapkata relief camp in western Assam's Kokrajhar district, told AFP that his people were starving and ill. "There is virtually nothing to eat and diseases like tuberculosis, cholera, and gastroenteritis are spreading among the refugees," he said. "Several deaths have been reported from many camps on a daily basis," he added. Karuna Basera, a 35-year-old mother of two, said she gave away her younger child for money. "I sold my one-year-old daughter to a grocery shop owner in exchange for 250 rupees (five dollars)," she said. "I am not in a position to feed my daughter and so decided to sell her." Over 150,000 tribal people were forced into 40 relief camps in early 1996 following bloody ethnic

clashes with the majority tribal Bodos in western Assam. An estimated 1,000 people lost their lives in the fierce bloodletting, mostly from the minority Adivasi tribal villagers, as the Bodos tried to drive them out of western Assam and carve out an independent Bodo homeland. Joseph Minz, secretary of the All Adivasi (Tribal) Students Association of Assam, said his people had lost all their land and were on the brink of starvation in the state-run refugee camps. "In the name of rations, the government provides rice for 10 days in a month and nothing else. With no source of income the refugees are forced to starve -- eat for five days and starve for the next 10 days," said Minz. Raphael Kujur, a refugee leader, said most of them were forced to turn to the jungle for food. "When there is hunger one is forced to eat anything -- wild roots, rats, tubers," said Kujur, adding that people were dying of disease in the camps with no medical aid forthcoming from the government or aid agencies.

Earn trust first, talk later, Kashmiris tell Delhi

AFP, Srinagar

Kashmiri politicians called Thursday on the Indian government to put in place confidence-building measures in the troubled valley to boost a nascent political initiative. They also said the killing of moderate separatist leader Abdul Gani Lone by unidentified gunmen on Tuesday will deal a body blow to the peace process. Indian Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee met Kashmir's political leaders overnight Wednesday to discuss ways to initiate a dialogue with various parties. "The prime minister showed keen interest in initiating a dialogue and resolving the crisis through peaceful means," said Mehbooba Mufti, vice-president of the People's Democratic Party, one of those who met Vajpayee. "It is a ray of hope which is most welcome. At the same time, border tensions between India and Pakistan and the killing of Lone has come at the wrong time for this

initiative," Mufti said. She said the Indian government's pledge to Kashmiris to find an "everlasting solution" to the 12-year-old militancy in the disputed state will have to be backed with concrete steps on the ground. "The state's economy is in shambles. An economic and rehabilitation package can be the first confidence-building step the government can take," she told AFP. Making a marked shift to improve bilateral relations, Vajpayee in 1998 visited Pakistan in a bus from India and two years later announced the unilateral suspension of counter-insurgency operations against militants. Last year, Vajpayee sent a special emissary to hold talks with political groups in Kashmir. Political leaders said that Vajpayee, currently on his fourth and longest trip to Kashmir after becoming the prime minister, has rekindled hopes of a political solution.



Two veteran Nepalese Everest summiters Apa Sherpa (L) and Pemba Sherpa (R) smile upon their arrival at Kathmandu Airport from mountain base on Wednesday. Apa set a record climbing world tallest peak 8848 metre (29,028 feet) high Mount Everest 12th times as Pemba, the first Nepalese woman to climb Everest from Tibet and Nepalese side.



This photo released by the Miss Universe Organisation shows Isis Marie Casaldic, Miss Puerto Rico 2002, Vanessa Mendoza, Miss Colombia 2002, and Ruth Ocumarez, Miss Dominican Republic 2002, 1st runner up, winner and 2nd runner up respectively, holding the Hoya Crystal trophies which they have won at the end of the Miss Universe 2002 National Costume show on Tuesday at Bellas Artes in San Juan, Puerto Rico. They will now vie for the title of Miss Universe 2002 during the LIVE CBS Television Network broadcast of the 51st annual Miss Universe competition on May 29 at the Roberto Clemente Coliseum in San Juan, Puerto Rico.

'Leaks could destroy US capacity to defend itself'

AFP, Washington

US Vice President Richard Cheney reiterated Wednesday his opposition to an expanded investigation of the September 11 terrorist attacks, warning that leaks of the most sensitive intelligence information could destroy the US ability to defend itself. In an interview with CNN's "Larry King Live Program," Cheney said the president's daily brief compiled the Central Intelligence Agency should be particularly protected from unauthorized eyes because it contains references to the most sensitive and secret sources. "If there are leaks from that document, if it's disclosed to people that it shouldn't be disclosed to, we will lose the capacity to defend ourselves against future attacks," Cheney argued.

The comments came amid rising clamor in Congress for the creation of an independent blue-ribbon panel to investigate the performance of US intelligence and law enforcement agencies in the lead-up to the September 11 attacks, in which about 3,000 people were killed. Meanwhile, US Vice President Richard Cheney said Wednesday the US government remains in the dark about the fate of Islamic militant Osama bin Laden who is blamed for the September 11 attacks on the United States. There is "a lot of speculation about where he is if he's dead, buried in one of those tunnels of caves in Afghanistan," Cheney told CNN's "Larry King Live" program. "We haven't heard anything from him for a considerable period of time now," he added.