

Terror attacks possible on hospitals in 4 US cities

AFP, Washington

The Federal Bureau of Investigation warned late Wednesday it had received alerts from overseas about potential terror attacks on hospitals in four major US cities, media reported.

The FBI had information from abroad indicating that attacks could be perpetrated on hospitals in Washington, San Francisco, Chicago and Houston, according to Fox News network.

A possible timeframe for the attacks could be between December and April, the news channel said.

Leader of Fiji Army mutiny gets life-term

AFP, Suva

The ringleader of a bloody army mutiny in the Fijian army was jailed for life here Thursday.

Shane Stevens was sentenced to life imprisonment at a court martial hearing for inciting the uprising on November 2, 2000 which left eight men dead after a shoot-out.

Stevens was one of 15 soldiers convicted of mutiny by the court martial. The soldiers were part of a mutiny hoping to replace army commander Rear-Admiral Voreqe Bainimarama.

Another defendant received an eight-year prison term for mutiny, while the other 13 received custodial sentences ranging between 18 months and three years.

41 fishermen missing as boat sinks off Palawan

AFP, Manila

Twenty-five Chinese and 16 Filipino fishermen are missing after their fishing boat went down near the western Philippine island of Palawan, a military statement said Thursday.

The Hong Kong-registered F/V Fung Ching Fuk, accompanied by six smaller sampan boats, was travelling from Malaysia to Hong Kong when it was hit by rough waves and high winds which damaged its engine, the report said.

The vessel went down on Wednesday near the Balabac islands off Palawan, some 820 km southwest of Manila, the military said.

Naval forces have been ordered to search for the missing fishermen,

Iraq readies for return of UN inspectors

AFP, Baghdad

Iraq prepared Thursday for the return of weapons inspectors after bucking to world demand to accept UN resolution 1441, but Washington warned war remains the alternative if disarmament fails.

For Baghdad the decision must lead to the lifting of international sanctions which have crippled the country since it invaded Kuwait in 1990.

"By accepting to deal with Resolution 1441, Iraq has proven its good will ... and confirmed that our country is free of weapons of mass destruction," said the influential newspaper Babel, run by President Saddam Hussein's elder son Uday.

Babel was the only newspaper to comment on Baghdad's announcement late Wednesday that it would "deal with" the resolution, which imposes harsh inspection terms on Iraq.

"Brotherly and friendly states must now put pressure on the Security Council to lift the sanctions after the truth that is known to all, which is that Iraq is free of mass destruction weapons, is confirmed," it added.

The world breathed a sigh of relief at the news, but scepticism over Baghdad's full cooperation remained as Washington kept up the headline rhetoric.

"Iraq accepts the resolution, unreservedly, without conditions," Baghdad's ambassador to the United Nations, Mohammed al-Douri said after delivering a letter from his government to UN Secretary General Kofi

Annan.

The letter, signed by Foreign Minister Najji Sabri, announced Iraq accepted Resolution 1441 and set no conditions for the return of inspectors due to get underway Monday.

"The issue is not acceptance, but performance on the ground," Annan said at the White House after conferring with US President George W. Bush. "I urge the Iraqis to cooperate with them and to perform, and that is the real test we are all waiting for."

Resolution 1441, adopted unanimously Friday by the Security Council, gave the Iraqi government seven days to accept its terms.

The next deadline facing President Saddam Hussein's regime is December 8, when it must make a full, accurate and up-to-date declaration of its alleged programmes to develop chemical, biological and nuclear weapons and ballistic missiles.

The chief UN arms inspector, Hans Blix, was expected to leave Friday for Europe, accompanied by a dozen aides.

They and about eight people from the International Atomic Energy Agency, led by IAEA director general Mohammed El-Baradei, are to fly Monday to Baghdad from Cyprus to reopen offices that have been closed since the previous inspectors were recalled four years ago ahead of a US-British bombing blitz.

Australian Defence official Bill Jolley would lead the first team of inspectors due in Iraq on November 25, officials said in Sydney.

Shakeup in US Congress

AFP, Washington

A shake-up in the leadership of the US Congress Wednesday has set the seal on the Republicans' recent electoral victory and turned the lives of politicians and their staff upside down in the Capitol.

Senate Minority Leader Trent Lott was confirmed as Republican majority leader in the upper chamber once the 108th Congress takes office in January 2003.

His arch-rival, Senate Majority Leader Tom Daschle was unanimously called on to once again lead the Democrat party -- trounced in

the November 5 congressional ballot -- this time as minority leader.

"I was surprised and pleased with that reaffirmation of support," Daschle said.

The flip-flop of power in the Senate also means that all the chairmanships of the chamber's powerful committees will also change hands -- and Democrats who once called the shots will be cutting back on their staff.

Republican senators' staff, meanwhile, are busy looking into choice offices for their bosses to take over -- which could happen as soon as November if Republican senator-elect

Jim Talent of Missouri is sworn in early.

Senator Ted Stevens of Alaska, for example, who will take the mantle as the president pro tempore -- the most senior member of the majority party -- after Strom Thurmond retires at age 100, have his pick of any of the richly-decorated available Capitol building offices.

And freshmen Republican senators, such as Minnesota senator-elect Norm Coleman got their feet wet in a weekly press scrum, calling his party's victory at the polls a "philosophical mandate."

Refugees evicted from Calais church

AFP, Calais

French security forces early Thursday started evicting nearly 100 asylum seekers from a church in this northern port on the English Channel, an AFP journalist witnessed.

The removal of the refugees, who had been in the church since Saturday, started at 5 am (0400 GMT).

Dozens of riot police moved in to evacuate Saint Pierre-Saint Paul church and the Iraqi Kurd and Afghan migrants were taken away in coaches. There were no incidents.

China expels Japanese defence attache

AFP, Tokyo

China has expelled the defence attache at the Japanese embassy in Beijing after he ventured into a prohibited area, Kyodo news agency quoted the foreign ministry as saying Thursday.

The attache was detained and subsequently asked to leave the country, a Japanese foreign ministry official said.

The attache serves in Japan's Maritime Self-Defence Force, or navy, and mistakenly entered an off-limits area while on an assignment near a Chinese naval base, according to the official, Kyodo said.

DPRK has biological arms too US to cut fuel shipments

AFP, Tokyo

A high-ranking North Korean official admitted to US Assistant Secretary of State James Kelly last month that Pyongyang possessed biological weapons, in addition to developing nuclear arms, reports said Thursday.

According to the Yomiuri and Asahi newspapers, as well as major local news agencies, a Japanese official said that North Korean Vice Foreign Minister Kang Sok Ju had told visiting Kelly: "Other than nuclear, we also have many other things. We also have bio."

While the reclusive Stalinist state has long been suspected of having an arsenal of chemical and biological weapons, if confirmed this would

be the first time it has admitted to it.

The US State Department quickly denied the reports, however, saying in a written answer that the North Korean senior diplomat "made no such remarks or admission during his meeting with Assistant Secretary Kelly."

But it said Washington believed Pyongyang did indeed have a germ warfare capability.

Japan's Chief Cabinet Secretary Yasuo Fukuda on Thursday said Kelly's reports to Tokyo indicated Pyongyang had the capability for various weapons of mass destruction but the possibility of it having biological weapons was nothing new.

"Various sources already pointed out such a possibility years ago,"

Fukuda told a news conference.

"I cannot go into details, but according to Kelly's briefings we understand that North Korea has a capability of producing not only nuclear weapons but also others," he said.

Meanwhile, the United States will Thursday tell Japan and South Korea it plans to halt heavy fuel oil shipments to North Korea mandated by a 1994 pact, after Pyongyang revealed its continuing quest for nuclear weapons, senior US officials said.

The program will end after delivery of the latest shipment of 42,000 tons of oil, currently on a tanker steaming for the isolated and energy-starved Stalinist state, the officials said.

Homeland Security Dept gets House nod

AFP, Washington

The US House of Representatives Wednesday approved a compromise proposal to create a new multibillion-dollar Cabinet-level Department of Homeland Security.

The bill which would bring about the largest reorganisation of the US government since 1947 passed in a 299-121 vote, a major legislative victory for President George W. Bush who had turned the department into a campaign issue.

The US Senate is expected to vote on the measure as early as Friday, creating the 38-billion-dollar super-agency which rolls all or part

of 22 federal agencies into one department in an effort to strengthen the nation's defences against terror attacks.

Stung by its failure to connect the dots from intelligence information streaming into the country prior to September 11, 2001, and fighting to prevent any repeat terror attack, the White House adopted the proposal for the new department after first opposing it.

Legislation for the new agency had been hamstrung for months as Republicans and Democrats battled over how much power the president should have over the hiring and firing of employees.



PHOTO: AFP

Journalist Patricia Karvelas grimaces with pain after being trampled by mounted police in central Sydney, 14 November 2002. Hundreds of demonstrators burned an American flag and disrupted traffic in an anti-globalisation and anti-war protest ahead of a meeting of world trade ministers on Friday.



PHOTO: AFP

Palestinian boys look out from a window during curfew in the West Bank city of Nablus on Wednesday. Israeli tanks rolled into Nablus early in the day and seized total control of the northern West Bank town, arresting at least 30 Palestinians in a stepped up retaliation for a kibbutz shooting which killed five Israelis, Palestinian security sources said.

Israeli tanks roll into Gaza

AFP, Jerusalem

Israeli tanks rolled into Gaza City Thursday, moving to just 200 metres (yards) from the home of Hamas leader Sheikh Ahmed Yassin, the day after Israeli forces took over the West Bank town of Nablus, arresting 30 Palestinians in retaliation for a deadly attack on a kibbutz.

At least three Palestinian policemen were wounded by shooting from the 20-odd tanks in Gaza and from three helicopter gunships that flew overhead. The tanks fired machine guns at the Palestinian television building in the same district before withdrawing, witnesses said.

Israeli military sources said the operation "was not of exceptionally large scale."

The tanks withdrew to a nearby Israeli settlement, the witnesses said.

Sheikh Yassin, spiritual leader of the Islamic movement Hamas, who is wheelchair-bound, has frequently justified his movement's continued attacks and suicide bombings of Israeli targets.

Earlier, on Wednesday Israeli forces took over the northern West Bank town of Nablus, arresting at least 30 Palestinians.

The incursion came a day after an Israeli raid on Tulkarem refugee camp, not far from Kibbutz Metzger, the collective farm in northern Israel where five Israelis, two of them children, were killed on Sunday.

More than 150 armoured vehicles backed by helicopter gunships entered Nablus under covering fire without meeting any serious resistance, Palestinian sources said.

"Our forces intervened overnight in the West Bank, notably in Nablus and neighbouring refugee camps, as well as in Bir Zeit" north of Ramallah, the army said.

Palestinian sources said two of the 30 suspects Israel said it had arrested were wanted members of the radical Islamic group Hamas captured in the Askar refugee camp.

Defence Minister Shaul Mofaz has given his troops as much time as needed to hunt down militants, basing the operation on a two-week hunt in Jenin that ended Saturday with the killing of a top Islamic Jihad militant accused of killing 31 Israelis, the media said.

"The soldiers received a mandate to operate for as long as necessary to destroy the infrastructures of Palestinian terrorist organisations following very many alerts of attacks

planned from these sectors," Israeli public radio said.

In the southern Gaza Strip town of Rafah, a three-year old Palestinian baby was killed and his mother seriously wounded Wednesday by Israeli tank shells, medical sources said.

Meanwhile, Israel's new foreign minister and former premier, Benjamin Netanyahu, reiterated in a cabinet meeting Wednesday claims made at a convention of the right-wing Likud a day earlier that he would build his election platform on expelling Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat.

Netanyahu is challenging Prime Minister Ariel Sharon for leadership of the right-wing Likud party, with primaries set for November 28. The winner will lead the party into an early general election called for late January.

Arafat, still effectively trapped in his Ramallah offices after almost a year of being isolated by Sharon, scoffed at the threat.

"He must know I am Yasser Arafat, this is my land, the land of my great, great-great-grandfather," he told reporters.

Australia bans more terrorist groups

AFP, Sydney

Australia outlawed four more terrorist groups Thursday and boosted its ability to track down suspects by striking cooperation deals with the United States, Britain and key police forces in the Asia-Pacific region.

The federal government listed the four militant Islamic groups under new counter-terrorist laws and anyone associated with the movements faces up to 25 years' jail.

The Abu Sayyaf Group, Armed Islamic Group, Salafist Group for Call and Combat and Harkat ul-Mujahideen are now classified as terrorist organisations under Australian law, Attorney-General Daryl Williams said.

US submarine hits ship in Mediterranean while surfacing

AFP, Washington

A US attack submarine struck a ship in the Mediterranean Wednesday as it surfaced to periscope depth, US Navy officials said.

No one was injured aboard the USS Oklahoma and a merchant ship seen leaving the area did not respond to radio calls, said Ensign David Luckett, a navy spokesman.

"There was some damage to the submarine," he said. "The damage appeared to be limited to the sail area of the submarine, but a damage assessment is still in progress."

The submarine was searching the area for other ships, said the US Sixth Fleet, which is based in Gaeta, Italy.