

FBI impeded own probe of terror suspect

AFP, Washington

Federal Bureau of Investigation officials hampered an investigation of terror suspect Zacarias Moussaoui in August by resisting calls for search warrants and admonishing agents for seeking help from the CIA, according to media reports.

The Washington Post in Friday's editions quotes a letter from Colleen Rowley, general counsel for the FBI's Minneapolis field office, to FBI Director Robert Mueller as saying evidence gathered in the Moussaoui case, combined with a July 10 warning about possible terrorists taking flight training in Arizona, should have prompted stronger suspicions at FBI headquarters that an attack was being planned.

UN team arrives in Australia

AFP, Sydney

A UN team arrived here Friday to investigate Australia's system of mandatory detention of illegal immigrants as Afghan detainees were offered cash if they drop their fight for asylum.

More than 1,000 Afghans were given 28 days to take up the offer of 2,000 dollars (1,100 US) each capped at 10,000 dollars per family to return to Afghanistan, which Canberra says is now safe for their return.

Those who accept the money, along with air fares home, counseling and job training, will remain in detention centres until their departure. Those who don't will be sent home anyway.

Thousands attend prayer meeting for Kashmiri leader Lone

AFP, Srinagar

More than 10,000 Muslims turned up for a prayer meeting Friday at the Martyr's Grave here to mourn assassinated Kashmiri separatist leader Abdul Gani Lone.

Top leaders of the Hurriyat Conference, an umbrella organisation comprising 23 separatist groups, including Abdul Gani Bhat and Ali Shah Geelani, took part in the prayers.

The 70-year-old moderate separatist was killed by unidentified gunmen on Tuesday at a political rally meters (yards) away from Martyr's Grave. He was buried at the graveyard the next day.

Accused 'shoe bomber' did not act alone: US

AFP, Boston

Briton Richard Reid, accused of trying to blow up a Paris to Miami flight late last year using explosives hidden in his shoes, did not act alone and told his mother the attempted bombing was part of his duty as a Muslim, US authorities said Thursday.

The information was contained in an affidavit filed in US District Court here in response to efforts by Reid's lawyers to lift restrictions on their communications with him. The lawyers are barred from passing any information to third parties unless it is necessary for Reid's defense.

Military job for virgins only

AFP, Jakarta

Women who wish to enter the Indonesian military academy must undergo tests to ensure they are virgins, the armed forces said Friday.

The requirement has been in place for years and is part of "standard policy," said an officer at the armed forces (TNI) information office.

"But female applicants will be examined by female doctors during the procedure to avoid sexual harassment," the officer, who declined to be named, told AFP.

He refused to give further details or say why the policy is deemed necessary.

Plane with 5 aboard missing in the Pacific

AFP, Papeete

A search and rescue effort is underway after a twin-engine plane carrying five people, including several prominent local politicians, went missing in French Polynesia, officials said.

The Piper Seneca PA-34 took off from Kaukura atoll early Thursday for what should have been a two-hour flight to Makemo in the Tuamotu archipelago, civil aviation officials here said.

The last transmission received from the pilot was that he was "heading for the atoll of Katu because winds at Makemo were too strong," an official said.



PHOTO: AFP

US President George W. Bush (R) looks on as Russian President Vladimir Putin (C) signs on Friday in St. Catherine's Room of the Kremlin, what the White House calls "the Treaty of Moscow", a 10-year treaty binding the nations to reduce their nuclear stockpiles by about two-thirds - to a range of 1,700 to 2,200.

US has much to lose if India-Pakistan go to war

AFP, Washington

If the spectre of the world's first nuclear war is not motivation enough for it to try to cool the brewing conflict between India and Pakistan, the United States has crucial national interests hostage to peace in South Asia.

Washington is leading a broadening diplomatic effort to cool tempers, not simply through altruism, but recognising it will pay a price if the clouds of war are not dispersed.

The extent of US concern was underscored Thursday, with the announcement that Deputy Secretary of State Richard Armitage would travel June 4 to South Asia in a bid to cool seething regional tensions.

The most pressing concern is the anti-terror campaign in South Asia, focusing on Afghanistan and mountainous Pakistani border areas where remnants of Osama bin Laden's al-Qaida network are

believed to be regrouping.

But South Asia's crisis presents the United States with a conundrum, as a decision to favor one side, a step which could tip the balance of a conflict, could terminally damage its standing with the other.

Boiling regional tensions have highlighted the paradox of US South Asia policy, which seeks closer long-term relations with New Delhi, but needs immediate Pakistani support in the anti-terror campaign.

It is a dilemma with no satisfactory answer, says South Asia analyst Zia Mian, of the Woodrow Wilson School of Public and International Affairs at Princeton University.

"On the one side you have India, an emerging strategic partner and a market of God knows, a billion people and a huge part in long-term US planning," he said.

"On the other side you have Pakistan, 140-odd million people, it's on the border with Afghanistan

and the central Asian republics, for all we know half of what is left of al-Qaida is hiding in the mountains up there.

"It has nuclear weapons and a huge amount of anti-Americanism that is in the public consciousness. The last thing you want is for that to go nasty."

On the military side, there are fears, which Thursday began to be realised, that the US campaign could be compromised, even by a limited clash over Kashmir.

Pakistani Information Minister Nisar Memon said Islamabad would withdraw some troops from the western border with Afghanistan to bolster the eastern frontier with India.

Further redeployments could hinder the search for al-Qaida fugitives, who some experts believe are regrouping in the region, which may even be providing a haven for bin Laden himself.

US-Russia sign landmark disarmament treaty

AFP, Moscow

US President George W. Bush and Russian President Vladimir Putin signed a landmark disarmament treaty Friday and opened a new era in relations that the US leader said would lead to "incredible cooperation."

The Treaty of Moscow commits Russia and the United States to slash their nuclear arsenals by two-thirds to between 1,700 and 2,200 warheads over the next decade.

"I am confident that this sets the stage for incredible cooperation that we've never had before between our two countries," Bush said after signing the treaty in an ornate hall of the Kremlin.

Bush and Putin signed a new strategic partnership accord drawing a line under the two countries' Cold War era rivalry and shaping a

new relationship for the 21st century.

The United States and Russia have entered a "new era" of friendship, Bush told Putin, who for his part spoke of an "absolutely new quality" in Russia's partnership with the United States during a Kremlin summit meeting.

The pledges of friendship came even as a row over Russia's nuclear links with Iran threatened to dampen the goodwill atmosphere of the summit.

Bush said the two sides had succeeded in "casting aside old doubts and old suspicions" dating from the Cold War.

"Today we are speaking about an absolutely new quality of our relationship, regarding questions of security, reducing our strategic potentials and creating a new secure world," Putin added.

The fifth meeting between Bush and Putin on Friday will also see the two leaders clinch a new strategic partnership accord effectively putting an end to the mutual suspicion of the Cold War era.

However a long-running dispute over Moscow's ties with Iran which Bush maintains is part of an "axis of evil" clouded the opening of the summit after the US leader warned Thursday that Russia was contributing to nuclear proliferation.

Bush and Putin discussed other major issues that pose a tough test of the evolving US-Russian relationship.

Russia is eager to secure US support for joining the World Trade Organisation, attract greater US investment and cooperate with Washington to export Caspian Sea oil.

Putin was also expected to press

the US president for assurances that an agreement 10 days ago to give Russia an unprecedented voice within NATO is only the first step in Moscow's integration within the Alliance.

Media coverage of the Bush-Putin summit focused on disarmament, the fight against terrorism in the wake of September 11 and strategic security, but Putin hopes the summit will also have a tangible economic payoff.

The Kremlin boss is looking for Bush to help Russia gain the status of a free-market economy entitling it to US trade benefits a decade after the fall of the Soviet Union.

Bush said he was determined to get the US Congress to lift the Jackson-Vanik amendment, a Soviet-era piece of legislation withholding favourable trade tariffs from Russia.

Afghan warlord takes over governor's house in Khost

AFP, Islamabad

An Afghan warlord has captured the governor's house in the troubled eastern province of Khost after failing to become governor of neighbouring Paktia province, the Afghan Islamic Press (AIP) reported Friday.

Forces loyal to warlord Padsha Khan took the official residence without a fight early this week, ousting Mohammad Hakeem Taniwal, a nominee of Afghan interim administration leader Hamid Karzai, the Pakistan-based news agency said.

"Karzai is playing foul with Pashtuns. We want him to resign and we do not accept his nominations for the province," AIP quoted Khan as saying in a telephone interview from the governor's residence.

Khan was initially appointed as governor of neighbouring Paktia province by Karzai but he failed to take office after members of a local council of elders refused to accept him.



PHOTO: AFP

Displaced Kashmiri women prepare food for their family after fleeing their homes near the Line of Control, the de facto border between Pakistan and India, to avoid Indian shelling near Muzaffarabad, capital city of Pakistan-administered Kashmir on Thursday. Indian troops continued shelling border villages of the Pakistani part of Kashmir as the death toll rose to 26 over the past week.

Fresh suicide blast in Israel Thousands of Israelis 'rave' for peace

AFP, Tel Aviv

A Palestinian attacker blew himself up outside a nightclub in Tel Aviv early Friday in the fourth suicide attack since Sunday, as the Middle East slid back toward its desperate cycle of violence.

Israeli troops meanwhile made a brief incursion into Gaza City, destroying three factories.

The latest attack came less than 24 hours after a suicide bomber sent to avenge the death of a Palestinian militant chief killed in Beirut hit Rishon Letzion, a Tel Aviv suburb rocked by a human bomb only two weeks before.

Israeli army radio said a security guard working at the Columbarian nightclub in Tel Aviv noticed a suspicious car moving towards the entrance of the club and opened fire on the driver, causing a huge explosion.

The Palestinian was killed and two bystanders were injured, one lightly to moderately and the other

suffering from shock, the radio said.

Israeli public radio said the guard had shouted at the clubbers standing in the street to lie on the ground, then had opened fire on the car.

It was not initially clear whether the Palestinian detonated a charge he was wearing or whether the car was loaded with explosives which went off when the guard opened fire.

Meanwhile Israeli troops staged an incursion into Gaza City early on Friday, destroying three factories before they pulled out, Palestinian security sources and witnesses told AFP.

Several Israeli tanks and jeeps moved more than two kilometers into Palestinian territory, targeting factories in the industrial zone of Zeitoun in the south of Gaza City, security sources said.

During the incursion troops laid explosive charges in a metal factory, a fiberglass factory and a timber production facility, completely destroying the three structures, local witnesses said.

Nepali PM faces legal battle over parliament dissolution

AFP, Kathmandu

Lawyers in Nepal have gone to the Supreme Court in an attempt to overturn a decision by beleaguered caretaker prime minister Sher Bahadur Deuba to dissolve parliament and call elections two years early, sources said Friday.

King Gyanendra, on Deuba's advice, disbanded parliament late Wednesday as it seemed set to reject a six-month extension of emergency rule, which hawks say is needed to crush Maoist rebels fighting to topple the monarchy.

Deuba was Thursday suspended by his own party, the Nepali Congress (NC), whose senior members are furious at not being consulted over his surprise move.

Three lawyers, Shyam Kumar Khatri, Sunil Chandra Poudel and Badri Subedi, filed a petition Thursday at the supreme court, court sources said.

They claim the dissolution of parliament was "unconstitutional and prejudicial" since there was a possibility of forming an alternative government within the disbanded parliament without fresh elections.

The petition demands that Deuba explain his decision and asks the court to reinstate parliament, the sources said.

There is a precedent for the court to reinstate a disbanded parliament. In 1995 then prime minister Manmohan Adhikari, who headed a minority Nepal Communist Party-United Marxist and Leninist (NCP-UML) government, dissolved parliament ahead of a no-confidence motion against him.

The court decided that parliament should be reinstated as a coalition government could be formed by opposition parties.

'Chart strategy to snub terror'



PHOTO: AFP

India's main Opposition Congress Party leader Sonia Gandhi greets her party members during a meeting of the All India Congress Committee (AICC) in New Delhi on Friday.

AFP, New Delhi

Indian opposition leader Sonia Gandhi Friday slammed the New Delhi government for not having a "comprehensive plan" in place to fight cross-border militancy from Pakistan in Kashmir.

Sonia Gandhi told a meeting of her All India Congress Committee (AICC) that the Congress would back the government during its current crisis with arch-rival Pakistan, but accused it of not having a "clear-cut strategy" in place.

"It is clear that the Congress party will support the government in its fight against cross-border terrorism and bringing the state of Jammu and Kashmir back to peace," said Sonia.

"While the Congress has some fundamental differences with the government over social, economic and other key issues, we want to make it clear to the international community that the entire nation is together in the fight against terror."

"However, the government must have a comprehensive plan and well-thought out clear-cut strategy to deal with terrorism keeping in mind the ground realities."

Sonia added: "We are disappointed ... We have yet to see any such planning in the Indian government's strategy to fight terror. There has been no drop in the incidents of terror from across the border."

India accuses Pakistan of arming, training and funding an Islamic insurgency in Indian Kashmir since 1989 which has claimed the lives of some 35,000 people

Europe must tackle asylum problem, warns Britain

AFP, London

Foreign Secretary Jack Straw said Friday Europe must address the issue of asylum or risk it being exploited by anti-immigration politicians, as a row raged on over refugees trying to illegally enter Britain.

Straw said governments which took their eye off problems like immigration and crime risked losing touch with voters, and warned the issue of asylum must be addressed "sensibly and sensitively".

It would be a mistake to think the raised profile of politicians like French far-right leader Jean-Marie

Le Pen and murdered Dutch populist Pim Fortuyn in mainstream politics was just a "temporary bad dream", Straw said, writing in the left-of-centre Tribune newspaper.

The foreign secretary warned that the past year had seen a shift to the right in Denmark, Italy, France and Portugal, and Germany could follow suit later this year.

Governments must stay connected with their electorates and not dodge these difficult issues, Straw said, adding: "Parties of the centre-left must never shirk from addressing issues of immigration, law and order and race relations."

Nerve, biological agents used in '60s US tests

AFP, Washington

The US military sprayed US navy ships with live nerve and biological agents in a series of tests in the 1960s that may have exposed hundreds of military personnel, the Pentagon disclosed Thursday.

The Pentagon released declassified information on five tests with code names such as "Flower Drum" and "Fearless Johnny" that were designed to probe the vulnerability of navy ships to chemical or biological weapons attack.

They involved docking US navy

ships with either live agents or simulated agents.

"Three used live nerve agents, one used a live biological agent and one used a simulant that while believed to be harmless at the time has subsequently been found to be hazardous," the Pentagon said in a statement.

The tests were unearthed during an almost two year long investigation prompted by claims by veterans that they might have been exposed to harmful substances, the Pentagon said.

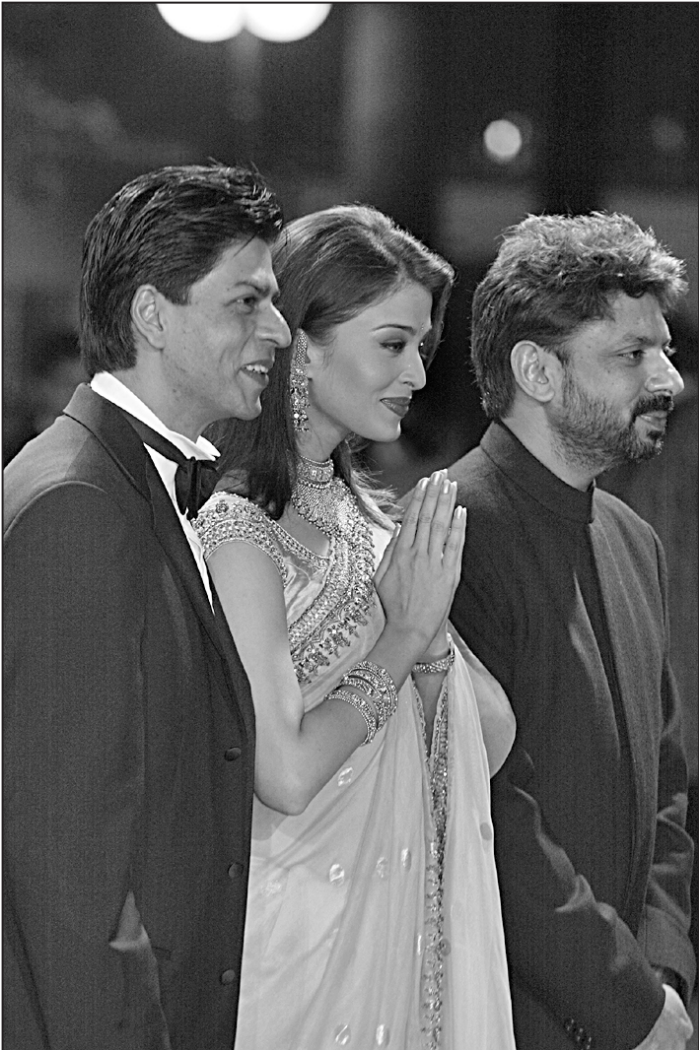


PHOTO: AFP

Indian actor Shahrukh Khan (L), actress Aishwarya Rai (C) and director Sanjay Leela Bhansali salute the crowd as they arrive at the Palais des Festivals for the screening of their film "Devdas" during the 55th Cannes Film Festival on Thursday. The film is presented out of competition.