



PHOTO: AFP
Palestinian girls pass by a mural showing members of Al-Aqsa Martyrs Brigades, an armed offshoot of Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat's Fatah movement, killed in armed clashes with the Israeli army during the current Intifada in the southern Gaza town of Khan Yunes on Wednesday.

Iraq invites US officials to visit its arms sites

UN eyes inspection at the end of Oct

REUTERS, AP, Baghdad

Iraq invited the United States on Thursday to send officials to visit Iraqi sites suspected of producing weapons of mass destruction. "The American administration are invited to inspect these (weapons) sites," said Abdul Tawab Mullah Hawaish, deputy prime minister and minister responsible for Iraq's weapons programs. Hawaish, speaking at a news conference in Baghdad, also said Iraq was not producing weapons of mass destruction and declared that U.S. claims that it was producing them were false. "As I am responsible for the Iraqi weapons programs I confirm here that we have no weapons of mass destruction and we have no intention to produce them," Hawaish said. He said Iraq would teach the United States an "unforgettable lesson" if it launched a military action to oust the government of President Saddam Hussein. "If the Americans commit a new foolish action against Iraq, we will teach them an unforgettable lesson," Hawaish said. President Bush has said he wants a "regime change" in Iraq, and is trying to persuade Congress to pass a resolution backing a possible U.S. military strike on Iraq if it does not cooperate fully with UN weapons inspectors. Iraq has agreed, under intense U.S. pressure, to allow arms inspectors to return after a four-year absence, but the UN Security Council is still locked in negotiations on how intrusive it wants their inspections to be. Bush wants congressional backing for unilateral action if the Security Council does not impose an inspection regime that it considers tough enough to uncover any Iraqi weapons programs.

AP adds: UN chief weapons inspector Hans Blix said Wednesday he still hopes to send an advance team to Iraq by the end of October to prepare for a resumption of inspections. The Security Council is discussing a possible new mandate for inspectors and Blix said it was reasonable to wait "at least for some little time" for the 15 council members to make a decision before sending the advance team. But the council's five veto-wielding members remain divided on a new resolution, with the United States and Britain demanding that it authorise the use of force if Iraq doesn't comply with inspectors and France, Russia and China opposing a green light to attack before Iraq has a chance to cooperate. Diplomats said a revised French draft circulated Wednesday made no significant changes and was still unacceptable to the United States. In an interview on the PBS' "News Hour with Jim Lehrer," Blix said a timeline originally called for inspectors to be in Iraq by the middle of October. Because of the possible change by the Security Council, "we think that it will be reasonable to wait for that mandate, at least for some little time, so still hopefully before the end of October," Blix said. Seeking to ensure Iraq's cooperation, UN weapons inspectors have sent the Iraqi government a letter outlining agreements reached earlier this month in Vienna on the resumption of inspections. The letter, circulated to Security Council members on Wednesday, asks Iraq to confirm its acceptance of agreements on a host of issues including that it "clarified" during the Vienna talks that inspectors "will be granted immediate, unconditional and unrestricted access to sites, including what was termed 'sensitive sites' in the past."

'Al-Qaida cell plotting attacks on Australia'

AFP, Sydney

A terrorism expert who interviewed captured members of the al-Qaida network says the group has trained militants to attack Australia and may already have dispatched a cell of fighters to the country. "A number of al-Qaida members were tasked to enter Australia for the purpose of destroying targets inside Australia," Rohan Gunaratna told The Australian Broadcasting Corporation in remarks broadcast Thursday. Gunaratna said his discussions with captured al-Qaida fighters indicated two or three members of the group may already be in Australia, but he was unable to say what their targets might be.

US raises visa fees to cover Sept 11 costs

AFP, Washington

The State Department announced on Wednesday that it will raise the fee charged for all non-immigrant US visas by more than 50 per cent to cover costs associated with increased security checks instituted after the September 11 terrorist attacks. Effective November 1, the fee for non-immigrant visas will rise from 65 dollars to 100 dollars, or 53.8 per cent, it said, citing a "critical revenue shortfall." "This adjustment will bring the fee into line with the actual costs of administering non-immigrant visas services," the department said in a statement.

UK suffers setback in asylum reforms

AFP, London

Government plans to tighten Britain's asylum system suffered a setback Wednesday after key elements were defeated in the House of Lords, the upper chamber of parliament. The vote means the government's Nationality, Asylum and Immigration Bill must return to the House of Commons, the lower chamber, for further debate. But government sources made clear that ministers would not allow peers to "derail" the legislation, which must clear both houses in November if it is to become law.

Kuwait probes al-Qaida link to attack on Marines

REUTERS, Kuwait

Kuwait is investigating possible al-Qaida links to an attack by two Kuwaitis who killed a U.S. Marine and wounded another, security officials said on Thursday. "These people went to Afghanistan and trained there in the camps and were present there," a senior Kuwaiti security officer told Reuters of the two attackers who were shot dead by the Marines in Tuesday's attack. "I believe that they must have links to al-Qaida and the thinking of that group...but we are still investigating to look for a direct link to al Qaeda," he added.

Suicide bomber hits Israeli bus: 1 killed

Army detains 55 more Palestinians

REUTERS, Tel Aviv

A suicide bomber blew himself up by a bus near Tel Aviv on Thursday after Israeli passengers stopped him boarding, killing a woman and wounding five people, Israeli police and hospital sources said. In a separate incident, Israeli troops shot dead two Palestinian teenagers in the southern Gaza Strip early on Thursday, Palestinian officials and witnesses said. The suicide bomber attack took place on the highway between Ramat Gan and Bnei Brek, two towns south of Israel's commercial capital, Tel Aviv. "It was a suicide bombing. A suicide bomber tried to get on the bus, the driver noticed him and the passengers pushed him out, and then he blew himself up," a police spokesman said. "We suddenly saw a wall of fire. We felt the blast and saw some people injured," said Aharaon, a witness. The attack took place after days

of violence in the Gaza Strip following an Israeli tank and helicopter raid on Monday in which 16 people were killed. On Thursday, Palestinian gunmen exchanged fire with Israeli soldiers patrolling the edge of the Rafah Palestinian refugee camp in the southern Gaza Strip. Palestinian witnesses and hospital officials said Israeli forces shot dead two Palestinians, an 18-year-old and a 12-year-old boy. The army said it was checking the reports. It added that one soldier was lightly injured when an armoured combat vehicle drove over an explosive device. On Wednesday, Israeli troops shot dead two youths and wounded 18 people during clashes at the Rafah camp. The Israeli army said troops patrolling the border with Egypt returned fire when gunmen shot at them from Rafah. Palestinians have been waging an uprising against Israeli occupation in the West Bank and Gaza Strip since September 2000,

shortly after peace talks collapsed. AFP adds: The Israeli army on Thursday arrested 55 Palestinians in a huge operation in villages round the West Bank town of Ramallah aimed at netting the radical Islamic group Hamas, Israeli military sources said. Several units, including tanks and helicopters, took part in the sweep which lasted several hours on Thursday morning, without meeting any resistance from the Palestinians, the sources said. "The aim was to destroy the infrastructure of Hamas, to arrest those behind anti-Israeli attacks," a military spokesman told army radio. "We hope to have delivered a very hard blow to Hamas," which is behind most attacks inside Israel. The operation came as a suicide bomber blew himself up in suburban Tel Aviv, injuring six people but killing no one except himself.

Another shooting, 7th victim killed



Decision to enlarge EU still faces hurdles

AFP, Brussels

The European Commission's recommendation that 10 candidate nations be allowed to join the EU in 2004 was widely welcomed, but problems loomed on the outside, from Turkey, and on the inside, from Irish voters. Thirteen years after the fall of the Berlin Wall, the EU's executive arm gave the nod Wednesday to a reshaping of the 15-member bloc that will take it up to the borders of Russia. The commission, in detailed assessment reports on the candidate countries, recommended the entry of Cyprus, the Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Malta, Poland, Slovakia and Slovenia.

FBI warns of another al-Qaida attack

AFP, Washington

The leadership of the al-Qaida militant group may have sanctioned another terror attack against the United States or its interests abroad, the Federal Bureau of Investigation warned late Wednesday. In issuing the warning, the bureau cited statements by al-Qaida leader Osama bin Laden and his top aide Ayman al-Zawahiri broadcast earlier this week by the Qatar-based, Arabic satellite television channel al-Jazeera. "The statements suggest that an attack may have been approved, while the specific timing is left to operatives in the field," the FBI said in an advisory sent to state and local law enforcement agencies. The bureau said that due to a lack of specific information about time or place, the suspected attack will not lead to a change in the homeland security threat level, which for the time being will remain at "yellow," or elevated. But it urged local authorities to take additional steps "to detect, disrupt, deter and defend against potential attacks against our nation's critical infrastructure and installations at home and abroad." On Sunday, al-Jazeera played a brief recorded statement by a man it

said was bin Laden, the alleged mastermind of the September 11 terror attacks, during which hijacked passenger planes were rammed into the World Trade Centre in New York and the Pentagon building outside Washington killing 3,025 people. "The youth of Islam are preparing something to strike fear in your hearts and will target the vital sectors of your economy until you renounce your injustice and hostility," the al-Qaida leader said on the tape. US officials later said bin Laden's voice appeared to be genuine. The threat was followed later in the week by remarks by Zawahiri, the Egyptian-born strategist of the group, who warned that al-Qaida was preparing fresh strikes against the United States and its allies, notably France and Germany. A US official said Wednesday the Zawahiri recording was also most likely real. The fact that the release of these statements was likely coordinated has prompted FBI investigators to seek comments from detained al-Qaida operatives held at secret locations inside and outside the United States, as well as the US naval base at Guantanamo Bay, Cuba, according to FBI officials. Their assessments -- as well the pattern of events preceding past suspected al-Qaida strikes -- have led the investigators to believe that a new terrorist operation may be in the works, the officials said. "One senior detainee maintains that al-Qaida would only release such a statement after approving a specific plan for an attack," said the FBI without identifying the person. It added that other captives, questioned independently from each other, had interpreted bin Laden's and Zawahiri's taped remarks "as a sign of an attack." Moreover, the 1998 bombing of the US Embassies in Kenya and Tanzania that left 224 people dead were also preceded by an al-Qaida fatwa, or religious ruling, calling for attacks against Americans around the world, the FBI officials noted. According to the bureau, the possible choice of economic targets would be consistent with the group's strategy and long-term goals. "Our adversary is trying to portray American influence as based on economic might and therefore seeks to strike an economic target prominent enough for economic and symbolic reasons that it would have immediate resonance around the world," the FBI said.

Hijackers conducted test flights prior to Sept 11

AFP, Washington

One of the hijackers who took part in the September 11 suicide attacks had conducted test flights near the Pentagon and the World Trade Centre before the strikes in apparent preparation for them, CBS News reported Wednesday. The report, which cited unnamed law enforcement officials, said the test flights had been made by Hani Hanjour, who is believed to have piloted American

Airlines Flight 77, which struck the Pentagon building. According to CBS News, Hanjour rented small aircraft in the Maryland and New York areas three weeks before the attacks and used them to fly in the vicinity of both the Pentagon and the World Trade Centre towers. US officials believe the purpose of the flights was to study the landmarks and examine possible approach routes to them. Hanjour's flights were dis-

closed to US interrogators by one of the detainees captured in the wake of the attacks and held by the US government in various locations, CBS News said. The US Federal Bureau of Investigation is also aware that several of the hijackers, including Hanjour and ringleader Muhammed Atta, had travelled as passengers aboard US planes in order to observe crew practices, according to FBI officials.

'Laden alive and well'

AFP, Dubai

Osama bin Laden is alive and well and has even put on weight, a Saudi weekly reported Thursday, quoting what it said was the head of information for bin Laden's al-Qaida terror network. "For your information, bin Laden's weight has increased by several kilos (pounds), because of his security precautions which prevent him moving around much," Abderrahman al-Rashed told the London-published weekly Al-Majalla. The claim, impossible to verify, came amid increased speculation over whether bin Laden had been killed in the US-led onslaught against al-Qaida's bases in Afghanistan a year ago in the wake of the September 11 attacks in the United States.

Blair, Adams in talks

AFP, London

British premier Tony Blair is expected to press for an end to IRA paramilitary activity when he meets Sinn Fein chief Gerry Adams for talks here Thursday, as London edges closer to suspending Northern Ireland's devolved government. As the fallout spreads from a major spy scandal, Northern Ireland faces the prospect of a return to direct rule from London, a move which could be taken by the weekend, newspapers said. Blair would tell Adams that the Irish Republican Army, the armed wing of Sinn Fein, must disband if the Belfast government is to be saved, the Daily Mail reported.



PHOTO: AFP
Queen Elizabeth II chats with participants in a cultural fair during her visit to Toronto on Wednesday. The Queen spent about an hour on a walkabout chatting with people and visiting various displays.