

Al-Qaida took 3 years in planning Sept 11 attacks

AFP, Washington

Al-Qaida terrorists began planning the September 11 attacks on the United States soon after they bombed two US embassies in East Africa in August 1998, The New York Times said Tuesday.

The commander of US forces in Afghanistan, Lieutenant General Dan McNeill, told the daily in a separate interview that he expected US forces to remain in Afghanistan for at least one more year until his mission is completed.

In closed-door testimony Tuesday before the joint House and Senate intelligence committees investigating the September 11 attacks, the heads of the FBI, CIA and National Security Agency said US intelligence has a much better understanding of the al-Qaida terrorist group.

23 slain during arrest of cult leader in Philippines

AFP, Cebu

Some 23 people died in violence in the Philippines during the arrest of a politically connected messianic cult leader accused of murdering his wife, police said Wednesday.

Ruben Ecleo, 47, finally surrendered on Wednesday after a four-hour gun battle between police and Ecleo's followers at the cult's commune on the southern island of Dinagat, a police statement in Manila said.

Sixteen members of Ecleo's pseudo-Christian Philippine Benevolent Missionaries Association (PBMA), including a co-defendant in the murder case, were killed when they tried to prevent police from arresting the two men, said regional police chief Alberto Olario.

Prominent MP arrested in Japan

AFP, Tokyo

Japanese prosecutors on Wednesday arrested a prominent lawmaker embroiled in a bribery scandal as they raided a lumber company suspected of paying him off.

The Tokyo District Public Prosecutors Office said its special investigation squad arrested Muneko Suzuki, 54, on suspicion of taking five million yen (40,160 dollars) in bribes in 1998 from Yamarin, a lumber firm in his constituency.

The move followed approval by parliament earlier in the day needed to lift parliamentary immunity on Suzuki, making him the first sitting lawmaker in more than five years to be arrested after such a move.

Australia under fire for backing US 'strike-first' policy

AFP, Sydney

The Australian government faced mounting opposition Wednesday to its endorsement of Washington's strategic policy of striking first against countries supporting terrorist attacks.

In a speech to senior military staff in Canberra on Tuesday, Defence Minister Robert Hill announced Australia was prepared to be the first country to support the "strike-first threat" announced by US President George W. Bush this month.

"The need to act swiftly and firmly before threats become attacks is perhaps the clearest lesson of September 11, and it is one that is clearly driving US policy and strategy," Hill said.

Pakistan flouting laws, violating HR: AI

AFP, Islamabad

Pakistan is flouting its own laws and violating human rights by arresting and deporting hundreds of people in pursuit of the US-led war on terrorism, Amnesty International said on Wednesday.

The South Asian power is making arbitrary arrests and sending suspects back to their home countries to face possible torture and execution, the London-based rights group said.

"The rule of law has been swept aside. Detainees are not treated in accordance with either Pakistani or international law. Human rights protection has been thrown out the window," said a statement monitored here.

"Who is being held where is unknown. Detainees are cut off from family and lawyers and there are no official notices."

Indo-Pak tension on the wane

Military officials of both nations may begin talks soon

AFP, New Delhi

Signalling a further easing of tensions between India and Pakistan, senior army commanders from both sides are expected to begin using a hotline to discuss military de-escalation on their borders, an Indian government minister said.

"When the need arises, the two militaries can engage in dialogue through existing established channels so that the de-escalatory process is handled properly," Foreign Minister Jaswant Singh said in an interview published Wednesday in the Indian Express newspaper.

The newspaper said the minister singled out a weekly telephone hotline contact between the rival commanders as one of the "established channels" which he said could soon be brought into play.

The hotline, set up in 1997, is currently used at noon every Tuesday between the directors-general of military operations of the two sides, during which they are meant to try to defuse any potentially critical situations.

But since a flare-up of tension on the borders sparked by an attack in December on India's parliament blamed on Pakistan-based militants, the communication has comprised little more than mumbled exchanges, military sources said.

"The two army commanders spoke to each other yesterday (Tuesday)," a defence ministry spokesman told AFP.

"But given the present circumstances, there was only an exchange of pleasantries and no dialogue," he added.

Without quoting a source, the newspaper also said that Pakistani President General Pervez Musharraf had given his word to Washington that he "will also shut down 60-70 (militant training) camps" in Pakistan-administered Kashmir.

New Delhi has said it will de-mobilise its troops and resume talks with

Islamabad only after Pakistan stops what it calls "cross-border terrorism" and dismantles militants' training infrastructure in Pakistan-Kashmir.

Infiltration of Islamic militants into Indian-Kashmir is at the heart of the current stand-off between the two nuclear-armed South Asian rivals, which has seen both sides mobilise about one million troops on their common borders, edging to the brink of war late last month.

India earlier this month lifted a ban on Pakistani flights into India imposed after the parliament attack, acknowledging that fewer Islamic rebels were crossing into its zone of Kashmir from Pakistani territory.

It also recalled its warships from forward attack positions off Pakistan and announced it was appointing a new high commissioner (ambassador) to Islamabad.

Pakistan has said the measures are not substantive enough and has demanded that India begins withdrawing troops from the international border and the Line of Control (LoC), the de facto border separating the two countries in disputed Kashmir.

Meanwhile, an officer of India's paramilitary Border Security Force (BSF) and a suspected Pakistani intruder have been killed in an exchange of fire between border guards in India's desert state of Rajasthan, a police official Wednesday.

The incident occurred Tuesday evening in Raisinghnagar area, 450 kilometres (280 miles) from here, when BSF troops patrolling the international border chanced upon an intruder trying to enter Indian territory from Pakistan, the official said.

While the BSF officials were questioning the intruder, Pakistani Rangers opened fire killing the officer, assistant commandant Sumer Singh.

The BSF troops stationed along the border retaliated and the exchange of fire continued for about four hours, the source added.



Jordan's Queen Rania (R) greets the wife of Prime Minister Tony Blair Cherie Blair on Tuesday before the launch of a medical appeal to save vulnerable Palestinians inside the West Bank and Gaza Strip. Queen Rania and Cherie Blair met staff and volunteers at Medical Aid for Palestinians (MAP) at the charity's London offices to draw attention to the human suffering to civilians in the troubled area. The appeal is to raise funds for the charity, which provides medical assistance and training for women.

N-deterrence prevented all-out war, says Abul Kalam

AFP, New Delhi

Nuclear deterrence on both sides prevented India and Pakistan from engaging in an all-out war in recent weeks, Indian president designate and missile expert A.P.J. Abdul Kalam said Wednesday.

Addressing his first press conference a day after filing his nomination papers for India's top job, Kalam said the bristling tension between the arch rivals had not boiled over into war due to the restraining influence of the nuclear weapons both sides possess.

"Nuclear deterrence on both sides helped (them) not to engage in a big war (and) avoid a nuclear

exchange," he said.

Kalam, 71, the architect of the country's ballistic missile program, was one of the key figures who planned New Delhi's nuclear tests in May 1998.

"When your neighbour has nuclear weapons you cannot afford to do 'tapas' (sit down with folded hands and pray)," Kalam said.

To a question whether a stronger economy was more important than a potent defence system, Kalam said national security and economy were inter-related.

"While no economy would be secure without a strong defence, strong security will not be possible without strong economy," Kalam

Asian candles poison home

AFP, Paris

Asian candles are tainted with so much lead that burning them may spread toxic particles throughout the home, according to research reported in next Saturday's New Scientist.

Lead is added to the candle wick to stiffen it and give it a more even burn, and it has long been known that toxic particulates may be released into the air around the candle flame.

However, researchers at the United States' Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) have discovered that burning a leaded-wick candle raises particulates not just near the candle but throughout the house.

India's 'Spice Girls' out to shake region

REUTERS, Mumbai

With bare midriffs and skin-tight red trousers, India's answer to the Spice Girls are out to conquer the subcontinent after being chosen from thousands of pop star wannabes.

India's first tailor-made all-girl music band, Viva, launched its first album three weeks ago and has set its sights on making the same splash in the "Indipop" music scene as the hugely popular Spice Girls did here.

"We haven't reached there -- yet," Mahua Kamat, 20, one of the band's five members, said as she tossed her frizzy red-tinged hair in a recent interview. "But we plan to make Hindi music famous internationally."



Rickshaws make their way through a flood-stricken street of Guwahati, the capital state of India's northeastern Assam state on Wednesday. Heavy flooding and mudslides in India's northeast in the past week have already snapped road links, submerged 40 villages and marooned over 30,000 people in the region.

US lawmakers have a glimpse of super-agency to counter terror

AFP, Washington

President George W. Bush's homeland security advisor on Tuesday handed US lawmakers a legislative blueprint for the creation of a new super-agency to counter terrorism in the United States.

Herewith follow the main points of the bill setting up the new Department of Homeland Security, which lawmakers have yet to approve.

The Department of Homeland Security would be effective 30 days following its enactment or, if established within 30 days of January 1,

2003, would be effective as of that date.

The department's primary responsibilities will be to prevent future terrorist attacks in the United States, reduce US vulnerability to terrorism, minimise damage and assist the recovery of an attack.

To that effect, it will have five major functions: information analysis and infrastructure protection; chemical, biological, radiological, nuclear, and related countermeasures; border and transportation security; emergency preparedness and response; and coordination with other parts of the federal gov-

Rohingyas stay put at invaded UN agency

AFP, Kuala Lumpur

A group of 18 Muslim illegal immigrants from Myanmar on Wednesday refused to leave the grounds of a UN refugee agency in Malaysia which they occupied to demand asylum.

The members of Myanmar's minority Rohingya Muslim community invaded the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) centre here in two batches on Monday and Tuesday.

The 15 men, two children and a woman have remained camped in the compound of the centre and say they will not leave until they are granted asylum either in Malaysia or in a third country.

Heavy artillery duel erupts on Indo-Pak desert border

AFP, Jodhpur

Heavy artillery firing erupted Wednesday between Indian and Pakistani paramilitary troops on the borders of the desert state of Rajasthan following an overnight skirmish that left two people dead, an army spokesman said.

The firing began at 07:00 am (0130 GMT) and lasted for about eight hours, the spokesman said.

He claimed "seven to 10" Pakistani border guards were killed when the Indian artillery hit the Al Badhar border post, roughly 500 kilometres (310 miles) north of Jodhpur.

"There has been intense cross-

border firing in the western sector. Indian troops have retaliated with artillery fire and damaged Pakistan's Al Badhar border post," the spokesman said.

"We suspect that the casualties were high because we have completely damaged the Al Badhar post," he added.

The incident marks the first exchange of fire across the Rajasthan border since the two South Asian rivals between them massed about one million troops along their common frontiers in December in the wake of an attack by Pakistan-based Islamic militants on India's parliament.

A police official said the tensions were sparked off Tuesday in the Raisinghnagar area, 450 kilometres (280 miles) from here, when India's Border Security Force (BSF) troops patrolling the border saw an intruder trying to enter Indian territory from Pakistan.

While the BSF officials were questioning the intruder, Pakistani Rangers opened fire killing the officer, assistant commandant Sumer Singh. BSF troops stationed along the border then retaliated, the source said.

The intruder, too, was killed during the cross-border firing, he added.

represents the younger generation of the party, which will help to consolidate democracy and stability in the country.

"We had been looking for a strong leader and are happy to say he has been chosen."

Koirala has made no public comment on his removal as party president, but had earlier said the convention, which was called by Deuba, was "illegal" because it was called by an expelled member of the party.

Shortly after Deuba's election, Minister for Agriculture and Co-operatives Mahesh Acharya resigned from his post because of the divisions in the party.

"Despite tireless efforts to save my party from breaking, it finally split into two factions. This sad event has stunned me and thousands of the other party activists like myself," he said.

"This event has gravely affected the country's paramount democratic party. My time and efforts from now on will be devoted to forging unity in the party and reforming its style of functions."

NC elects Deuba party president

AFP, Kathmandu

Nepal's ruling party Wednesday elected caretaker prime minister Sher Bahadur Deuba its new president but his victory failed to erase deep divisions within the strife-torn organisation.

A national convention of the Nepali Congress (NC) held in Kathmandu elected Deuba uncontested, officials said.

On Tuesday the NC threw out the former president, Girija Prasad Koirala, after he expelled Deuba from the party last month for three years in protest at his recommendation to King Gyanendra to dissolve parliament and call early elections.

The convention also overturned the expulsion order on 56-year-old Deuba.

"We are very much delighted that we have been able to choose Mr Deuba as the Nepali Congress party president," said deputy home minister Devendra Raj Kandel, one of Deuba's supporters.

"I am pleased to say that a person of Mr Deuba's stature has been elected as the NC president who

Hurriyat offers to broker truce with Pakistan-based rebels

AFP, Srinagar

Indian Kashmir's main separatist alliance on Wednesday asked that its leaders be allowed to visit Pakistani territory to negotiate a ceasefire to help resolve the half-century dispute over the Himalayan province.

Abdul Gani Bhat, the chairman of the All Party Hurriyat Conference, said members of the alliance wanted to travel to the third of Kashmir administered by Pakistan to meet with leaders of the "mujahedin," or Islamic warriors.

"We will negotiate peace with them and a peaceful resolution to the dispute of Jammu and Kashmir," Bhat told reporters in Srinagar, Indian

Kashmir's summer capital.

"We would want a ceasefire to happen," Bhat said. "Obviously if a forward movement is intended, we will have to give peace a chance."

The Hurriyat, comprised of two dozen groups that favor either independence or its accession to Pakistan, had urged Pakistan-backed rebels to reciprocate a unilateral ceasefire on offensive operations India announced in November 2000.

But most militants spurned the request and Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee withdrew the ceasefire after six months.

During the truce Hurriyat leaders also asked to travel to Pakistan, a

request India denied.

Bhat said the Hurriyat had wanted to convert Vajpayee's ceasefire "into a meaningful, purposeful and substantive political process."

"But the visit for one reason or the other did not happen," he said.

The Hurriyat considers itself the representative voice of Kashmiris and wants tripartite talks between its leaders, India and Pakistan.

The alliance has called for a boycott of elections planned in the Indian state by mid-October. Instead, it has proposed forming its own "election commission" that would organize polls to choose representatives from both the Indian and Pakistani zones of Kashmir.



Miss Universe 2002, Oxana Federova, 24, of Russia (R) poses with Safari Cats dancers on Wednesday after her arrival in Nairobi for a six-day charity campaign tour to bring world attention on the effects of AIDS in Kenya.

Colombo-LTTE to monitor pullout from temples

AFP, Colombo

The Sri Lankan government and Tamil Tiger rebels have agreed to set up a panel to monitor the withdrawal of troops from temples in line with a Norwegian-backed truce, officials here said Wednesday.

The rebel Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) and a government representative Tuesday decided to establish a joint team that will also include members of the Scandinavian body which is monitoring a truce between the two sides.

The military announced last month they had vacated temples and churches in the embattled northern and eastern regions except for three Buddhist temples where priests had wanted the military to remain.

However, the LTTE had complained that police and paramilitary units were still occupying places of

religious worship, mainly in the eastern province, in violation of the ceasefire deal that went into effect from February 23.

Officials involved in the negotiations with the LTTE said they agreed to set up the panel so that truce monitors can "ascertain the position."

The decision was taken at the second round of informal face-to-face talks between the LTTE and a government delegation in the rebel-held town of Kilinochchi in the north of the island on Tuesday.

The head of the government's "peace secretariat" coordinating the Norwegian-sponsored peace bid, Bernard Gunatilleke, held two hours of talks with Tiger leaders.

Tiger radio said Gunatilleke, who flew into the rebel-held area in a military helicopter, was accompanied by two colleagues and a Norwegian diplomat.