

Kabul residents try to move a damaged taxi at the site of a blast in Kabul on Friday. Security has been beefed up in the capital after two blasts tore through downtown Kabul on Thursday. The blasts, in which 26 people died, came ahead of the first anniversary of Northern Alliance commander Ahmad Shah Masood's death, and the terrorist attack on the World Trade Centre.

Clashes with military leave 100 Colombian rebels dead

AFP, Bogota

At least 100 guerrillas have been killed in the last several days of clashes with the military in south-eastern Colombia near La Uribe, a traditional rebel stronghold, the Air Force said Thursday.

The rebels, members of FARC, Colombia's oldest and best-armed guerrilla force, were felled in heavy fighting after a military offensive against their leader, Henry Castellanos, near the Duda River, air force general Edgar Lesmes said in confirming the rebel casualties.

"It's an operation we were preparing for several days and can say that at least 100 guerrillas were killed in clashes in the zone, where we discovered a camp where we presumed the delinquent, known as 'Romana' was staying," Lesmes said.

Some 30 farmers and indigenous people were killed by leftist rebels and rightwing paramilitaries, and hundreds of people were displaced.

Tough talk, raids boost Iraq war speculation

Bush seeks action, KSA warns of tragedy

REUTERS, London

Prime Minister Tony Blair said the United States could count on Britain before heading for talks with President Bush expected to focus on preparations for a possible war with Iraq.

American and British defense officials declined to confirm a report in London's Daily Telegraph that 100 warplanes had been involved in their latest strike to enforce a no-fly zone over southern Iraq.

Financial markets read the strike and increasingly tough talk by Britain and the United States as evidence that conflict with Iraq is now inevitable.

The dollar dipped and oil prices rose on expectations that the allies will back up their criticism of Iraqi President Saddam Hussein and his weapons—programs—with military

might. Iraq has the second largest oil reserves in the world behind Saudi Arabia.

Blair, due to hold talks on Iraq with President Bush at Camp David near Washington on Saturday, was asked by a television interviewer if he recognized a description of Britain as prepared to stand by the Americans and pay a "blood price" in a time of crisis.

Blair, who along with Bush accuses Saddam of amassing weapons of mass destruction, said it was vital Americans knew they could count on Britain for more than words, according to advance excerpts from a BBC documentary to be shown on Sunday.

"They need to know, 'Are you prepared to commit, are you prepared to be there, and when the shooting starts are you prepared to

be there?'"

The Daily Telegraph's front page report said Thursday's air strike on Iraq appeared to be "a prelude to the type of special forces operation that would have to begin weeks before a possible American-led war."

It said 100 U.S. and British warplanes had taken part in the raid on an Iraqi command and control center in what it said was a first strike in western Iraq and the largest in four years.

The Ministry of Defense declined to comment on numbers, but said the raid was part of the normal enforcement of the southern "no fly" zone, one of two zones policed by Britain and the United States since the 1991 Gulf War.

Although it was the second such strike in six days, a spokeswoman said there was no sign of an

increase in the tempo either of allied operations or Iraqi activity on the ground.

Meanwhile, President Bush on Thursday said history had called the United States into action as he stepped up his campaign against Saddam Hussein, but a top Arab diplomat cautioned that a war to oust the Iraqi leader would "open the gates of hell."

Facing foreign doubts and congressional demands for evidence against Saddam, the White House said it already had all the evidence it needed to remove the Iraqi president.

But key U.S. senators demanded more evidence from the administration, and a senior Saudi diplomat accused an "obsessed" U.S. president of driving toward a war that would end in tragedy.

Candidate, activist killed in Kashmir Troops kill 7 infiltrators

AFP, Srinagar

A candidate campaigning for Indian Kashmir's upcoming elections and a political activist were shot dead Friday by suspected rebels in separate incidents, police said.

Sheikh Abdul Rehman, an independent, was campaigning in his constituency of Handwara, in the northern Kupwara district, when militants opened fire at him, a police spokesman said.

"The entire area has been sealed off and searches launched," he said, adding that senior police officers rushed to the scene of shooting.

Kupwara is one of five districts heading to the polls September 16 in the first of four rounds of voting for Indian Kashmir's assembly. The last phase of the controversial polls is October 8.

Muslim rebels have threatened to kill anyone who participates in the polls process and have attacked a number of activists, particularly those from Kashmir's ruling National Conference party.

A rebel group said Thursday it would attack candidates if they did

not withdraw from the race by September 10.

Rehman was one of the nine candidates in the fray for Handwara. Also running is Ghulam Mohiuddin Sofi, who last month resigned from a separatist group to run in the election.

Meanwhile, Indian troops have killed five Muslim rebels and two unarmed men who tried to enter from the Pakistani zone of Kashmir, officials said Friday.

Two foreigners believed to be members of Kashmir's dominant rebel group Hizbul Mujahedin were killed overnight in the Kalaroos sector of the northern Kupwara district, an army spokesman said.

Kupwara is one of five districts heading to the polls September 16 in the first of four rounds in a controversial election to Indian Kashmir's state assembly. Muslim rebels have vowed to disrupt the voting, which closes October 8.

The spokesman said three more rebels were killed in the Keran sector of the same district late Wednesday when they tried to cross from Pakistani territory.

Attempt on Karzai shocks world

AFP, Kabul

Western leaders expressed outrage at the assassination attempt on Afghan leader Hamid Karzai and a huge bomb attack in Kabul, and called for renewed efforts to crush extremism.

Speaking hours after a gunman tried to kill Karzai in the southern city of Kandahar Thursday, US President George W. Bush's spokeswoman said the US leader was relieved the Afghan leader escaped unhurt.

"He expressed his relief that President Karzai was safe. He is looking forward to meeting President Karzai in New York (next week)," spokeswoman Claire Buchan told reporters in Kentucky.

UN Secretary General Kofi Annan's spokesman Fred Eckhard condemned both attacks "in the strongest possible terms." Annan called on the Afghan authorities to bring the perpetrators to justice, and noted the ongoing climate of insecurity in Afghanistan in the aftermath of the fall of the Taliban regime in December.

Thursdays attacks were the worst in Afghanistan since a US-led bombing campaign helped opposition forces depose the Taliban regime in December. Afghan officials were quick to point the finger of blame for the new

amount for the Afghan people as head of their transitional authority."

French President Jacques Chirac described the explosion near a busy market in Kabul as a "criminal act which cannot be justified".

German Foreign Minister Joschka Fischer pledged Berlin's strong support for the transitional Afghan government, saying the attacks were carried out by "enemies of a democratic and peaceful Afghanistan".

US Secretary of State Colin Powell, speaking in Gabon on his way home from the Earth Summit in Johannesburg, said the attacks were a warning that terrorism was still a threat around the world.

Meanwhile, President Hamid Karzai moved to calm fears over security in Afghanistan Friday after narrowly escaping an assassination attempt just hours after a car bomb in Kabul killed at least 26 people.

attacks at Osama bin Laden's al-Qaida network, Taliban remnants and other extremists opposed to the US-backed Karzai government.

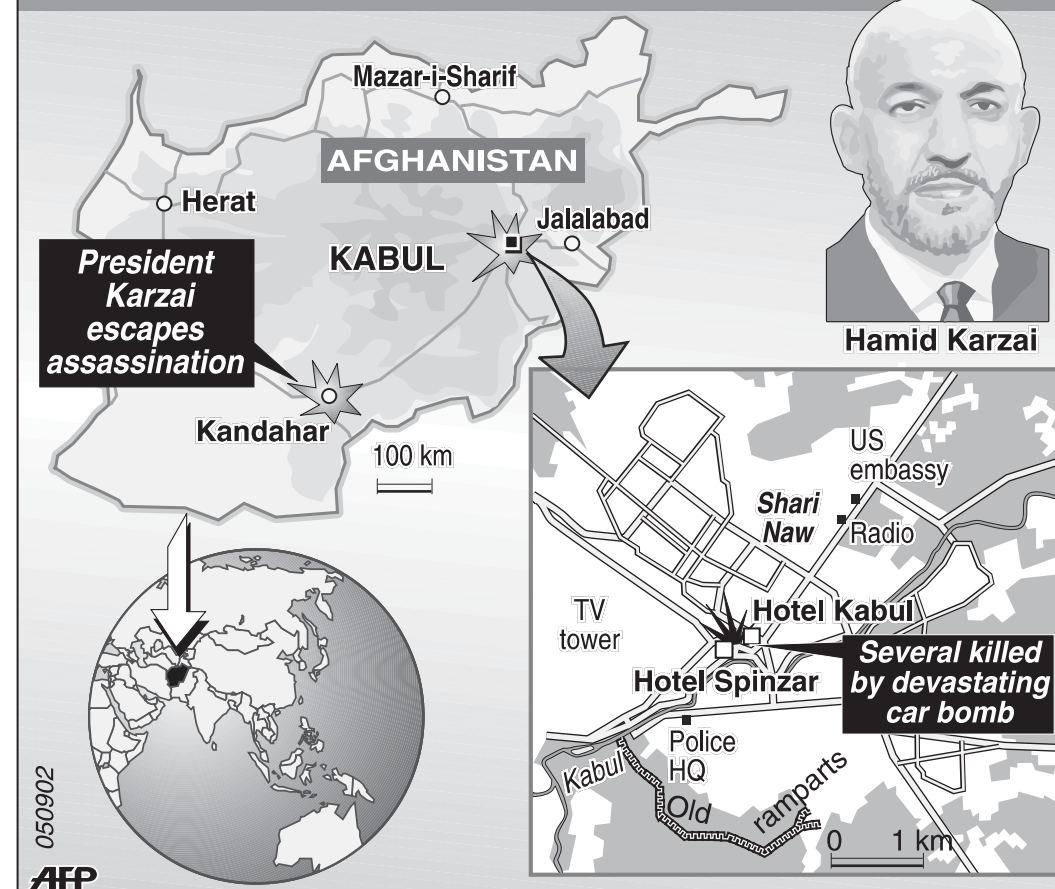
Condemning "senseless acts of violence", European Union foreign policy chief Javier Solana promised Europe's support in the ongoing battle against extremism and terrorism in Afghanistan.

"Clearly this work is not over yet. The EU and the international community at large will spare no efforts in continuing to assist the people of Afghanistan in their undertaking to build a peaceful future for their country," he said.

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Tension rises in Afghanistan



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AFP



Imran Khan, Pakistan's cricketer turned politician, prays while starting his party election campaign from a famous shrine of Data Gunj Bux in eastern city Lahore on Thursday. Politicians of the country started their campaigns for the upcoming general election scheduled for 10 October this year.

Marxists vow to topple Lankan govt

AFP, Colombo

Sri Lanka's main Marxist party vowed Friday to topple the government of Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe over his attempts to forge an internationally backed accord with Tamil rebels.

The leftist JVP, or People's Liberation Front, said Wickremesinghe's government had surrendered to the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) when it lifted a four-year ban on the rebels Wednesday.

"The government is kneeling before the LTTE and dancing to the tune of Western imperialist forces," JVP general secretary Tilvin Silva said. "We will mobilise all progressive forces to save the country from the disastrous actions of this government."

The JVP, which twice led armed struggles to overthrow governments in 1971 and in 1987, did not

say what form its latest action will take, but said it was in talks with several other groups that were not named.

The JVP's first insurrection in 1971 was put down by the then government with the loss of an estimated 20,000 lives while the second lasted nearly three years and cost some 60,000 lives, according to private estimates.

The party shed its military campaign and entered mainstream politics in 1994 and now has 16 members in the 225-seat national parliament.

The island's Tamil separatist campaign has claimed more than 60,000 lives in the past three decades.

Wickremesinghe's government has been bracing for protests after lifting the ban on the LTTE to meet a key demand of the guerrillas before starting peace talks in Thailand on September 16.

Israel cuts Gaza into three sectors with roadblocks

2 Palestinians killed in Israeli incursion into Jenin

AFP, Jerusalem

The Israeli army said Friday it had cut the Gaza Strip into three sectors with roadblocks overnight in order to impede the movement of "terrorists."

The roadblocks were set up near the Jewish settlement bloc of Gush Katif in the south and the Netzarim settlement close to Gaza City in the north, a statement said.

"This measure was taken to stop terrorists from moving arms around the region," the statement said.

On Thursday, two Israeli soldiers and an armed Palestinian were killed in two separate incidents, which also left several other soldiers wounded.

Meanwhile, two Palestinians were shot dead early Friday when clashes erupted during an Israeli army incursion into the West Bank town of Jenin, Palestinian security sources said.

Kamel Silawi, 25, was a member of the Al-Aqsa Martyrs Brigades, an armed offshoot of Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat's Fatah group, the witnesses said. Samir Kandil, 30, was a member of the Palestinian security services.

However, the armed wing of the radical Islamic group Hamas, the Ezzedin al-Qassam Brigades, claimed Silawi as one of theirs and vowed to exact revenge his death, which the group called an "assassination".

After a month of relative calm in Israel and the Palestinian territories, tension is mounting with the

approach of the Jewish New Year, which starts Friday evening.

The Jenin clashes brought the death toll since the start of the intifada in late September 2000 to 2,490 -- 1,837 Palestinians and 604 Israelis.

Moreover, the Israeli army on Friday arrested a local leader of the armed wing of the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP) in the West Bank town of Qalqilya, witnesses said.

Jamal el-Hindi, the 35-year-old head of the local branch of the Abu Ali Mustapha Brigades, was arrested by troops in a barber shop in the town.

Five other people there were also arrested by Israeli soldiers who moved in in unmarked cars to make the arrests.

Countdown for Sept 11 begins

Questions & concerns dog US foreign policy

AFP, Washington

After the wave of international sympathy and understanding that followed the September 11 terrorist attacks on US targets, President George W. Bush's foreign policy has once again attracted questions and deep concern around the world.

Prospects for conflict with Iraq and the often abrupt assertion of US interests often scrambled the image of an embattled United States, nobly and legitimately seeking to eradicate the terrorist threat.

Bush's black and white rhetoric - demanding that the rest of the world be either "with us or against us" in the war on terrorism and the designation of the Iran-Iraq-North Korea "axis of evil" -- has only compounded the confusion abroad.

"Two pending choices will

largely determine whether Washington comes to be seen as an aggressive new Rome," wrote Jessica Mathews, president of the Carnegie Foundation for International Peace, referring to policy on Iraq and how Bush approached his policy of "preventive strikes" against potential enemies.

This shift has been frequently analyzed by experts who see striking differences in the reactions to the events of September 11 among Americans and the rest of the world, in particular Europeans.

"There are serious tensions between the United States and Europeans on this subject which are related to quasi-existential questions," said Simon Serfaty, of the Center for Strategic and

International Studies (CSIS) in Washington.

"For the United States, we are in a war to defend a certain idea of America, the land of freedom with sacred territory," he said.

But "Europeans, in particular, don't have this perception," he said. "For them, history is always tragedy. Three thousand people died (on September 11). On the European scale, that is not a big thing. The same was done in half an hour at the battle of Verdun."

The pre-September 11 propensity of the Bush administration to put US interests ahead of multilateral agreements -- which was not diminished by the attacks or the diplomatic offensive to build a global anti-terror coalition that followed -- has worsened the friction.

US sets Sept 11 flight restriction

REUTERS, Washington

Airline passengers must stay seated for 30 minutes after takeoff and prior to landing at six New York and Washington area airports on Sept. 11 and private aircraft will face restrictions amid heightened security on the anniversary of the hijack attacks, officials said on Thursday.

The 30-minute rule announced by the Federal Aviation Administration for airlines based in the United States and overseas will be extended through Sept. 13 in New York. The city is hosting a number of high-profile remembrance ceremonies and political events through the period.

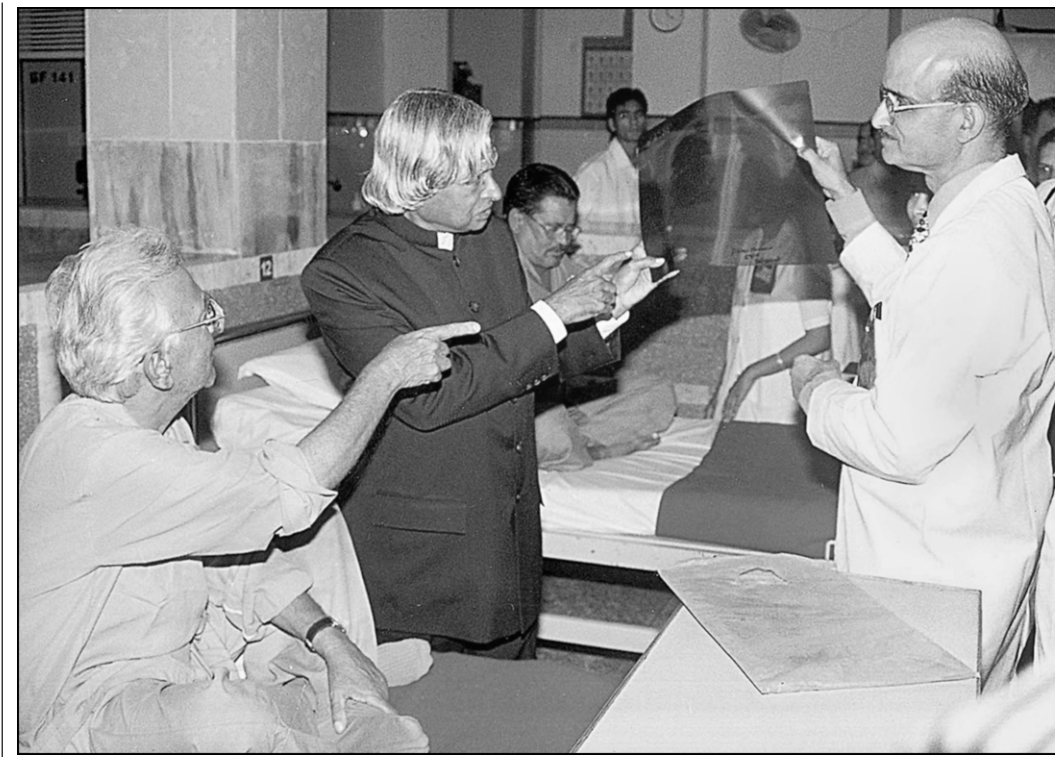
The FAA already required passengers to remain seated for 30 minutes after takeoff and before landing as a permanent security fixture for flights operating at Ronald Reagan National Airport just

outside Washington, which is located close to the White House, the Pentagon and other landmarks.

The temporary restrictions announced on Thursday covered operations into and out of John F. Kennedy and LaGuardia airports in New York and Newark in New Jersey. It also applies to Reagan National as well as Baltimore-Washington International and Dulles airports outside Washington.

The New York-area plan will be in place from 7 a.m. on Sept. 11 through 8 p.m. on Sept. 13. At Washington-area airports, the limits will be in effect only from 8:30 a.m. to 11 a.m. on Sept. 11.

In Somerset County, Pennsylvania, where one of four hijacked airliners crashed in the rural community of Shanksville, the FAA will prohibit aircraft from flying over or near the site for a brief period of time on Sept. 11.



Indian President A.P.J. Abdul Kalam (C) looks at an X-ray with a gas victim on Thursday at the Bhopal Gas Trust Hospital. Kalam is visiting Madhya Pradesh state and stop at the hospital to meet the victims of the world's worst industrial accident. Thousands were killed in 1984 following a release of lethal gas at the Union Carbide plant in Bhopal.